

No Good Deed

Penelope Grenoble

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ABQ Press Trade Paperback 2012**

Cover Design By Howard Goldstein



www.abqpress.com

**ABQ Press
Albuquerque, NM**

ISBN 978-0-9838712-9-3

For Susan and Michael

with love

Author's note: The landscapes described in these pages are real; the locations have occasionally been rearranged to protect the resource.

The Santa Monica Mountains fall under the jurisdiction of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's and Fire Departments.

Special thanks to Lt. Ken Fowler, Retired Detective Bureau Commander at the Lost Hills Sheriff's Station and Don Franklin, 37-year veteran of L.A. County Fire.

When there is no desire, all things are at peace.

—Tao Te Ching

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Sunday, August 12, 9:15 AM

The small hump-backed woman stopped in the shade just short of where the trail dropped out of the oak canopy into the open. She wiped sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand, squinted up the broken sandstone ridge and sighed. Thirty minutes at least — up and over the ridge, then over the saddle until finally, the canyon. There would be shade in the canyon, she knew, shade but no water. Not much water anywhere in the mountains this time of year.

The woman dropped her pack on the trail beside her, and with the caution of someone who knows the movement will be uncomfortable, she bent forward and pulled out a thermos and a small plastic bowl. She filled the bowl with water from the thermos and called a black-and-white sheepdog from where it had settled in the shade.

“Sorry, Mac,” she said. “We started too late.” The dog looked up from the bowl of water, checked to be sure what the woman said didn’t require a response and dropped its head to drink.

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This first priority dispatched, she took a battered notebook from the front pocket of her pack, selected a page halfway through and entered the time (0900 hours), a description of where she and the dog had stopped and the temperature at the trailhead when they started (26° C). She noted that she had seen the Pacific Ocean clearly from the ridge fifteen minutes into the hike despite the thin line of moisture that still hung on the horizon, which she predicted would be gone before noon, and that the purple stalks of hummingbird sage she had seen blooming along the trail just two months before were now dry and lifeless. She brushed grit off the page, and below where she had entered the day's statistics, she wrote *Heat*, then *Frustrated* and added an exclamation point. It was good to be back.

Dr. Elizabeth Larson, professor emeritus, researcher and an occasional advisor to environmental causes, was a stickler for field notes. To wait until you got home was to risk getting bogged down in detail and miss what Dr. Larson liked to describe as the "feel of the experience." It was in this spirit that she noted she had already finished the first of her two liters of water, but wasn't worried because the boy would bring water, and that so far this morning she and the dog had not encountered a single mountain bike.

Dr. Larson disliked mountain bikes. She disliked being forced to move off the trail by two, three, sometimes six of them at a time, when she and the dog had the right of way. She disliked the riders' flashy outfits, which she considered out of place in the backcountry, and their testosterone-fueled propensity to use the mountains as a racetrack. The sheepdog was trained to sound the alarm, and if it hadn't been 80 degrees at

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nine in the morning, it would have been out in front of her, exploring in its agitated mountain gait, but ready to return at any moment should a bike appear. Then the two of them would step off the trail together, the dog on a stay at her side. Sometimes a rider going by would shout, "Thank you," or "Good dog you've got there," and Dr. Larson would force herself to smile.

She bent down and picked up the dog's bowl, careful to return it to its proper place in the pack, re-attached her walking stick to her wrist by its woven nylon strap, heaved up another heavy sigh and stepped out into the sun.

The trail under the oaks had been hard-packed and good for planting her stick, but she was walking now on broken sandstone and she cautioned herself to be careful the stick didn't slip. Just two weeks before, Dr. Larson had resisted the advice of a sporting goods salesman to trade in her heavy staff for a pair of aluminum trekking poles. But the poles had felt flimsy compared to the walking stick and she disliked the idea of hiking with both her hands occupied. She had likewise rejected counsel from friends that she not walk with the stick's nylon strap attached to her wrist, so as to be able to jettison the heavy staff if it got tangled and threatened to throw her off balance. But Dr. Larson felt secure with the stick fixed to her body, just as she preferred walking with one hand free to steady herself in case the trail got particularly rough or the stick somehow failed her.

As she picked her way through the broken sandstone, she reminded herself that this was to be a healing trip, a time to reacclimatize and begin anew. To rejuvenate. But she was alone now, with no one to

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call on for help, and she warned herself to move slowly and watch the trail carefully, to wait to move her front foot forward until the back foot was securely in place and plant her stick to the right and slightly in front of her. To compensate for what her downward gaze might cause her to miss, and lacking a companion to describe the landscape through which she passed, Dr. Larson had developed the habit of stopping regularly to reconnoiter and get her bearings. She knew that today she would stop at the top of the saddle just before the trail dropped into the canyon, because today, with the air wrung clear of moisture, she would have a drop-dead view of Santa Catalina Island.

