

WHAT I WANT*

By

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I know not to talk to my friends, Bernie and Karla, about my fantasies, because my fantasies involve a man. A man who is not my husband. They would both respond in a similar way, no doubt: "Men are dogs." Their conclusions have been drawn from vastly different sources; though Bernie has had no real contact with a man in years (she decided to become celibate seven years ago), she knows that men are dogs. She's been told so in her women's studies courses at the university. Karla knows this is true because she is married to one. A dog, that is. He will fuck anything that moves. Except for Karla.

I can't tell them what I think about when I'm rocking Casey, my youngest, off to sleep: this man with a perfect face and wild hair, his hands on the small of my back, pulling me onto him. Looking at me straight on, saying, "You are amazing."

I've tried to give my mystery man a face. The man I saw jogging when I took the kids to school. The mailman. The guy who bagged my groceries this morning. But despite my trying, I cannot put features to the fantasy.

I'm not sure when these fantasies of mine started, and I feel foolish for concocting this mystery man. I try to remember when he first came to mind. I try to understand where he came from, where he is when I can't see him: he must rest in a place where a warm breeze blows as he lies on his back on a hillside someplace far removed from people and schedules.

I didn't decide to create him; he just appeared over time. Now he's here, like a mirage on the desert; his image moves in and out of focus, blurred and barely there, then tangible and resolute, playing with my intuition, becoming something I fear trusting, feeling in my heart it's my mind's eye playing tricks on me. But then he becomes something I'm compelled to trust since there's a remote chance he could be real. Could exist somewhere.

I've tried to understand why. I tell myself I have a lot to be grateful for, that I don't need these girlish fantasies to survive. But, I keep coming back to this notion that something is missing in my life. I don't believe in affairs, but I understand how they can happen.

My mystery man allows me to carry on without anyone getting hurt. His compliments make my knees weak. They aren't like the compliments I get from Jack: "You look nice." This mystery man stands back and looks at me, takes in all of me, and when I look in his eyes, I know he finds me absolutely, positively, from the inside out, remarkable.

Each day ends like the one before. Jack comes through the door, a hot day's work hanging on him like layers of animal hide. He kisses my forehead, leaves a wet circle that's still there many seconds later when he's at the foot of the stairs calling out the kids' names.

"Denny! Reise! Casey!"

They rumble down the stairs and greet him with the fanfare a small town exudes when one of their own has gone off, made it big, and returns years later for a visit. I watch him laugh with them and hug them, tell them he loves them.

My husband is the kind of man a lot of women would want. My husband would never cheat on me. He is decent and honest. A good father. He owns his own business and is successful by society's standards. He is attractive. From the outside looking in, a rare find.

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We live in an old house with the original seventy-two year old wiring and plumbing. Sparks and shorts are a common occurrence when we flip the light switch. As are clogs and drips in the kitchen and bathroom. There are cracks in the dusty plaster walls and ceilings. Once upon a time, I routinely filled the deep crevices only to have them reappear a few months later. Finally, I gave up. The deepest furrow is in our bedroom ceiling. I've told Jack to mark my word, that some night when we least expect it, the whole damn thing will come down on top of us.

Jack, who is a roofer by trade in the summers and an all-round handy man in the off-season, is capable of fixing most of the problems our house possesses. But he is very busy, being the owner of the business, and has good intentions when he promises he'll get around to our house soon.

Soon is a word for maybe, sometime, never.

The wood deck that was put in, I don't know how many years ago and runs along the back of our house is rotting from the ground up. This can happen here in Oregon with all the rain we get; if you don't take the time to maintain things, they will decompose right out from under you.

We have slugs here, too. Those caramel-colored gastropod mollusks that make a blasé trek across our rotting deck and leave a streak of sticky slime behind. As far as I can tell, they serve no other purpose but to eat my flowers and supply Denny and Reise with cheap entertainment.

I wouldn't admit this to many, but I'll confess to you that I let them take the salt shaker out on the deck and sprinkle the sodium granules on the backs of those big banana slugs. I hear them laugh as the spineless creature disintegrates before their eyes, turning to a puddle of slop.

