Red, Orange, and Yellow Memories

By Reid Whitmore

The orange rock stared back at me while the sun looked down at us warmly. I was not distracted. I didn’t own a phone when I went to the Grand Canyon the first time because I was only nine and that was surely a good thing. The canyon and its ominous ravines and caverns demanded respect; a respect that the presence of a phone was sure to interrupt. Hiking around the enormous rock formations, we entered into the cold shadows cast from the cliffs above. A chill ran up and down my arms and legs. It was a hot spring day, but there, under the protection of mother nature, we were safe and shielded from the burning sun. Solid, old, and trustworthy, the rocks offered comfort that could not be found anywhere else. It is incredible how such landscapes remain so constant while the world around them continues to change. As people lived and died, and as technologies altered the world, these rocks stayed here. Watching, with the same cold dark shadows cast day after day, seemingly unchanged. These golden rocks will live to see the end of every set of eyes that has ever stared back at them.

My grandfather died unexpectedly at a hotel only a few minutes away from the Grand Canyon in 2015. In the grief that followed his death, I couldn’t help but feel that it was kind of the universe to end his story in the spot he loved so very much. He was warm and friendly, like the canyon. Funny and easy-going, he invoked a sense of peace anytime I spent time with him. He always had the best jokes and he knew how to make a grueling hike through the 105 degree desert enjoyable. Since he worked as a hiking guide in the Grand Canyon, he had plenty of enchanting stories that added to the irresistible allure of the canyon. I deeply regret not fully appreciating what a good-willed person he was while he was still alive.
The second time I went to the Grand Canyon was for his funeral. His service was in a place I had not visited before; behind us were lush, dark green woods whose existence seemed contradictory to everything that anyone had ever known about the state of Arizona. In front of us, an expanse of that same orange-red rock that had so magically caught my eye the first time we visited. I still didn’t have a phone, but I didn’t care. I will never forget the hot dry air or the sun that still managed to be blinding even at sunset. I will never forget the dusty rocks and my dirty shoes. Phones can’t capture feelings. They can't capture the breeze nor can they capture the pristine pinks and yellows of a sunset the way a human eye can. I got everything I needed from that day and I remember it perfectly. A photo would have done me no good.

The Grand Canyon has a warmth and personality that no electronic device could ever obtain. Its range of colors present the canyon as fun and light-hearted, while its depth and massive scale establish it as steadfast. The Grand Canyon has feelings, too. It understands the human circle of life. It remembers the millions of faces who visit it every year to get a taste of its incredible plateaus and valleys. It gives thanks to those who take care of it and respect it. It sends a final goodbye to souls who rest in its majesty with a massive show of its colors and beauty.

The last time I went to Arizona was three years ago, in 2019. This trip is foggy in my memory; I vaguely remember details about the boat tour we took on Canyon Lake outside of Phoenix or the day we went segwaying. My phone holds many photos of this trip because by this time, I had a phone, but despite having numerous pictures to look back upon, memories of this vacation remain foreign to me. I can’t remember how the sky looked the day we took the boat tour or the feeling of the sun on my already burnt skin by the pool. I do, however, remember being disengaged and spending time on my phone scrolling through Instagram. It completely extracted me from those beautiful moments and I will never get them back. Desperately grasping
for bits and pieces of memories of this vacation, I find myself wishing I didn’t have a phone at that time. Perhaps I can’t recall much about this trip because it was one of the few times we visited Arizona without going to the Grand Canyon. That being said, I can’t help but think that my phone has something to do with my cloudy memory of my vacation in 2019.

While I can spend time going over the trip I can’t remember, racking my brain for small memories to bring me joy, I find it much more worthwhile to remember my earlier visits to the Grand Canyon. The sun from those excursions has stayed with me and it burns bright in my mind. It shines on memories of the days I spent at the park taking in the other-worldly landscape. Clearly, I didn’t need a phone then to seize those moments of awe and when compared to my dazzling memories of the Grand Canyon, my phone becomes meaningless. Suddenly, the revolutionary device completely loses its tight grip over my mind. Much like how the canyon will keep with it the many lives that have passed on before it, I will keep the memories of the sights and feelings I have experienced there. It will remain there, beautifully composed, waiting for my story to end when it will once again project its best colors for the world to see.