

THE QUARRY

Hannah McNicholas

Clarke's Third Law

It started with a crack in the wall.

Avril noticed it when she moved in, a fine, hairline fissure in the plasterwork. It started high in the corner of the room, above the bookshelves she'd spent the past two hours assembling. The crack crept down from the ceiling and split into infinitesimal threads like tiny river deltas.

She could have sworn that it wasn't there when she'd inspected the place. She'd checked the house over before she signed on it, every nook and cranny, and aside from a little water damage in the bathroom and some stained carpets, she hadn't noticed anything wrong. But the crack was incredibly fine. Maybe it was only visible in the afternoon, the sun slanting rich and golden through the blinds. Maybe it had appeared sometime between the inspection and the move, the mark of lazy removalists. Summer had set in early this year; maybe the sudden heat had shrunk the plaster.

Maybe she'd just missed it.

Either way, there was a crack in her bedroom wall and it would need fixing, just like the leaking tap and the aging carpet she'd strategically placed her couches to hide. She'd have to pick up some putty and fill in the damage, some time after she finished unpacking boxes and assembling flat-packed furniture.

She made a mental note and went on sorting books.

...

Avril noticed it again on a Thursday, while she was struggling with her left heel. She was running late as usual, stockings twisted around her thighs, blouse half buttoned, wrestling with the tiny buckles on her shoes. She spotted it in the corner of her eye, the spider-web cracks, drawn like artists' charcoal on the cream plasterwork.

She sighed. She'd forgotten about it, hidden it behind a collection of geology maps and oddly shaped rocks. The summer had been long and dry this year, it had probably caused the plaster to give, the crack splintering further down the wall. Its threads peeked out from behind the bookshelves like the crooked legs of a creeping insect. A shiver ran down the back of her neck.

She didn't linger on it. She had a full day ahead and no time to worry about cracks in her walls. Avril tied up her hair, snatched up her handbag and hurried out the door. She didn't think of it again all day.

...

She noticed it again the next week when she was creeping back in early Friday morning.

There had been another quake, a 6.9 this time. It struck a few hundred miles off the coast, too far and too deep to feel on land but enough to overturn a trawler or two and send heavy waves crashing to shore. She'd been working late, kept back checking and recording the readings.

They were getting stronger, and more frequent.

She stumbled, tired, pressed a hand to the wall, winced as it creaked under her palm, and remembered the crack she hadn't fixed yet. It was a thin, spidery line splitting the paint and plaster. She could just fit her thumbnail in the crack and had to fight back the urge to pick off flakes of peeling paint. She followed the fracture with her fingers, feeling where it branched away into smaller cracks, until she couldn't reach any higher.

It had grown longer since last week, splintering down to eye level like the scars of a lightning strike. It was just a fraction wider too. Her head was full of tectonics and Richter numbers, and she thought vaguely the crack looked a bit like the shaky seismograph readings she'd spent the day squinting at.

She would need to do something about it before it got any worse.

Her fingers tingled faintly and she blamed it on fatigue.

...

The crack was the first thing she noticed when she woke up. It had spread like splinters through shattering glass, sharp lines spiked across the paint. The fissures had crept out over the wall, a tangle of veins and threads of capillaries branching from the dark fracture in the corner. She thought of the hole torn in the ocean floor.

It was an old house, she told herself. Old houses had creaks and cracks and shadows in corners. It wasn't anything to worry about.

...

It was very late, or maybe very early, when she woke to a long, deep rumbling and thought there was a storm overhead. She waited for the next lightning strike, waited to count the beats between flash and thunder but the flicker-flare of purple grey never came. She pulled back the curtains and found the white glow of a full moon casting deep blue shadows in the streets below, the pinpricks of stars glittering in the inky sky, not a cloud to be seen.

The not-thunder rolled again. It started low, like a growl trapped deep in a wolf's throat, and built to a howl, a primal roar that snatched at her sternum and shook in her skull. Avril clutched her hands over her ears but it did nothing to block out the noise and a distant corner of her mind whispered, this was the sound of the earth tearing at its seams, of islands rising from the depths and mountains growing from rock and oceans freezing over and the surge of molten stone miles beneath her feet. This was the sound of all that had ever been or would be or could be. It was ancient and forever and it was inside her head and it was *angry*.