I know that by telling you this I run the risk of appearing inhumane. But this doesn't seem any more harsh than the most common: broken egg shells scattered around the garden, the purpose being to slice open their pasty bodies.

Leona, my mother-in-law, lives just up the road from us at the top of the hill. She can see our house from up there, can look down on us and watch our every move.

And she does.

When I wonder what life will be like when she's gone, I always smile. I've even gone so far as to imagine her funeral, the sound of muffled mourning that hangs in the air like thick fog, and me clicking off a tap dance in my heart, relieved to finally have a life without her judgments and criticisms.

I've never admitted these thoughts to anyone, knowing they'd find me morbid or cold. They either wouldn't understand or wouldn't want to hear it because they may have similar thoughts about someone they know and are afraid to admit them.

There was a time when I held my thoughts in, denied them even to myself, but I've learned that when I do, they stay stuck inside me, become stagnant, and make me sick. Jack thinks my theory is a silly one. He says we have no control over things like illness. But I have to ask him why the only time he gets sick is when he finally has time off and is home with us.

Yes, just when I think I may have a break from the kids and the house, that he'll be home to help or maybe even relieve me completely, he catches some bug and is flat out laid up on the couch, sniffing and snuffling, lying there like one of those slugs, going nowhere, oozing fluid.

The only thing that gets him up off the couch when he's sick is Leona. She called the other day because her drain was plugged again.. Without thinking twice, Jack was shoving his feet in his work boots by the back door.

But, what about *our* crumbling house? I wanted to ask him.

He coughed and wheezed, then left. You just can't expect much of a man when he's sick like that.

When he got home, I told him he lets his mother lead him around by the dick. "Has her hand wrapped right around it," I said.

He held up his hands and opened his mouth. "Claire," he said in a voice that made me think he might say something, that there might be something inside him, sparked by my comment, something that would make him really talk to me, engage in something with me. But all he did was bite his bottom lip and let his hands drop before he went back to the couch, coughing.

I am thankful for my dreams. Last night I had another one about my mystery man. He sat on a chair in the center of a big room. He was surrounded by women. With his back to me, he surveyed his options, his body turning slowly toward me. When he turned, and his eyes met mine, I knew there was no question for him. He put out his arm, pointed to me, and said, "She's the one."

I moved to the center of the room and took my place on his lap. He smiled, held my face in his hands and said, "I'm so glad I found you."

Days and weeks go by, and I get lost in the duties dictated by the life I have chosen: up at dawn to make breakfast and lunches for everyone, except my husband, who makes his own. I think about Karla and how she's still making her cheating husband's lunch for him every day and laying his clothes out for him, too. There's no way in hell I'd ever do that.

I clean dried banana and sticky pools of apple juice from the kitchen floor, chisel mud clods off the kids' shoes with a knife, and scrub crayon from the dining room wall. I play tea party once each day and "eat" the neon-colored pies and cupcakes Casey has cooked up with Playdough. If Casey had her way, we would play tea party all afternoon, but there is a limit to the number of times I can pretend to eat fake food and convince my daughter I'm enjoying myself.

The only way to break away from the tea party is to read. Casey's favorite book is *Cinderella*. My conscience gets to me whenever I read her this story. I have tried several times to tell my young daughter that life is not this way. There will be no prince to come along and save her from anything, and even though it may seem she has found one, no one is capable of being a prince forever. Though there are times lately, because of my fantasies, I wonder if that's not what I'm foolishly after. I tell myself you don't get everything in life, that I should be glad I'm not in a spot like Karla.

I have tried to "lose" *Cinderella* when Casey isn't around. I have stuffed it under sofa cushions and between other books with plans to throw it away after she goes to bed, but she always finds it. I was successful once in getting the book in the garbage. But, Casey found it there, too. She pulled the book out, pushed the wet coffee grounds off the back cover with her chubby palm and said, "Look! Someone forgot and put *Cinderella* in the garbage!"

