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Published in *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 30, 2010

with the title, "Riding out a Desert Thunderstorm"

759 words

Arizona Spring Storm

We ran across open ground, then scrambled over broken rock men had ejected from the mountain long before. Dad went first, and my three brothers, my sister, and I ran close behind. Mom brought up the rear of the running line and shooed everyone forward as rain increased. Lightning and thunder and harder rain darkened the face of the mountain and slid rapidly down toward us. All of us carried parts of our Sunday picnic lunch, grabbed in haste from the truck we left behind as we fled from the storm.

We entered the abandoned mine shaft, which intruded straight back into the mountain and was large enough for all of us, with plenty of room to spare. We turned and watched the storm that had chased us in.

Years before, men had dug the mine shaft into the mountain. In the darkness inside the mountain, it probably turned downward and ran deep into the earth, but I hadn't time, light, nor parental permission to explore and find out. Nor did my imagination stay with the subject of where the mine went in all its darkness, because the storm that had driven my family into the mountain grew rapidly more dramatic and drew all my attention. Powerful wind scoured

the rough, rocky desert landscape in front of the mountain. Rain poured down the wind. Brilliant lightning flashed. Thunder roared and shook the earth.

Lightning struck rocks of the desert. Pieces of fractured rock flew into the air. Lightning struck close to the truck below us, next to the dirt road we had driven up. Dad worried aloud that lightning might hit the truck. The sharp smell of lightning and burned rock strongly penetrated the desert air around us.

I stood with my mouth open at the beauty, power and ear-stunning sounds of the storm. Fierce wind, a loud and wild voice, howled and threatened everything around and changed its sounds every second. Lightning sizzled and crackled with powerful electric sounds. Thunder stunned our hearing, then rumbled and echoed away from us and started again, far too close. The earth and the mountain vibrated with the power of the storm. I smelled and tasted ozone. Stone melted and filled the air with its smells.

I wasn't frightened of the storm as much as awed to silence. The mountain protected me. My family stood close around me, and I was sheltered by the knowledge that we were all together.

Earlier that morning, we left our home in Bullhead City, Arizona, headed for the country around Oatman for a Sunday picnic. The sun shone hot in Arizona spring. We needed sunshine, because there wasn't room for all of us in the cab of the truck. Some of the children, me included, rode in the back of the truck, exposed to the sky and whatever weather might develop in the sky above us.

We drove close to our chosen destination in uninhabited country before the front edge of the storm hit us with the first rain and promised heavier rain. The crew in the cab spotted the mine, parked the truck off the dirt road, and distributed all our supplies for the day among members of our family. We ran for shelter, stopped inside the mine and looked out at the storm. The storm's sounds drowned any attempts at conversation.

Lightning and thunder gradually decreased. The loudest part of the storm moved away from us across the desert. Wind reduced to a hard, steady wind. Rain decreased to hard rain that soaked seeds waiting for moisture in the desert soil.

Our damp clothes dried. We spread the picnic cloth on the floor of the mine shaft, away from the edge of darkness. My mother spoke of snakes and scorpions and drew our boundary out of the storm but in light that flowed into our temporary refuge from the desert outside. We ate sandwiches, cold fried chicken, boiled eggs and apples and drank fruit juice.

Rain stopped. The sun came out. Wind calmed to a soft breeze. We put everything back in our basket and sacks and walked out of the mountain to the washed-clean desert. The day again turned ideal for those of us who rode in the back of the truck.

I grew through that spring toward summer and toward adulthood. The power of the earth and of the storm struck deeply into my consciousness, stayed in my awe-stricken memory all my life and pulled me toward the outdoors, toward deserts and

mountains and toward the drama of skies and changing weather.