

Supermoon

At some point, they'd followed the wrong path. Ella thought she knew the exact moment, but she'd let her husband lead them awry for a few minutes, sensing they'd find the volcano's summit one way or another. The couple emerged from the cloud forest, leaving behind the soaring trees, beckoning ferns, the music performed by insects and birds, *tutti*. They approached, with increasing effort, the more barren slopes of dark pebbles leading to the crater. They'd been hiking since dawn.

When they reached the summit, Floyd pitched the tent in a spot open to the elements. He apparently didn't need help selecting their campsite any more than he'd needed help following the correct path.

Before long, darkness fell. And with it, an aroma descended on the camp, unfamiliar but nostalgic—the air smelled like hearing a new favorite song for the first time.

“Check out the moon!” It loomed overhead, a pale street lamp in the fog.

“I know.” Floyd adjusted a log on his fire and patted the patch of ground next to him.

“You planned it?”

“Yeah, little girl. It's the supermoon.”

Ella sat next to her husband and poured herself a cup of boxed wine. The crisp acidity of Italian dressing washed over her tongue with all the flavor profile of a juice box.

“Be careful with that stuff. It doesn’t take much at an altitude of 14,000 feet!”

“I can’t believe you planned this.” Ella pecked Floyd’s cheek. “I didn’t remember it was tonight....”

They fell silent, watching moonbeams slide onto the neighboring volcano’s surface. It was clearly meant to be a romantic moment. Maybe it was the exhausting climb, the inexpressible beauty before them, or the almost chilling atmosphere that arises in the absence of human civilization. But, looking out over the Guatemalan wilderness, Ella found herself feeling contentedly alone.

Every stir of the wind cut through the exposed camp. Ella pulled a knitted cap over her ears and broke the silence. “I think I felt a rumble.”

Floyd laughed.

“I’m serious. A...gurgle, even.”

“We’re sitting on an inactive volcano, observing another—inactive—volcano. Let’s just enjoy the view, Ell.”

But then Floyd, too, must have heard the distant roar. His eyes darted to the nearby crater, but his wife touched his arm and gestured towards the volcano across the valley. In the lunar glow, they could detect a thin yet distinct stream of smoke dispersing from the peak like that of an extinguished candle. The stream turned into a plume as the couple watched from their safe distance, awestruck. Floyd was the first to spy a fiery glint. Chunks of rock flew up from and tumbled down the volcano’s sides.

“That one must have been as big as a car,” Floyd said as the first torrent of molten lava erupted from the volcano’s mouth.

They fell back into silence. The moon shone on in its unnatural brightness.

Ella was feeling the wine. Irritable, bloated, tired—it was almost embarrassing how quickly her mood had changed. Floyd only grunted when she told him she needed to lie down. She unfurled a sleeping bag. The tent churned around her as she lay on one side, aware of the ground vibrating beneath sore bones.

A glimpse of the moon through the tent flap gave her chills.

The next morning, Floyd eventually tried to wake her. When he rotated Ella onto her back, he noticed her face had broken out into some rather unsightly acne. He decided not to mention it to his wife while they were still camping.

“Ouch,” Ella said, rousing.

“What?”

“...tender.”

Floyd had already turned back to the fire. “See if you can find the instant coffee and bagels.”

But Ella seemed to have been pulled once more into her dream, and Floyd had to dig through the backpack himself. It wasn’t like her to be a late riser, but he enjoyed his own company. He left her to rest, taking a brief hike to the other side of

the summit where he photographed the view: last night's spectacle was over, though an ashen column still snaked its way into the clouds from the opposite peak.

Ella was retching into the bushes when he returned.

Floyd made himself touch her face. "You're running a fever."

"I just need to..."

Floyd allowed her time to finish the thought, but Ella's mind was clearly elsewhere. Her blank eyes flicked between the space the moon had occupied last night and her husband's face in the cold morning.

"You need to see a doctor. We're packing."

All Ella managed was to dress and stand upright. She seemed to have an opinion about how Floyd was stuffing the wet tent into its bag, but she must have forgotten what she was going to say by the time her mouth opened. She closed it again, looking confused.

"It's going to be a long descent," Ella said eventually.

And it was long—for Floyd. Ella had passed out before even reaching the cloud forest despite her evident effort to travel quickly and cheerfully. Her limp body skidded down a short slope and came to rest, stopped at the hip by a large clump of bushes. Floyd was free to panic openly, rolling after Ella and slapping at her face in the hope of reviving her. He ditched the tent and backpack, grasped his unconscious wife under dusty arms and knees, and continued the trek at a remarkable pace, wondering if this was a case of altitude sickness or something more.

The day was getting hot. Floyd had reached the exposed portion of the trail, and the sun bore down on his shoulders. He'd left most of their essentials at around 12,000 feet, grabbing only his ailing wife. When he stopped for a break, he had no water to replenish himself or splash over her cracked lips.

Hiking downhill was more demanding on Floyd's knees than the carefree ascent of the previous day had been. Bearing weight in front didn't seem to be working well for his balance, so he prepared to sling his wife over his back instead. He considered holding both of her arms around his neck, then just one arm and the opposite leg around his waist. As he adjusted their position, he noted with some horror, blood—a lot of it—that had seeped from Ella's leggings onto his hands where he'd touched her. Surely this was an abnormal amount for menstrual blood?

He picked up the pace.

When at last Floyd saw their little yellow rental, he broke into a trot. He could almost see Ella leaping out of the car as she had the day before. In her excitement, she'd parked askew; he hadn't even thought to criticize. Now, he buckled her into the rear passenger seat and set about using this whole stick-shift thing.

That was Ella's job when they were in foreign countries. She didn't mind the manual cars. Or didn't seem to. He had the basic idea down, but Floyd was experiencing more difficulty than he'd expected in starting the rental without its stalling. After a few frustrating minutes on the verge of tears, sputtering turned to a more or less consistent purr, and they were on the road to help.

As they approached the city, traffic slowed them to a standstill. Cars, chicken buses, and tuk-tuks flooded every street and avenue. Floyd had never seen the city

like this on a weekday evening before. He wondered if it was a saint's day, noticing almost every shop in sight had closed early.

In the backseat, Ella moaned as if having a nightmare. Floyd turned his head to look at her and breathed a sigh in response to the noise escaping her lips.

Floyd turned back to observe the commotion in the street. He noticed the elderly Maya woman and her granddaughter who'd woven colorful braids into his wife's hair the other day. They seemed to be sleeping in somewhat unnatural positions on the sidewalk. The line of vehicles crawled by the market, usually open until late during the week. But every stall was empty now, no women trying to sell hard-to-identify veggies or suspiciously warm raw chicken.

Floyd's unease intensified.

It was seven hours now since Floyd had noticed the bleeding, and still, a doctor had not seen Ella. After choking the motor twice, he signaled to an open tuk-tuk driver, abandoned the rental car mid-lane, and made it through a bumpy ride to the hospital, patient on his lap.

The hospital was chaotic.

There were lines the length of which Floyd couldn't believe. Doctors looking strained. Not enough staff—not nearly enough. It was like something had happened, or was about to happen, the way people were rushing around. There wasn't even enough administrative staff—and those there were all seemed to be in training: somebody's nephew or son. It struck Floyd that the only women he'd seen since returning to the city were the two Maya ladies passed out on the ground.

Finally, Floyd found an English-speaking someone-in-scrubs. “My wife is very sick. We were climbing the mountain...” He waited as several others were called over, then repeated his words and paused as he was translated.

They stared at him with eyes like the supermoon.