Casey still naps in the afternoons, and for that I'm thankful. While she's sleeping, I catch up on chores around the house. I attempt to remove the brown stains from Casey's *Cinderella* underwear. Using pink soap, I scrub the fabric against itself with my hands, working up a brown lather. The rancid smell of feces stays on my hands for the rest of the day: a constant reminder of this problem the pediatrician believes is my fault. I attempt to balance the checkbook, which I never can because Jack has withdrawn money from the teller machine without telling me or has written a check and not recorded the amount. I pay the bills and sometimes fantasize drawing out our entire savings and taking my mystery man to Belize. Then I remember there's not enough in the account to get me to Portland for the afternoon and that I'm still not sure where to find this man.

I try to convince myself I'm not as sad as I think.

Casey has been sick. This morning I sat in the pediatrician's waiting room, holding her inflamed body, wondering how I'd get the vomit she sent spraying across my bedroom from the crevices in the picture frames and perfume bottles sitting on my dresser.

When the doctor examined her, I was glad for a moment that he had something other than her toilet habits to occupy his mind. Then, as soon as the thought had left my brain, I wished I could take it back, thinking, as mothers will do sometimes, there was an outside chance Casey may have some serious illness. I would rather be reminded of my failure as a mother in not yet getting Casey to consistently deposit her excrements into the toilet than have the doctor's diagnosis be anything more than the flu.

The doctor smiled and handed me a prescription. When he explained his findings, a stomach virus and double ear infection, I thought he sounded like he was diagnosing a faulty engine's problem rather than talking about a human being. I decided he's been doing this too long.

After I had Casey back home and tucked in bed, I attempted to dislodge the regurgitated macaroni and cheese bits from the raised flowers on the silver frame surrounding my great grandparent's wedding

picture. They had been married sixty-two years when my great grandmother died suddenly of a stroke. A few months later, my great grandfather died. From loneliness, everyone said.

I looked at their solemn faces, using a cotton swab to remove all the signs of Casey's illness. I rinsed the perfume bottle caps under running water, working the dried chunks loose with my fingernail. I put the bottles and picture back on my dresser, looking one last time at my great grandparents, their faces expressionless, apparently void of any expectations of the future.

One day last week I passed the window and caught a glimpse of the new couple next door. They are younger than Jack and me, and they have no children. I watched them at their dining room table; the woman sat in her husband's lap and tipped her head back when she laughed. Her long blond hair swung like wheat in the wind. I watched them in their happiness and was surprised to feel something I couldn't quite name grow inside me, sharp and cold. I was even more shocked to realize this feeling has been there a long time.

Karla called me later that day, and before I could finish saying 'hello,' she shrieked, "The bastard is at it again!"

Casey's side-splitting scream ricocheted down the hall: a tantrum because I wouldn't let her have, for breakfast, the foot-long chocolate bar I bought in a weak moment so the girl outside the grocery store could go, along with her class, to Mexico. I heard Casey's Fischer Price piano crash against the floor chinking out angry notes.

I considered telling Karla I couldn't talk right then but decided to let Casey have her fit; my energy level was low.

"I'm so sorry, Karla," I said. "Who is it this time?"

"Someone he works with," she said and blew her nose.

After we talked awhile, and when Karla had stopped crying, I confessed the feeling inside me. I told her I wasn't sure, but I thought it might be loneliness. Then, my heart sagged when she said, "Oh, come on! He's a great guy. You have it made. At least he's not out catting around like mine."

I hung up, wondering whether I expect too much. Wondering what it is I want.

My husband is a happy man. I see it on his face when he reads to Casey or wrestles with her older brothers. He wears a smile that rivals anything I have felt for a long time. Too often I'm torn between despising him and envying him for this. Despising him because I believe he has somehow learned to thrive on complacency. Envying him because I think he may actually be content with this life we live.

Although his dream of being an architect has not been realized, the praise and success he's earned by running the roofing business his dad left him seems to be enough. His employees respect him; he will go out of his way to see that they are satisfied. And, he has won the title of Businessman of the Year here in Filbert Grove for the past six years. He is good at talking over lunch with prospective clients, winning them over with his smile. The ultimate nice guy.

For years, while Jack's business has been roofs, mine has been the kids. I've birthed them and fed their bodies and souls with the best possible stuff I have. I've taught them things I didn't know myself, like there is enough room in my heart to hold all this boundless love for each one of them.

