The Big One

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My mom says she woke up thinking about it this morning, the morning I called to ask. She tells me about the view from the window behind the headboard of her bed, that when you lie flat on your back with your head tipped onto the pillow and look straight up you see the trees rooted into the hill that spreads down from our house and into the valley full of forest. *I've been thinking about them lately, about them falling over and what a drag that would be.* When the earth starts shaking, if the earth starts shaking, if you think about it, you know they'll fall.

And when you think about the trees, you have to think about the window behind the bed, too. *That'll fall down in huge jagged shards that will basically rip us to shreds in our bed.* She says she was thinking about taking the screens out today. It's not summer anymore; actually, it's been raining for weeks. *I thought I could take those screens down for the winter. But maybe they'll provide a little protection--at least deflect a little glass. It just was an interesting coincidence. I don't wake up thinking about it every day. But I was thinking about it today.*

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The article comes out in The New Yorker two summers ago: over 6,000 words on our impending doom via seismic inevitability. My childhood friends post it on Facebook paired with quotes reminding us just how many people will die, how to correctly visualize the scrunching of the earth like a paper napkin or a trembling fist clenching under the Pacific Northwest. The research says 7 million people will feel the earthquake and 13 thousand will be killed, that there's a one in three chance it will happen in the next fifty years.

It's not like we've never heard any of this before. That research comes from my hometown, where there's also a tsunami lab that offers public demonstrations of what a wave would do, in miniature, sweeping up the Alsea River and flooding over the tiny homes. There's been an emergency prep box in my parents' basement, unfilled, for years. When a disaster is only an extracurricular thought experiment, though, it's hard to take seriously. When no one is making you think about something apocalyptic, you don't.

But after the article is published, the earthquake starts seeping into our collective nerves.

There's a directory of earthquake-proof spaces online, and I look up where I've felt safe. The assessment measures how hard the ground will shake, what's sticking the building together, how soft the soil is underneath. On the fill-in the blank scorecard, all the schools I attended are ranked. There's a small digital image of the entrance to each one-story building, and the score for each school, K-12, is the same: Collapse Potential--High.

My dad tells me that most people don't know that the gasoline supply will be gone. The fuel stores for the whole state sit in big tanks on the far side of the Willamette River in Portland. *When the earthquake happens that's all wiped out. Kaput.* When my dad talks about the earthquake, he talks in terms of whens, not ifs. The creeks might switch direction, he says. Most people don't know.

Even if you're not doing the research, it's hard to miss the guides: How to pack easily for earthquake, tsunami and more; Where to store your emergency supplies; How To Prepare For The Cascadia Megaquake; Unprepared: An Oregon Field Guide Special. They're accompanied by cute pencil drawings or wiggly animations, and they're worded in hypotheticals with the tone of a kid starting an adventure: "What will we eat?...And, er, what about this tsunami?" It seems like the researchers have decided that chipperness is a strategy for helping people engage. Or maybe the bloggers just don't know how else to talk about this, same as the rest of us.

At the first Christmas after the article is published, my mom asks for a giant propane tank so she'll still be able to heat up water for tea when all the power lines are down and the gas lines are out. She asks for a solar powered cell phone charger, too. And then there's the emergency contact, a guy my aunt and uncle know in Chicago. We all get a plastic coated keychain with his name and number; when it happens, you can find a phone line and report if you're safe, or not. It's a joke because it has to be: every gift is accompanied by a smirk.

That winter, the winter when my family becomes obsessed, I feel the first tremors five times a day. Each heavy step on the kitchen floor is the start of The Big One.

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Neither of my parents will tell me they're worried anymore.

Instead, my dad talks in terms of extreme practicality, even when the measures he suggests are clearly absurd. He stocks the shed behind our house with gallons of water and energy bars. There's money, too, just in case--*ATMs won't work anymore*, he reminds me. They used to say you needed to have supplies to sustain your family for three days, now it's three months, he says. Imagine, he says. *In case it becomes a tradable commodity at some point where you can actually buy something from someone. In the case of an earthquake somebody's going to figure out some way to screw somebody to make money. Nature of the beast.*

My dad has always dealt with stress by taking on false responsibilities. He spends weekends on a sixteen foot ladder to our roof, cleaning out the chimney because he doesn't trust the professionals. Or, after a storm, he'll spend a whole day in the woods, "cleaning up" the downed branches. As if the forest benefits from a swept floor. For a person who takes comfort in preparation, this emergency creates a strange space of impossibility; there is endless preparation to be done, but if it really happens, we will never, ever be ready.

