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## Eruptions

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“Are you alone, too?” Lu asked, cradling the pup in her arms. “Did someone abandon you, as well?”

As if to reply, the pup offered a half-whine, half-bark. In the light, Lu could see him better: His fur hadn’t grown in unevenly; someone had torn it free of him in large handfuls, leaving ugly scars littering his tiny body. Where the skin was still exposed, Lu could see black and purple bruises the size of her fist. She wondered if he had any broken bones. The pup’s tongue lolled to one side of its mouth, stained with black spots, probably blood from any one of his barely healed wounds. A pang of sympathy tore through Lu as she examined the poor pup.

“You look as bad as I feel,” Lu murmured softly. The pup merely nuzzled into her for warmth.

Lu cast her gaze to the starless sky overhead. An eternal oblivion greeted her, stretching out in all directions to cover the world in a blissful, silent night. The puppy in her arms shuddered as a cold wind washed over them and howled out threateningly.

“I wonder if we’re all meant to suffer...if we’re all meant to find warmth in one another in the darkest parts of the night. I wonder if that’s why we’re born...”

As the sun broke through the darkness, Lu shuddered against the cold.

## *Eruptions*

[Linda Elaine]

Cold, thick mists blanketed my hat and slicker. Only a third of a mile to the top, but my calves burned like they had endured five miles of steep, wet, concrete terrain. Forty other Americans and I had traveled by bus thirty or more miles outside of San Jose to Alajuela, where we hoped swift winds would blow the clouds away to reveal one of Central America’s largest and most active volcanoes: the Poas. With every advancing step, my lungs labored to acclimate themselves to the bitter, stinging sulphur that had filled the air and the bottom of this volcano for thousands of years.

“Just turn back,” my inner voice said.

Our guide had warned us about the steep climb and the

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noxious fumes. No one would have criticized me if I begged off.

My thoughts kept revising the excuses I'd make: "I'll just stay here at the side of the trail; you can pick me up on the way back."

I sounded lame, even to myself, so I kept walking with the others and sniffed in shallow breaths.

The average temperature in the volcano would be sixty degrees, they said. Sixty in Chicago, if the wind's not blowing, can be an invitation to play softball. Here, in this open crater, my senses registered twenty degrees in January. The flesh on the tip of my nose iced up; liquid drained and ran.

I like to think of myself as perseverant, game, even, to challenge myself physically. How much can I push my calves and thighs? They can only get stronger, leaner.

What is the coldest temperature my body can tolerate?

Brief discomfort can have great rewards that I'd miss if I wilted like a hothouse flower.

Then, I heard what I thought was singing, like a whisper of soprano harmonies floating above the sulphurous air.

I shook the sounds off: It's only talking, or at the top someone is playing a boom box too loud. Here?

Immersed in the unfamiliar and strange melody, I was pulled onward. I began to imagine that each step drew me toward heaven, where a chorus of angels waited to greet me. As if to prove my delusion, altos and basses joined the sopranos. I climbed higher. The air thinned even more. I was sure I was hallucinating. My group's chattering quieted. We all listened, almost reverently.

When we reached the lookout point, the Poas entwined its green pool of bubbling and gurgling with hymn-like Spanish harmonies that emanated from a circle of women and men singing their thanks to God for the beauties of His Universe.