Everything Changes

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Extract

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The night before everything changes, an earthquake jolts me out of my sleep and I instinctively reach over for Tamara, but it isn't Tamara, of course, it's Hope. There was never even a time when it might have been Tamara. And yet, lately, whenever I wake up, my first, dazed instinct, before real life comes back into focus, is to assume it's Tamara in the bed beside me. I suppose that in my dreams, not the one or two that I can recall, but the millions that vanish into oblivion like flies when you've barely even begun to move your cupped, ready hand in their direction, in those dreams, she must be mine, over and over again. So there's always this vaguely troubling notion when I wake up like this, this sense that I've somehow been transported to an alternate universe where my life took a left instead of a right because of some seemingly insignificant yet cosmically

crucial choice I made, about a girl or a kiss or a date or a job or which Starbucks I went into . . . something.

Meanwhile, back in real life, the Upper West Side of Manhattan trembles like a subway platform, rattling windows and uprooting corner trash cans, the shrill wail of multiple car alarms rising up over Broadway, piercing the night at its stillest, in the hour just preceding dawn.

"Zack!" Hope shouts, reaching out urgently for me, the volume of her voice almost as startling as the quake, her manicured nails slicing painfully into my shoulder. *Hope, not Tamara. That's right. Beautiful Hope.* I open my eyes and say, "What the hell?" It's the best I can manage under the circumstances. We look up at the ceiling as the bed shimmies lightly under us, and then quickly climb out of bed. My trusty Felix the Cat boxers and her satin Brooks Brothers pajamas belie the postcoital nature of our broken slumber. The tremors have stopped by the time we run downstairs to the living room, where we find Jed, my housemate, standing naked and peering out the window with mild curiosity.

"What happened?" I say.

"I don't know," Jed says, rubbing his toned abdomen absently. "I think it was an earthquake." He turns from the window and moves lazily toward the couch.

"Oh my God!" Hope cries, simultaneously spinning around and covering her eyes.

"Oh," Jed says, first noticing her. "Hi, Hope."

"Can you put that thing away for a minute?" I say on Hope's behalf.

"I didn't know she was here," Jed says, making no move to conceal his kinetic nakedness.

"Well, you do now," Hope says in that high, aristocratic whine that never fails to bug me.

I love Jed, but he's been pulling this naked shit more and more lately. I can't recall the last time I saw him wearing a shirt. One of the few downsides to living with an unemployed millionaire is that he has nothing to do but watch television and cultivate eccentricities. On the other hand, I live in a newly renovated brownstone on the Upper West Side and haven't paid rent in over three years. In Manhattan, this makes me nothing less than fortune's son. When you do the math, I am being highly compensated to tolerate the occasional flapping phallus. I grab a pillow off the giant leather sectional that runs the perimeter of our ridiculously large living room in a wide crescent, and throw it at him. "Cover yourself, Jed. For the sake of the nation."

Jed sits down on the couch and wipes the crust out of his eyes while I gag inwardly at the thought of his naked ass on the mushroom-colored Italian leather. He crosses his legs and perches the pillow comically over his genitals, flashing me his trademark laid-back grin. Hope sniffs, audibly and with great inflection, before walking over to the window. Jed has made a lot of money, but Hope comes from money, which carries with it a distinctly different flavor. Having done neither, all I can do is sigh a this-is-my-life kind of sigh, resigned, but not without some trace of contentment. Jed is my best friend, and sometimes a bit of an asshole. Hope is my fiancée, and while I don't think she's a snob, I can see why Jed might. They are polar opposites, triangulated by my central presence between them. Physically, though, they could be siblings. Both are effortlessly beautiful, tall and lean, with thick hair and chiseled features. Jed's prominent forehead and thick nose lend him a vaguely European look, like a Calvin Klein model, and he cuts his hair short so he doesn't have to brush it. Hope's hair is thick, obedient, and often suspiciously similar

to Gwyneth Paltrow's latest style, although she would never admit to such pedestrian influences. I stand between these two attractive people as something of an oddity, like the guy taking the light readings at a photo shoot, miraculously connected to both of them, conspicuously average; the man in the middle.

Jed and I met in Columbia and became roommates after we graduated, in a run-down junior four on 108th and Amsterdam. At the time, he was working as an analyst at Merrill Lynch and I was writing long, boring press releases full of disclaimers for a PR firm specializing in pharmaceuticals. Then Jed quit his job to join a hedge fund investing in Internet startups and, like everyone else except me, became a millionaire on stock options by the year 2000. By the time the bubble had burst, he'd already bought the brownstone, inviting me to move in with him, and sold enough stock before the fall to bank a healthy few million to boot. For a while he talked about going back to work in the financial sector or maybe starting his own hedge fund, but then our buddy Rael got killed and Jed pretty much forgot about all that, and announced that he was going to just stay home and watch television for a while. That was almost two years ago, and as far as I can tell, he seems to have found his true calling. The nudity is more of a hobby.

