

Everything in Death Valley seemed extreme. The day before, the sky had seemed to be falling, threatening to wash out the roads just before it abruptly stopped, then blew a gentle, dry breath of air into the valley. This morning—or rather, very late morning—when she emerged from her torpidity into the daylight, it had been clear and calm and quiet. Now, standing on the rim of the Ubehebe crater, Clara had to plant her legs in a stagger, one forward and one behind, to keep from blowing over in the great gusting sighs of wind.

They had driven around the crater, which was a half-mile in diameter, so that Greg could scout the best location and angle for the photograph he wanted to take. The whole time, he'd had to make tiny course corrections with the steering wheel against the wind, which was strong enough even to nudge the SUV slightly off-course. During one particularly violent gale, Clara braced herself with her hand against the dashboard, then turned around to make sure the moving truck was still behind them, her heart pounding at the fleeting nightmare vision of it being lifted off its tires and hurled over the volcanic edge, rolling and spilling auto parts and human bodies and her Blüthner until it all crashed into rubble at the bottom, five hundred feet below.

“NASCAR should build a track and add this to the Sprint Cup schedule,” Clara said after they'd parked, safely, at the lot on the western side. “I bet Danica Patrick could kick some ass out here.”

“Who?” Greg asked as he heaved the hatch door open against a gust of wind.

“Nobody,” Clara said. She walked over and held the door so he could get his camera out of the bag.

“*Miren*,” he called to the movers. “I need you to go back around the crater to the other side. Take the truck past that trailhead over there”—he pointed to a spot on the northern edge

then panned his hand across the ridge—“and unload the piano just opposite where we are. *Me entienden?* Okay, good, but listen. It’s a little higher over there, but it’s still really windy. You’re going to have to hold onto it. Just get it out as close to the edge as you can but then you’re gonna have to lie down behind it, both of you, holding on. You know what? Use the straps. They won’t show in the photo this far away. And the way the wall is angled, see? I probably won’t be able to see the feet over the lip anyway.”

“I can go with them,” Clara said, not able to disguise her concern. The gusts were strong, and she knew too well how unstable the piano was once it was off-balance. Her hand ached just thinking about it.

“Clara, don’t worry. I wouldn’t risk it if I didn’t trust them,” Greg said. “They used to work for a buddy of mine at a set design company. Movie sets. You know that one about the guy that falls off the apartment building? Where you see the story of his life as he’s passing each floor? My buddy built that set. Won an Oscar for it, too. Anyway, these guys aren’t piano tuners or anything, but they know how to move heavy shit around.”

Juan winked at her. “*Es true,*” he said. Without further ado, they climbed into the truck and Clara and Greg watched as they drove slowly around the edge of the crater until the truck looked like a toy being pushed by the unseen hand of a giant child.

“Being out here makes me want to believe in God,” Clara said absentmindedly.

“You don’t?” Greg asked.

She pulled her eyes away from the alluvial fans carved by millions of years’ of debris flow into the exposed red-orange bedrock and turned to him. She was sensitive to the faiths of others, and always felt a little ashamed when she admitted her own failure to believe. She used to

think of herself as an atheist, but then realized that the belief *against* God was still a belief, and she couldn't commit even to that. It would be nice, she thought sometimes, to trust in some higher order. It might help her feel less alone. "No," she told him. "Not really. You?"

"Fuck no," he said, scoffing. "Every time anyone talks about God, all I hear is their own brand of fanaticism, dogmatism, elitism or bigotry. Some excuse to feel morally superior to someone else. No thanks."

"I don't mean religion. I mean God."

Greg lifted a shoulder as he screwed a telephoto lens onto his camera body. "Same thing," he said. "Zealots and murderers and politicians justifying their actions by invoking rules made up by an imaginary friend. Or athletes! Fucking athletes the way they point to the sky during the post-game interview and say crap like 'The Big Man Upstairs was watching out for me.' Do they really believe that? That they're somehow superior enough to attract the attention of God away from the other team? What does the other guys think, huh? If they're into that, then they have to say, 'Oh, it's all part of God's plan' or some bullshit like that. Why can't it just be that one side worked harder, or even just got lucky that day? Why does it always have to be part of some big *plan*?"

Clara, taken aback by his reaction, the way his pale cheeks bloomed red, felt both the need to diffuse his irritation and the need to defend her position. "I was really just thinking about the crater. Or the rainbow I saw yesterday. Or that hawk up there that's been following us since we left the hotel. Just the mystery of it, that's all. No big *plan*."

"Maybe that hawk is God. Watching out for us." He pointed at the sky then waved. "Hey Big Man Upstairs! Thanks for everything, okay?"

“What’s the matter with you?” Clara said in a tone castigatory enough to give Greg pause. He set his camera down on the hatch and put his hands against his head, then pulled them down his face like he were wiping something away.

“Sorry,” he said. “It’s just that there have been plenty of times in my life when that fucking hawk was flying over somebody else’s head instead of mine. Or my mother’s. Plenty of times when it was obvious that we weren’t going to be winning any of the games. You know what I mean?”

Clara thought about waking up at her friend Tobey’s house the morning after her parents died. She could still remember the dream she’d been having as Tobey’s mother shook her gently awake: she was wearing a sparkling blue leotard, bounding across a spring floor that was covered with a thick layer of powdery regolith like the surface of the moon. With each leap, she gained more air, leaving widely spaced footprints across the floor. There was a crackling roar coming from the spectators, the judges, the other gymnasts, a sound that coalesced into a chant of her name: Cla-ra! Cla-ra! She was smiling as she took the final bound, so high that she escaped the gravitational pull completely and was released from one world to another, twinkling in her leotard like a star. It had taken her several moments to reconcile that euphoric dream of flying with the pained look on Tobey’s mother’s face as she shook her by the arm whispering, “Clara. Clara, wake up. Something has happened to your parents.”

She let her gaze rest on the lunar-looking white silt at the bottom of the crater, then moved it up the jagged wall to where Juan and Beto were unloading the piano at the edge. If the hawk was flying nearby, she couldn’t see him. “Yeah,” she said. “I know exactly what you mean.”