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Whispering Woods

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Actually, it is more a howl,
But through the double-paned, vinyl windows
It sounds as an impertinent child in church
Silently informing her friend that she
Is somewhere she doesn’t belong.
Her father is playing golf between the Scottie dog tees
At the base of a snow-capped volcano—
Has slept for a thousand or more years,
May yet awake in fury—
It demands the little girl and
Her father leave it alone
And stop all that infernal
Whispering.

Dawn is just breaking as we bump down the dirt road in a rental car. The lights of Mesa and Chandler are behind us now, and the craggy spires of the Superstition Mountains loom ahead of us. The housing developments bordering the urban sprawl have encroached further and further out into the desert, until they cower in the shadow of the mountains; but there civilization has come to a grinding halt. Some would say it is because of the Apache Indian curses that blanket the Superstition Mountains, warning off all intruders who would presume to enter there. Others, that the harsh, unforgiving wilderness has averted further development. In minutes, we shall be swallowed up in the mountains’ grasp like the houses, leaving technology and all the comforts of civilization behind.

The desert has flattened out and now it is populated with low bushes, still green in the early days of June. Saguaro cacti loom above the green haze, their uneven spires stretching heavenward toward the faint purple sky. The moon is a perfect pale disc to the southeast. Whoever said the desert was not beautiful has never experienced it, I have decided. A roadrunner darts away from the car and disappears into the bushes ahead of us. As Dad maneuvers the white Chevy Cavalier through another washout, I wonder what the rental car company would be thinking right now if they saw the road we were taking their car down, straight into the heart of the mountains east of Phoenix, Arizona.

It is five o’clock a.m. when we pull into the gravel parking lot at the base of the Peralta trailhead. There are no other cars here, and my friend’s warning over the phone flits through my head. “Nobody goes hiking up there at this time of year. This is when they pull bodies out with heatstroke. You guys have forgotten what it is like here.” In the back of my mind I know she has spoken the truth, and I wonder if the day will vindicate her words. It reaches 110 degrees Fahrenheit in the Phoenix valley in June. But Dad and I are not dissuaded. Like neccient out-of-towners, we are taking our chances, entertaining the illusion that we will somehow be immune from the consequences of prolonged heat exposure and the possibilities of falling off a cliff face. I think of others who have wandered into these mountains, some never to return alive. Some dehydrated and others disappeared, swallowed up by this treacherous, yet beautiful wilderness.

I have not been back here since I was thirteen, but I find the mountains as vivid in reality as the picture I have retained in my imagination during my eight-year-long absence. Our lives have gone on; we are different people from the last time that we hiked this trail; but time has been suspended in this wilderness. These mountains are the same as they were the day we left them. I look over at Dad, sideburns speckled with gray, who is wrestling our