Rael, my best friend since the third grade, lost control of his BMW on his way home from a night of gambling in Atlantic City. The car swerved up an embankment on the Garden State Parkway and crashed through the woods before flipping over into a gully. It was two in the morning and the parkway was empty when it happened, so it took a while for help to show up, and by then he was dead. I doubt they could have saved him anyway, since his internal organs were pretty much crushed on impact when he was impaled on the steering wheel. It would be

comforting to think he died instantly, but it actually took a while. I know, because I was sitting next to him.

"Did we really have an earthquake?" Hope says, sounding like a little girl as she peers out at Eighty-fifth and Broadway. Her whine is gone, and I love her again.

"So it would seem," Jed says.

He turns the television to one of the local channels while we gaze out the window, considering the possibility of terrorist actions. Since 9/11, we take nothing for granted. The din of the car alarms is starting to lessen, and a few hardy souls have ventured out onto the street to assess the situation. They're showing an old Clint Eastwood film on channel 55—urban Clint, as opposed to grizzled Western Clint—and after another minute, the crawl appears at the bottom of the screen confirming that yes, in fact, we did have a minor earthquake. No injuries or damages have been reported.

"Since when does Manhattan have earthquakes?" Hope says in a tone that suggests she's inclined to write a letter to someone's supervisor about this. "I've lived here my whole life, and I don't recall there ever being one before."

"Maybe not on the East Side," Jed says. "Here in the West, we get them all the time." He never misses a chance to needle Hope about her privileged roots. "Teach you to go slumming." He winks at me, a quick, effortless wink that I have fruitlessly tried to cultivate from time to time. My facial muscles apparently lack the required flexibility, and my cheek always manages to get dragged into the fray, lending the gesture a ticlike quality guaranteed not to impress.

Hope looks down her perfect nose at Jed. "You are an ass," she declares sincerely.

"No," he says, standing up briefly to bend over and flash her some moon. "This is an ass."

"Oh, for God's sake," she squeals exasperatedly, turning to me like it's my fault and flashing me her what-lovely-friends-you-have smirk. Her genteel origins did not prepare her for guys like Jed, or me for that matter, and I have to say that she's adjusted rather admirably in the name of love. "Let's go back to bed," I say, taking her hand. Jed plops back down on the couch, the leather farting as it scrapes against his skin, or else he's actually let one rip, which would hardly be out of character. We won't wait around to find out. He flips on the television, surfing aimlessly through the vast desert of late-night programming. "Night, Jed," I call to him from the stairs, but he's already gone, swallowed up in the numbing blue-green glow of the fifty-two-inch plasma screen, his true home for the last two years.

"*X-Files*," he announces exuberantly. "Damn. I saw this one." He'll sit there until morning, watching reruns and infomercials, effectively doubling his odds of encountering Chuck Norris. At some point he'll take a nap and a shower, order in some breakfast, and, thus replenished, resume his mindless vigil.

Back in my room, I try to capitalize on our unscheduled wakefulness and extract Hope from her pajamas, but although she lets my hands roam blissfully under her shirt, she obstinately refuses to relinquish it. "I have to be at work early," she says.

I gently rub her left breast in what's intended to be a seductive motion, running my hand across her nipple and down to where the softness disappears into her ribs and then back up again, her breast filling my palm, overflowing against my fingers like a rising cake when I press inward. Hope has the greatest body of anyone I've ever been allowed to touch. Her long, toned torso is crowned with two remarkably pert, grapefruit-size

breasts whose tall, barrel-shaped nipples jump to attention at the slightest manipulation. Her legs are lean and toned from her thrice-weekly spinning workouts at the Reebok Club, and above them sits a Magritte apple of an ass, firm but deliciously yielding. "Come on," I say, already popping out of my Felix the Cat fly. "Earthquake sex."

She looks at me skeptically. "Earthquake sex?"

"Of course."

I am forever cataloging the vast cornucopia of the various kinds of sex there are to have. New Partner Sex (basic and always fun), Shower Sex (more technically difficult than it appears on Cinemax), Platonic Friends Dry Spell Sex (the sexual equivalent of emergency rations), Sloppy Drunk Sex (self-explanatory), Hotel Sex (make all the mess you want, since you won't have to clean it up), and Wake-Up Sex (absolutely no tongue kissing), to name a few. When it comes to sex, my inner teenager pretty much has the run of the place.

Hope remains unimpressed. "I've got a maritime auction tomorrow," she says, firmly removing my hand from under her pajamas.

"Do you realize what a rare opportunity this is?" I say. "What are the odds of another earthquake in Manhattan?"

"Only slightly better than the odds of your getting any right now," she says with a yawn, rolling over and closing her eyes.

"Come on, I'll be quick."

"Sorry. I need to sleep."

"But what about my needs?"

Hope opens one eye and rolls it at me. "We had sex three hours ago," she says.

"And wasn't it great?" I say.

The other eye opens. "The earth moved," she says, and

smiles lovingly, a rare smile devoid of her habitual irony. I love that smile, and how it feels to be both its cause and effect.

"There you have it, then," I say.

