

Monsoons and Motherhood

By Dawn Wink

The decision to have a child is “to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body. ~ Elizabeth Stone

There it is—that small, still knowing we experience at the cusp of the one season’s end and another’s beginning in New Mexico. We sense in the air that almost imperceptible shift from summer to fall. I stand outside, tilt my head back, and inhale deeply, seeking on the winds the pungent scent of roasting *chiles* in the air that announce fall’s arrival.

In the distance, mountainous storm clouds darken, pregnant with the last of monsoon rains, sheets of rain glide across the desert toward me, the air still rich with the earthy fragrance of wet desert. These rains are summer’s last hurra, ushering in fall days of air so cool and crisp we hear it snap.

The storm ebbs closer. Shards of lightning slice the sky. Electricity rides the air. Soon, rain will pound on the roof like pebbles and the steamy scent of rain hitting the hot, dry ground will fill the air.

Few events symbolize the desert and home like a good summer monsoon rain. No matter how long you live in the desert, monsoon rains never fail inspire the same awe and exaltation at their arrival. They have arrived. The past month of anticipation is now met with a deep exhalation of relief. They are here. We can now go about living again.

When monsoon season arrives, heavy rains pour down on the scorched desert faster than the sand can absorb it. Arroyos fill and run with water and bone-dry riverbeds churn with silty water within a matter of hours. The water carves the sandy bed of the arroyo that borders our home into sculpted, serpentine shapes snaking their down its center. The chalky greenish-blue shades of the chamisa deepen and shift above waters that wash away the clipped hoof prints of

horses, the nubby indentations of coyotes, pinprick dots of the centipede, and the tire-like tread of my running shoes smattered across the crust since the last rain.

Especially sacred are the rains that fall as the sun still shines, announcing that somewhere in the desert *los coyotes se están casando*, coyotes are marrying. The holy distilled into droplets on your neck and arms, surprising and tickling your skin, that seem to fall from a clear sky. You look up to discover rain shed by pockets of heavy, steel-gray clouds, floating alone amid a clear blue sky, the sunlight adding golden-rimmed edges with a deft hand.

A primary rule of the desert is to never enter an arroyo running with water no matter how low and docile it appears. During a serious monsoon rain, arroyos that appear shallow and manageable often mask raging currents beneath the surface. The possibility of being swept away looms ever present.

As I walk down the arroyo to meet the storm, these sights and sounds evoke memories of other monsoon rains, those of my childhood in Arizona. A canyon enclosing a large arroyo (or ‘wash’ as any true Arizonan knows them) ran near our home. At its origin several miles away, the sides of Kelsey Canyon rose sharp and high to form a narrow ravine. Sheer rock walls bordered each side of the canyon. Small cacti grew with seeming impossibility and eternal hope out of tiny crevices and shelves in the stone walls. A combination of soft, pebbly sand and large, water-smoothed rocks lined the canyon floor. The steep walls gradually sloped downward and disappeared, until the arroyo eventually ran through open desert. Dense thickets of mesquite trees, hungry for the water the arroyo promised, lined its edges.

During the evening thunderstorms, my family and I sat out on the wrap-around front porch of our adobe style house to watch. Mom and Dad sat in the hanging swing. The soft creaking of the metal chain among the sounds of the storm marked the rhythm of the swing as

they rocked slowly back and forth. My brother and I rested on the low stucco wall, leaning back against opposite supporting columns.

We sat in complete darkness, surrounded only by the sound and sights of the storm. Interconnected flashes of lightning danced across the sky in front of our eyes. Not one strike. Not two strikes. Entire strings of multi-pronged flashes of lightning stretched the length of the horizon. Waves of rumbling thunder rolled through the clouds, culminating in final, explosive claps overhead. The rain fell intermittently fast and furious or gentle as pin drops on the tin roof of the patio.

We heard the rocks cracking against each other as they tumbled across the arroyo's floor almost a mile away. The cracks echoed sharply against the steady sound of the rain on the roof. We sat in silence, often drinking a tall glass of iced-tea or on very special days, a Coke with a twist of lemon.

In those moments, all was right with the world. When I need to feel secure or grounded in my life today, I close my eyes and return to that front porch. Again I sit silently in the dark and watch the flow of rain course down and lightning drape the sky, and listen to the rumble of thunder, the crack of tumbling rocks, and the sound of raindrops dancing on tin.

As a parent, one of my greatest hopes is to provide my own children memories they will one day look back on with such genuine tenderness and solidity as I remember sitting with my family on that front porch, enveloped in the sights and sounds of a storm in darkness.

Monsoon rains bring incredible beauty and life. After a thunderstorm, the desert jumps to life with the arrival of water. Animals scurry and dart in search of food and water, cactus grow and bloom within hours. The beauty of the water and bursting arroyos are wonders to be respected. There is always the possibility of being swept away in the rushing waters. Water is the

vulnerability of every living creature of the desert, humans included, whether it be its scarcity or explosive arrival.

As the monsoon rains nourish the desert, our children nourish our souls. We are swept away, tumbling head over heels in our love for them, just as the rocks bounce and tumble along the floor of Kelsey Canyon, swept away in the force of the water. The depth of our emotions for our kids rushes utterly out of our control. When they look at us and smile or come over to plant a spontaneous kiss on our forehead, we absorb this as surely as the desert absorbs the rain of the monsoons. They give us life.

My head swims with these thoughts of unlikely bedfellows: monsoons and motherhood. But, isn't that what parenthood is all about? Beauty and vulnerability? Our children fill our lives with each every single day; equal parts love-them-so-much-it-makes-you-weep and the patina of heart-stopping vulnerability that forever colors our world as parents. Just as those tumbling rocks along the bottom of the arroyo have no choice where they will eventually come to land or stop, once we hold that baby in our arms for the first time, we are lost to them. Swept along in the course of their lives, we bounce and tumble along in the wake of that love.

So perhaps motherhood and monsoons do have something in common after all. I continue to watch the rain-skirted clouds march steadily northward. They bring an end to this summer's monsoon parade. I breathe deeply again, and seek the scent of *chile* on the winds.