

The Line Between Tectonic Plates

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She wasn't sure if she could stand up so she didn't try. Her hands pressed into the snow but the cold didn't hurt. Her knees grew wet through the blue of her pants. They were dark pants, lines of green and red and orange cruising down from thigh to ankle. Pants so tight that she had to jump to get them over her hips. So tight that she had to suck in her breath to button them. They looked good, those pants.

She made it to the driveway, and then up the steps on the side of the gorge where the river water was smothered by snow and ice and dented beer cans. She was not even talking to herself anymore, not even saying, almost-there, almost-there, almost-there. The night was tilting, and she needed to get home.

At the top of the steps she held onto the bridge and stood, taking large lurching steps to cross it and feeling the dark spots around her head close in, jerk her to the side, overcorrect, tilt her to the street. If she had been a marionette there would have been strings.

And then the boy. He was just there, no warning, no approach. He took her by the shoulders and kissed her, and she kissed back, didn't know how she couldn't have. There was this boy and he kept an arm around her and he wanted to kiss her. He wanted to walk with her. He took her across the street and up another street, and that wasn't the right way but she did not know how to turn around, her feet weren't thinking.

On dark brown carpeting, thin, patchy, she focused on a clump of rug yarns, melded together with something sticky. Gum, pancake syrup. There were two boys now, two boys and she sat up, didn't she try to sit up? Didn't she try? Or did she just lie there and look at the carpet, the brown carpet.

The lights were on, she did not watch the door, but she heard it open and close. When she lifted her head it just rolled to the side. There was a hand over her mouth that smelled like cold and tobacco.

What was it that she had wanted? To be kissed. Yes that was it. To be kissed. And she was eighteen then, and she was wearing her favorite blue pants with the stripes down the legs, from thigh to ankle.

He walked her home. The boy. A boy. She remembered him outside her room. She must have told him where it was. He knew her name. He could say it to himself now. He could say it to anyone. And she had wanted him to stay over. He didn't. Of course he didn't. She got into bed, it was lofted and her roommate was sleeping and in the morning she did not say anything and went to 2pm breakfast as usual. "I got kissed on the bridge," she told her friends.

Later there was an earthquake near her parents' house in California and she called them, said, "You should sell it. You should move." She was afraid that the fault lines would give, would throw up the house and crack all the pictures

in it. Fracture them into spider webs. But her parents told her not to worry. They were fine. The house was fine.

In class she tapped her pencil against her teeth and looked around the lecture hall. It could have been anyone. They could have been watching her right then. She giggled and pulled her shirt up over her mouth. Her friend sitting next to her elbowed her in the side, wrote *what's wrong with you?* on her notebook cover. She stood up and stepped over the legs of five people to get out. She stopped herself from waving when she got to the door. *Hello out there, whoever you are.*

Earthquakes became her passion. She studied them in the Olin Library where the geothermal section was largest and there was a color map of California pinned up to the wall. She traced her fingers along the red veins that marked the active areas. When no one was looking, she drew a penciled dot where she guessed her house was. At any moment it could give. The cats would fall through the floorboards.

But that was not how earthquakes happened. She knew that. Earthquakes came from the shifting of tectonic plates and they only lasted for a couple seconds. Animals could sense them coming before humans. Animals always knew where the trouble was.

Sometimes, standing outside smoking, someone put an arm around her shoulders and she stiffened so suddenly that her breath left her. She would throw the hand off and then turn around and kiss. Kiss hard.

Her first earthquake was when she was three, maybe four, and it shook her awake. She went to her parents' room where she climbed under the covers between the two of them. Her father was not comfortable with her in bed and turned so that his face was against the wall. She had herself stiff to avoid rolling too close to him. Her mother stayed awake and told her that she was very sensitive, to be able to feel such a small quake.

In the bedrooms she surprised me. "Boo," she would think and then she would hold on tight. But it was better that way. Better than not being able to move her head.

The scientists said they couldn't predict when the next big one was coming. But Nostradamus knew about the '89 quake, wrote in his notes that a force would shake the new world; that roads would collapse. And roads did, the Cypress freeway broke in half and commuters stuck in San Francisco had to drive the long way home, over the Bay on a two-lane bridge that had no shoulder for accidents.

She rode the train into the city and wondered what would happen if the big one hit right then and broke all the bridges, all the roads. She wondered if she would be stuck there forever. At the time, she did not realize that there were parts of the city that were connected to solid land. She had imagined it like Atlantis, with water everywhere.

She stopped thinking about that night. Erased it from her files. She stopped going out. She stopped blacking out. If, sitting on a couch, her knee accidentally touched someone else's, she thought for a long time about whether it would be rude to move it. She wondered whether a normal person would move it.

Years later on a front stoop in a non-coastal town a new friend, a man, will say to her, "last night you told me about some wild stuff you used to do." He will talk about men, about two of them, and of her, somewhere in the middle.

"I never said that," she will say.

"I'm not judging you."

"I never said that. Why would I say that?" Her back will turn cold. She will not remember saying that. He will put his arm around the back of her shoulders and she will slap it off.

"We all do things like that," he will say.

"I don't."

"But you did."

"I don't tell people that. I never tell people that."

"It's OK." He will think she is embarrassed.

She will know that if she tells him, "sometimes things like that are not good things," he will believe her. But it had been her that night on the bridge, and she had wanted that kiss.

Years later on a front stoop in a non-coastal town, a man will hold her. He will say, "I care for you no matter what." She will sit under his arm and try not to breathe. She will imagine the next big one, her parents' house splitting down the center, the furniture all spilling out. And she will tell herself that if that happened, they would just build it up again. Because that is what always happens. Boards nailed over fissures. Concrete poured in industrial size strips. Liquid gray cement filling in all the holes, and a man, holding her.