

The Wash Is Dry

The sagebrush hung low in the shadowed evening light. There I sat, near the piñon tree throwing small rocks a few feet in front of me. Every summer I come to sit under the piñon tree and absorb the last of the cool evening before the sun goes down. The days were only slightly shortened as August, and a new school year, approached. I should go, I thought when it happened again—Crack—Low and quiet, unassuming. Whatever made the snap of a tree branch must have been small, maybe a bird or a bug. I should go. The shadow of the piñon tree got longer, and the evening light got lower. I stood up and began to walk down the mountain, being as quiet as I could. I don't know why I was trying to be quiet, avoiding every crinkly leaf, every dry twig—Crack—this time even smaller, must be an ant I thought, nothing bigger than an ant. I have great hearing, I could hear an ant walking over a dry leaf I know. *Relax*, I reminded myself. I always psyched myself out over the littlest things. I kept walking quietly. Then I saw it, a shadowy figure near a far-off tree, must be a person, a hiker? The shadow didn't move. “Hey!” I yelled towards the figure—Crack—This time louder and closer coming from behind me, I spun around and nearly tripped—nothing. Nothing. I spun back to the shadowy figure I saw a few yards in front of me—nothing. *Nothing*. There was no figure, I must be tired. I continued down the mountain avoiding small crinkly leaves and twigs. Orange sunset drained from the sky being replaced with cool dark night. One star shined through the last of the evening light before I realized that I was straining to see. I really would miss nights like these spent in the dry, high desert climate of my small town. I should have gone down earlier—Snap—my thoughts interrupted, different, louder, a twig snapping, couldn't have been an ant, ants can't crack twigs, this was bigger, whatever it

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was, bigger. I had great hearing, I thought, to be able to hear such small sounds because this was small still, just bigger than an ant, maybe a bird or a mouse or a grouse or something small. I came upon a wash, its walls sandy and high, I saw something and heard it too—water, the cooling rush of water through the wash. I saw the glimmer of night light dancing on the surface. There must have been just an inch or two of water because there was no water when I came up. I stepped closer to the wash. Straining my eyes I saw the dry sandy bottom, the glimmer was gone—Crash— this time a crash, much bigger, oh no much bigger, couldn't have been an ant, couldn't have been a bird or a mouse or a grouse or something small. This was big but still stealthy and unassuming, could be chalked up to background sound, but I knew it was something moving in the dark behind me. I jumped down into the wash, landing on the dry dusty sand bottom. No water, I hadn't seen water. I spun around, nothing. Nothing there again. I should have gone down sooner. The evening light was gone by now, but I could still see in the moonlit glow. Where was the water? I had seen the water, heard it too, but the wash is dry. I continued down the wash, quiet sand crunched as I walked. I was hearing things, but I knew they were real. The sounds I was hearing were real, I thought the water was real and the shadowy figure too, but the wash, it's dry. It was quiet now and the hairs on my arms stood up. Everything in my body told me to run; the hair on my arms and neck, my heart beating faster and faster; but my head told me to be still, be quiet, just be *quiet*. Crack—this was the quietest one, the one that was barely there, but this was the one that sent me running. I picked up my feet running faster and faster, I knew I shouldn't be running, if something was stalking me it was now chasing me since I am running—Crash— this was loud, it was me falling face-first onto the dry sandy wash bottom. Something got me I thought, something has me by the leg. I let out a small

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scream, and jerked my leg desperately but when I turned to look—a log. I tripped over a log. Hot blood rushed down my shin landing on the dry sandy wash floor. The blood soaked in fast as if the ground was thirsting for a drink of moisture, the blood was gone and swallowed by the sand within seconds. I stood up, throbbing pain in my shin, and this time I thought I better go fast, but not too fast, don't run. I could see now that I was close to my car, maybe a few yards. I looked up and the moon was covered by clouds, no stars were out to help light the night, it was dark and I was alone. If something was following me, it must be closer now, now that I have fallen. I walked faster—crunch—loud and close, I spun again and there it was. A figure crouched behind a pion tree maybe thirty or fifty or sixty feet behind me. It wasn't a human figure, maybe a lion, a mountain lion. I knew I was close to my car now, so I ran. I ran fast. Each time I landed on my feet pain shot up my shin, each time sharper than the last. There, my car. I grabbed the handle, locked—snap—a twig cracking behind me. I searched my pockets for my keys. I felt the cold metal touch my hand, fished them out of my pocket, and fumbled to find the unlock button. Hands sweating and fingers shaking I found the button and unlocked the door. I threw myself inside, locking the door swiftly behind me. Heavy breathing echoed in my ears. Still and quiet, everything still. Nothing outside of my car clawing to get in. I heard the cracks, every one of them, the snaps too. The branches breaking, whatever was following me was a stealthy, practiced predator. I'm sure I heard it, and if it had got me they would have found me, somewhere near here. Somewhere in a bush or a tree. Lying face down in the wash, sand pushing against my face is how they would have found me. The wash was dry, I hadn't seen water in the wash. Breath fogged my windows.