She leans over and gives me a quick peck on the lips. "Good night, Zack." Her tone leaves me no wiggle room. Not that I'm keeping count, but I suspect I've been getting a lot less sex since this whole engagement business started. I roll over painfully onto my vestigial erection, and then turn to watch her drift off to sleep. I love the way she folds her hands under her cheek, like a child pantomiming sleep, the way she rolls her knees up, curling herself into a compact ball. Hope at rest is a rare thing, and it gives me time to contemplate her beauty, to wonder, as I often do, at the dumb luck that has brought this angel into my bed. "Why do you love me?" I've asked her repeatedly.

"Because you have a big heart," she's told me. "Because you've spent your life taking care of your brothers, and you don't even understand the strength and love that that must take. Because you think you have to earn everything, that nothing is coming to you, which means, among other things, that you'll never take me for granted. Because," she has said, "every boyfriend I ever had loved me for my potential, for what they expected me to become once we were married, an accessory to affluence. But you have no great plans for me. You love me for who I am right now, which means you'll always love me, no matter what I become."

"Why do you love me?" I whisper to her now.

"Because I knew you were going to ask me that right now," she murmurs without opening her eyes.

When I fall asleep, I dream of Tamara.

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Life, for the most part, inevitably becomes routine, the random confluence of timing and fortune that configures its components all but forgotten. But every so often, I catch a glimpse of my life out of the corner of my eye, and am rendered breathless by it. This is my own doing, this life, with my millionaire-playboy housemate and my stunning fiancée with blood as blue as the clear winter sky. I spend my days toiling in my office, and then come home to a spectacular brownstone where I hang with rock musicians and beautiful people. This is no accident. I made this happen. I had a plan.

I am about to fuck it all up in a spectacular fashion.

Morning. I don't have to open my eyes to know that Hope is long gone. She'll have awakened at six, preferring to shower and change in her own apartment before going to work. Hope works at Christie's, evaluating nineteenth-century paintings that will ultimately be auctioned off to the rich and stuffy, and although she won't come out and say it, she's mildly disgusted by my shower, with its gooey shampoo bottles, dented Irish Spring bars, scattered Q-tips, and disposable Bic razors planted strategically on every available surface. I've repeatedly offered to stock her Bumble and Bumble hair care products and Burberry body wash, but she blanches at the impropriety of the whole premarital bathroom thing. In truth, she's only recently begun sleeping over—mostly on weekends—a gracious concession to the diamond I recently, unbelievably, placed on her finger.

I roll over and survey my room lovingly, and with a touch of wonder, as I've done almost every morning for the last three years. It's a large, square room, about eighteen by eighteen feet.

I've furnished it sparingly to maintain the feeling of open space. It contains my queen-size bed, a small cherrywood desk from the Door Store upon which sit a black eighteen-inch flat-screen computer monitor, a cell phone charger, a cordless phone and charger, scattered pictures, receipts, dry-cleaning stubs, and approximately six months' worth of miscellaneous mail and papers that I fully intend to get to, although I probably never will. The floor-to-ceiling bookcases are crammed with an eclectic collection of trade paperbacks, contemporary fiction mostly, some of the classics for show, a handful of the better Star Trek novels, screenplays printed off the Internet, and three or four years' worth of *Esquire* and *Entertainment Weekly*. Opposite my bed is an entertainment center containing a thirty-two-inch Panasonic flat-screen with built-in DVD player, a VCR, and a Fisher stereo. The center of the room contains only an expanse of thick wine-colored carpeting that is more than occasionally littered with discarded clothing. On one wall hangs a framed, original *Rocky* movie poster on which a bloodied, pre-steroids Stallone collapses into Adrian's arms, and on the opposite, a well-known Kandinsky print, a gift from Hope. The door to the bathroom is between the bookcase and the desk. The bedroom in my last apartment was roughly the size of my bathroom.

On my way to the shower, I see that Hope's hung one of my suits on the bathroom doorknob with a yellow Post-it note in her elegant script. *Perfect for the party, but it needs to be dry-cleaned. Love you, H.* Her parents are throwing a party in our honor this coming Saturday night in their apartment, to officially announce our engagement. This despite their evident disappointment in their daughter's selection of a mate, although I think I'm starting to grow on her mother, Vivian, who finds my suburban middle-class sensibilities humorously quaint. I consider Hope's note and the somber dark suit she's selected,

clearly having overlooked the Moe Ginsburg label or she'd have rejected it for sure. Today is Monday. "Fuck," I say for no readily apparent reason.

My bathroom is all done in a soothing gray, the tiles, the wallpaper, sink, bath, and toilet all peacefully monochromatic, contrasted nicely by the white towels that hang on the brushed chrome rack. It's like a halfway house between sleep and consciousness, muted, functional, and unchallenging to the eye.

While I'm taking a leak, I notice something disturbing. My piss, usually a vibrant Big Bird yellow in the morning, is colorless, except for what appears to be the occasional flash of a cola-colored thread within the stream. When I look into the bowl, the colors have separated and I see a small floating nebula, which is now an unmistakable blood red. I feel an icy sensation in my belly, a tremor in my bowels. I study myself in the mirror for a minute, my brow furrowed in consternation. "That can't be good," I say.

When I step into the shower, I find myself wistfully wondering what it could be, and if it might somehow get me out of the engagement party.