Walking slowly, making her way carefully along the ridge, she reviewed the rendezvous scheduled for the canyon. The boy would come two miles from the trailhead at the other end and wait for her in the bottom, at the place where the streambed widened. But would he come? “You have to decide for yourself,” she had told him. “You have to establish priorities.” She laughed. What a thing to say to a thirteen-year-old. *Priorities*. They would be nothing she could imagine. Except this was no ordinary thirteen-year-old. This child had purpose. Hadn’t he sought her out, left intimidating messages — “I have something you should be interested in” — until she had finally given in? *Should* — this determination had frightened her at first, but it had also struck a chord. For more than a year it had been only herself and the dog. Now it appeared the boy was to be part of it.

Sweat dripped off her forehead and into her eyes. The salt made her eyes sting, and she knew she should stop and wipe her forehead clean and give the

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dog more water. But she had momentum on her side now, and she would endure the burning eyes for the sake of expediency, and the dog would have to wait. As the sun rose higher in the sky, Dr. Larson began to wonder if she hadn't been foolish to rely on the boy for water. At the least he could be late, which would be disastrous in this heat. She shuddered, for the first time aware of how alone she was. And that only the boy knew she was up here. Then she smiled. Alone except for the dog. She checked the sky again, sure now that she would make it to the meeting place within the fifteen-minute window she and the boy had established. He would bring water, there would be shade in the bottom of the canyon and plenty of time for the dog to cool off and then they would get to work.

"Almost there, Mac. Water right around the corner." She turned and saw the dog hugging the inside of the trail to catch shade off the uphill vegetation and moved farther outside to give him more room. Then she saw it. Movement. She turned again to the dog. "Just when I thought we'd be o for o for the day." But as suddenly as it had appeared, what she thought she saw was gone, suggesting to Dr. Larson that she had been mistaken. She was tired now, and hot, and finding it difficult to concentrate. They had been late starting, they were on a fool's errand and shouldn't have come. Then she saw it again.

She remembered she had met a horse on this trail once. Two horses. But the riders had been polite and waited at the top of the saddle for her to pass. Now suddenly there it was again, something moving through the brush ahead of her, not the flash of color she had been expecting, but something dark and

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shiny. Plastic? “Something new, Mac. We’ll see soon enough.” Perhaps the boy had reached the rendezvous early and concerned about the heat, continued on to meet her. But what was the black plastic? A new helmet? Again the movement seemed to disappear, and again Dr. Larson thought her eyes had deceived her. “Not much farther now.”

But when she looked up to get her bearings for the final assault on the saddle, she saw it again, and this time she knew it was a mountain bike. Well, they were used to that on trails like this, riders going in and out. Sometimes you heard them before you saw them. Sometimes, like today, you only saw a flash. The colors gave them away, warning you to be careful and step off the trail. Only this time she hadn’t seen color.

She tried to calculate how fast the bike was moving and how much time she had to call the dog. The trail narrowed here, and she saw just ahead where a slide had torn away vegetation and left a shower of loose gravel on the downhill shoulder. On a narrow stretch like this she would expect the rider to slow down and give her time to move out of the way. But expectations were not always warranted with mountain bikes. She could see him clearly now, the top of his head. But rather than slowing down, he seemed to be picking up speed.

Suddenly the bike broke out from under the brush and immediately she saw that the thing that was dark and plastic covered the rider’s chest and arms like a suit of armor, that he also wore a heavy black helmet and goggles and if he kept coming, they would meet in the broken place just ahead. Her mind raced. Perhaps he knew the trail better than she did,

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knew there was a place to stop before he got to them. Perhaps he hadn't seen they were there. She strained for the sound of a mountain bike shifting down, for the click of the chain and the metallic squawk that meant brakes. But the rider kept coming. Thought became reality now. He wasn't going to stop.

Frantic, she looked for a place to move out of the way. They were in the open here, close to where the slide had torn away the brush, and there was nothing to lean into, nothing to grab. Perhaps she could plant her stick downhill, hold on and slip just far enough off the trail to give the rider room. On this narrow stretch, with the broken rock, it was the only thing. But the dog...Her mind raced. He was almost on them.

Quickly, fearfully, she bent down and clutched the heavy staff in both hands. She would have to be careful to plant it close enough to her body to have leverage but far enough away to give her room to move. With the brush gone, if she slipped, there would be nothing to break her fall. She grasped the stick tightly in her fingers, raised it above her waist, straightened her arms and, with all the strength she had in her, she pushed the thick shape into the rock at the edge of the trail. But when the stick hit, her heart sank. There was nothing solid beneath the broken rock, only more loose stone. The stick slid in the rolling gravel, drawing her arms forward and away from her body and pulling her off balance. She tried to pull up, to right herself, to raise the staff and plant it again, but the downward motion had drawn her too far forward and the heavy stick was caught between her knees.

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And now the bike was on her. She felt a rush of air from the handlebars, caught the sharp edge of the pedal as the rider angled his body toward the inside of the trail. The rear wheel struck her like a paddle, knocking the stick out of her hands. She fell sideways, reaching out to try to stop herself, feeling the ragged gravel dig into her palms, the sharp stab of pain as her shoulder hit the slope. Her feet flung around and she pitched forward, bouncing, slamming against the jagged rock, up then down again, tumbling like a beach ball toward the bottom. Above her, a man swore and the sheepdog screamed.