There was a great, final boom and a sound like steel shredding, like stone tearing and bone breaking.

And then it was gone.

When the sun rose, grey light filtered through the autumn fog, she couldn't ignore the cracks anymore. It was as if the wall had been struck by a mallet. The fractures branched out across the plaster like the scattered bones of some slaughtered beast. They were dark and deep, and she couldn't see where they might lead. She didn't try to touch them again.

Avril wasn't superstitious by nature. She didn't believe in coincidence or accidents. She had been trained to believe in cause and effect, in numbers and figures, in observation and evidence, but this-

- this was out of her league.

....

'There's a crack in my wall.'

Zach looked up from his cafeteria lunch – dry turkey sandwich, fruit cup, and a slice of mass-produced blueberry crumble – and his brows furrowed.

'So fill it in,' he said around a mouthful of brie and cranberry sauce. 'Or hire a handyman. I'm a physicist, Avril, not a repairman.'

Avril leaned close, pushing his tray aside and touching his wrist gently. Zach froze, his sandwich half way to his mouth, and met her earnest gaze. His face was set in its usual cantankerous scowl but his eyes were wide with concern.

'There's a crack in my wall,' she said again, slowly, quietly. 'I need you to look at it.'

He cast a longing glance at his crumble.

'Please.'

Zach cursed under his breath and threw the remains of his sandwich aside.

...

Zach sat cross-legged on the floor of Avril's bedroom, squinting against the bright afternoon sun. There was, indeed, a crack in her wall.

More than a crack, really. A web, maybe. A lattice of fissures, crawling and criss-crossing like bare winter branches. He had studied snowflakes once, back when he was very young. He had caught flakes the size of pennies on his fingertips and marvelled at their tiny clefts and flaws, the starbursts and spider legs of the ice, a minute sculpture of chance and cold. The cracks reminded him of the snowflakes, wild and random and lovely and utterly mystifying. He touched one of the faintest lines, tracing it across the paintwork. It grew wider and wider under his hand as he

drew towards the epicentre, where the fissures branched out like veins pulsing around a knife wound.

His ring finger slipped into one of the wider cracks, expecting the scrape of ragged plaster, splinters of wood and old insulation.

‘What is it?’ Avril asked from her perch at the head of the bed, as far away from the wall as possible.

Zach drew his hand back. The tips of his fingers were tingling, the buzz reminiscent of static shock on a metal doorknob, but otherwise hale and whole.

‘Nothing,’ he said, frowning. ‘It’s nothing.’

He heard sheets rustling behind, and when she spoke next her voice was a little closer. ‘Nothing?’ she asked. ‘It can’t be nothing.’

‘It’s nothing,’ he said again, shifting back from the fractured wall. ‘There’s nothing there. No plaster, no wood. I can’t feel the other side. No light, no heat, no sound. There’s nothing.’

For a long moment the room was quiet. Avril half-thought she could hear something humming, like the low thrum of a plucked string. She stared unblinking at the wall until the lines seemed to move, shifting in and out of focus until she finally looked away.

‘That’s impossible,’ she said. ‘How is that possible?’

Zach shook his head faintly. He didn’t say a word.

...

Avril started looking for a new place to live.

The quakes kept coming in shudders and shakes, the numbers crept higher, the needles barely stilled, and she spent long days in the lab watching the earth shift. It was a terrible time to be looking to move, but there were cracks in her bedroom wall, cold, empty cracks leading to nothing and nowhere, cracks growing wider and darker by the day.

She spent a few nights sleeping on Zach’s couch but eventually a need for clean clothes drove her back to the abandoned room. Her shoulders were set tight as she slipped back into her house, something heavy settling in the spaces of her spine.

