

Humming of the Desert



I want no visions of gila monsters magnified, he thought to himself, not on my trip through the desert! "What does a man need?" he asked around before he left. A few ideas of how things are: that spring is the best time to go, that it is too hot in the summer, that some come back and others don't. And beyond that — travel light. A flask of water, not much more.

His wife Annie had been to the desert before they married, she knew it as a place to dream about, to conjure up images and transpose them to her canvas. Like Georgia O'Keeffe. She hoped that some day they'd go there together, but they never did.

"Go to the desert, go somewhere, loosen up," she told him when they were splitting up.

"Nah," he said, "too much uncertainty, mirages of water. I like my water real, straight from the tap."

"Well, just the same I think you should go... to the canyons I once told you about." Those were her parting words.

Was it today or yesterday that it happened? A mirage of time, when a distant moment appears to be nearby. He had no doubt about the place: at the mouth of a dry canyon, where it fans out into the valley. Thank God for that. Had he gone higher, inside the canyon, he would have been pulverized; that had not been Annie's intent.

He was on his way to Death Valley, deep in the Mojave Desert, traveling from Los Angeles — The Angels. No angels there now, but some may have landed there before man. The first man to land there may have seen angels, or wished he had, between the sea and the edge of the desert. Somewhere past Bakersfield he stopped at a roadside Casa Burrito for a cup of coffee. Sipping coffee, as he now cupped the mug in his hands, was one of those quiet moments when he missed Annie the most. Annie gone, and their young son John in the army, he spent the past couple of years alone.

He wanted sugar in his coffee — unusual for him, he seldom used it. There was none on his table, so he walked over to the neighboring booth. A woman was sitting there.

"Sure, take it," she said, pushing a jar of sugar in his direction. The movement of her hand was light, a few silver bangles jingled softly on her arm.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"Yes."

"May I join you?"

"Yes." He brought his coffee and sat across the table from her.

"I'm on my way to the desert," he said, "have you ever been there?"

"Yes, many times."

He waited.

"You're a woman of few words," he finally remarked.

"It takes me a while. I prefer to listen, then I hear better."

"You mean, you're a bit deaf?"

"No, I mean I hear better what people are really saying."

"Interesting. My wife used to say the same thing."

"Used to?"

"We don't see each other any more."

"I'm sorry."

"Sweetening the coffee helps."

"I know. But all the sugar in the world is sometimes not enough. There was plenty of it where I just came from, but it didn't help."

"Oh? Where was that?"

"In Guatemala."

"Really? I'm not one for traveling, even to places close by, like the desert here, almost in LA's backyard."

"I travel a lot, I travel light," she said as she adjusted the gauze shawl over her young shoulders, over her light dress.

"Where are you going now?" he asked.

"I'm on my way back to Bakersfield, nothing pressing though."

"Would you... would you consider coming to the desert with me first? I'd appreciate your experience."

"Not an easy place to visit. Why do you want to go there anyway?"

"To begin going somewhere, to loosen up."

"I see."

She looked at his square jaw, muscles twitching, but his eyes seemed gentle, some white hair softening the dark-brown of his beard.