He admits that our family is probably better prepared than most people we know. Marginally. *But we don't have any guns*. What? My dad will often say something crazy in what sounds like a sarcastic tone when, in fact, he's not joking. *You know, if you think about it in the worst case scenario there's going to be a bunch of vigilantes out there who start eating people. If you think about that we have no way to protect ourselves*. This is clearly unreasonable, like it's unreasonable to feel like it's your job to tidy up the woods. But he reads survival guides. First: have a sense of humor, second: don't underestimate danger. *I don't think there'll be cannibalism happening. But you could have people marauding the countryside. That assumes that they could get to us. We might be totally isolated out there--the roads completely covered with trees, nobody could get to us, we don't know how to get out*. He tells me that the bridges will collapse, that people will be stuck on the wrong sides of the rivers. He says we'll make a cooperative with our neighbors, though. He's already reached out, they're talking in whens.

He says he doesn't worry about it like my mom does. That maybe she doesn't admit it.

My mom tells me that in her dreams, she's always by herself. During the earthquake, as she imagines it, she'll be alone, too. *It's me, like, having to save my own bacon*. For a while, she says, she was keeping the gas tank full. She'd think about the earthquake when she drove home over the mountain or sat with my grandparents in their house, which is old and made of crumbly concrete. For a while she knew exactly what she'd grab when the shaking started: the colorful quilt on her bed, handmade by strong women. Now, she thinks about it less actively, thinks our neighbor would probably come looking for her. *My best hope is Doug, nutty Doug, I know he would come to save me. And your dad would militantly make his way across the universe to save me. But he'd be farther away. So mostly I'd be here by myself. And I'm like, making a cup of tea on my camping stove. And I'm breaking out a bar of chocolate because that was the one thing I put in the earthquake box. And looking at the devastation around me. And figuring it out!*

Sometimes she imagines herself with a broken leg. In that scenario, everything gets much harder. But mostly, she says, she doesn't think about it. *I mean, I'm trying to do my best to shut out all the much more real evils that are lurking around the edges. I feel like the state of the world right now is so incredibly scary; the earthquake is somewhere on that list. But Donald Trump is much higher right now.*

When you talk to your dad he'll say something totally different. About how he's put together his box. He has a whole list of should-dos. You know, he's more of a pragmatist, she says.

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"At 10:20 a.m. on October 20, 2016, City of Corvallis staff and patrons will join thousands of Oregonians and "Drop, Cover and Hold On" in the 2016 Great Oregon ShakeOut, the state's largest earthquake drill ever."

This drill happened in my town a couple of weeks ago. My mom told me that people all over our town played dead, that the paramedics practiced resuscitating people, or something. That everyone checked their water supplies, and that the volunteer radio groups tested their signals. It sounds so dramatic that I Google for images. None come up, because the drill wasn't people playing dead; it was the same drop-cover-hold situation that we practiced twice yearly in elementary school classrooms. I always felt good at tucking myself into small places, was always careful to fold my spine under the strong metal bar holding my miniature desk chair together, cupping a hand over the back of my neck. 360,000 Oregonians mimicked that movement at 10:20 a.m. on the same rainy October day this year. I think, *how could you not panic*. Every public building in my town stopped functioning for half an hour while all the people crouched down. They say that drills like this build muscle memory. Like your body will know.

It's a privilege to worry about the earthquake. It comes up when we don't have to think about my grandfather breaking his hip. It comes up because we never have to worry about groceries, because buying gallons of water and a durable shed to store them in is feasible financially and because we have the extra space in our brains. I used to think my family only worried about the earthquake because everyone needs something to worry about, because they were clinging to an outlet.

But it's more complicated than just that. The earthquake is a demonstration of how we grapple with facts, and how facts that don't have material impacts can still manifest, complexly, distinctly. It's a figment of something amorphous and unimaginably terrible that we can choose to think about, or do something about, or not, or maybe we don't get to choose.

And letting go of the earthquake might mean something too. When I call her for this interview, my mom suggests that maybe thinking about the earthquake is a young people thing now, a control thing, that maybe I need to write about her obsession and mine because I'm still at the age when I think I can decide how much danger I want to put my body in. *When you get to my age, you've seen people die and you've seen people have horrible diseases that they've done nothing to deserve and you just see how random the universe is and this is just like one more random thing*.

The earthquake makes us assess what we would do, if it happened right now. Maybe, it would all be over, maybe we'd all be crushed by bricks and maybe none of the food supplies would last. Maybe it's about to happen, maybe it will never happen. When you have to take imminent apocalypse into account, what do you do with this next minute?

I think about the windows issue a lot, she says. *Not enough that I would change the position of my bed because I love love love my bed under this big tall window. You lie here on this bed and you can see the whole sky and you can look out at the stars and you can watch the progress of the moon across the sky as you sleep. I would never move my bed across the room to be safer*, she says. *I would never do that. I would rather have a shard of glass go through my forehead.*