The fractures loomed dark and as faults, opening little canyons from floor to ceiling, lines crossing and branching like roads on a map. There were torn, jagged

mountain ranges and smooth, curving rivers and the sharp corners of highways cutting through their midst.

She knew how the earth worked, shifting and grinding against itself, tearing down mountains, flattening cities, opening chasms and swallowing itself whole, spewing forth ash and stone and fire. If it could happen in her world, she thought, why not others? Why not both?

She had felt it, once, when she was younger, the tremors of an angry earth, shaking her down to her bones. She'd seen windows shatter and rock crumble and the ground split open beneath her feet. She'd hid under her school desk while dust and glass rained down. She'd never felt so afraid.

She thought of the darkness through the cracks and the tingle in her fingers when she touched the lines. She thought of Zach, his face bloodless, lips a thin, pale line as he examined the wall. She thought of watching houses half-torn down, their ruins set ablaze, of the beaten, bleeding earth, gashes dug deep in its skin and the thrill of fear as she stood on the edge and gazed down, down into the nothingness below. She thought of the shift and grind and tear, of the thunderous, furious roar that had woken her all those days ago.

...

'An earthquake?'

Zach's left eyebrow arched dangerously high.

'Yes,' said Avril. Then she frowned and shook her head. 'No. I'm not sure. It doesn't matter, what I'm saying is if our world can grind against itself and tear itself down the seams, why can't it rub other worlds the wrong way?'

'A grand cosmic earthquake,' Zach corrected, no less sceptical. 'I thought you didn't believe in -?'

'That was before my wall opened up for no reason,' she said, waving her hand dismissively. 'And not an earthquake, more like an aftershock. Pre-shock? Like the first cracks in weak points where worlds touch. The rumblings before the volcano goes off.'

'And that always ends well,' he muttered. 'I know you want to explain this, but this -'

'What would you call it then?'

Zach shrugged. His coffee had gone cold long ago but he swirled it around his mug like he still intended to drink it. 'I don't know,' he said with a heavy sigh. 'Magic?'

It was Avril's turn to raise a dubious brow. 'We're scientists,' she said. 'We don't believe in magic. Do we?'

'That's just it,' Zach was muttering, like he didn't want to hear what he was saying. 'I thought we could figure it out, but there's nothing there. There's no data, there's nothing to read. There's nothing but a crack in your wall that leads nowhere. Magic is starting to look like a strong candidate.'

Avril bit her lip and clenched her hands tight. 'I saw a magician when I was little,' she said. Her nails dug into the soft, cheap table-top. 'He said he could make a canary disappear. And he did. He shoved it up his sleeve. The bird died. Crushed under his arm. I saw him shake its little body out after the show.'

Zach's coffee stilled, forgotten. 'Why are you telling me this?'

The table under her nails was a crosshatch of sharp lines, bleeding and branching out from the puncture-wound heart like twisted bony fingers.

'Because I don't believe in magic.'

....

It was late.

Avril had turned on every light in the house in the vain hope the artificial brightness would ward off the yawning darkness of the fractured wall.

It was spilling over, the emptiness leeching out into the room. A few days ago the cracks had been sharp and clear. Tonight they were...fuzzy. Out of focus, the edges blurred, like trying to read without glasses. Something cold settled in her chest and she shivered. The hairs on her arms stood up. Her skin tingled, and she wasn't touching the wall. The low humming droned on.

The ground was shaking.

It was faint, barely more than a gentle tremor. She would not have felt it if she was not so utterly still, watching the wall, watching the cracks, watching the lines that seemed to shift and breathe and bleed. There was the shaking room and the broken wall and the nothingness beyond, and Avril had the eerie sensation of standing on some high ledge, gazing into an abyss, waiting for the ground to fall out from beneath her feet.

She emptied her dresser, tore clothes from their hangers and packed haphazardly, her bags a mess of clothes and books and tangled jewellery. She was sure she'd forgotten things. She didn't care. She'd buy new things and sleep on Zach's threadbare couch until she found a new place to live, a long way away from here.

She'd seen what happened when two sides of cracked earth got too close. She wasn't staying around to see it happen again.