But, you don't win awards for that kind of thing.

No, while my husband has been off exercising his mind, winning awards and gaining recognition, I have been home losing my patience and myself, working vomit and shit from my fingernails.

I don't tell my husband I've been sitting in the shadows of the kitchen watching the couple next door and, in the process, have polished off the foot-long chocolate bar. I don't tell him how I see the man come home for lunch every day—how I watch them embrace. How I think I feel my heart quiver when the man places his hand on the back of his wife's neck to kiss her. Or how he doesn't let go of her right away, and they look into each other's eyes and their lips move, saying things I wish I could hear. I imagine he's saying how much he has missed her in the last five hours and how he couldn't work from invasive thoughts of her.

I wonder why a young woman like her is home all day, why she doesn't have a career. In fact, sometimes I want to go over and tell the woman she'd better find one, she'd better find something that's hers so that years from now, she won't need her husband so much.

And, I haven't told my husband about the day last week when the man came home and in one quick motion, standing between the kitchen and dining room, he put his arms around his wife, whisked her shirt up over her head and threw it on the table. This made me get up off the chair positioned in the shadows and move forward, closer to the window. The man moved his hand to the clasp on his wife's bra and with a movement like he was snapping his fingers, it was undone and dangling loose on her shoulders until she shrugged it off, knocking it to the floor. The man slid his hands across his wife's back and arms in such a slow methodical way it made my stomach tighten. He kissed down her neck, across her chest, crouching to her round breast, then took her nipple in his mouth for a moment. He stood straight again, gripped his wife's chin in his hand and moved his mouth, saying something. His wife smiled, and they stood like that, looking at each other.

"We can't give ourselves away to them like that," Bernie keeps telling me. "When we give them that part of us, we give away our spirit."

"But, isn't that the point?" I always argue. "To give something of ourselves? To connect like that?"

"The problem is, though," she always says, "they never give. Not even the smallest piece of themselves. We give and never get." Then she'll knock the ashes off her cigarette with a few hard taps, blow a stream of white out the side of her mouth and say, "We don't need them, Claire."

Sometimes I think my friend's brand of feminism ignores biology.

Earlier today Bernie was over for a visit and Karla stopped by, red-eyed, with a new story about The Dog's most recent conquest.

She sat, blowing her nose, while I confessed my fantasy to them.

"I'm surprised," said Karla.

"I don't believe you," said Bernie.

I laughed. Smirking, I put my hands on my hips and said, "What kind of desires are these for an independent woman, anyway?"

"Okay, make fun," said Bernie. She lit a cigarette, looked out the window, and swung her crossed leg.

I pulled a kitchen chair out and sat down, wanting to explain, in a way they would understand, this yearning of mine. A yearning that comes from our need to hear their deep voices in our heads, feel their knotted hands on our bodies, feel them inside us.

"We are made to want them," I said.

"They have nothing to offer me that I can't do for myself," said Bernie.

Karla's shock came in the sound of a muffled grunt from behind her wad of tissue.

"I'm not talking about the orgasm. I'm talking about why we do it."

"And tell me," said Bernie, "why is it?"

I could her tell it's because we want to stir up that swirl of that thing inside us that makes us seek each other out and makes us want to fuse with each other. That thing that makes me want to look in someone's eyes and see movement, see something bouncing around inside him. Something that ricochets, bangs against his insides, shoots from his body into mine. Someone who wants to unfold me from the inside out, hold each precious piece of me in his hands and show me what he's found. That's what I want. I don't want to settle. I absolutely don't want to settle. But, if I have to, if I have to settle for something, then I want to settle for more.

My friends sat looking at me. I knew Bernie wouldn't buy it, and neither would Karla. So, I just said, "I'm lonely. I want to be close to someone."

Karla finally said in a small voice, "Well, Claire, you do have someone. You have Jack."

"Yes," I said. "You're right. I do have Jack."

On my way to bed tonight, I found Jack sitting in his tiny room, as usual, lit by one small light, doing the books for the business. I put my hands on his shoulders and said, “How long will you be?”

“Not too long,” he said and patted my hand without looking up.

“We need to talk,” I told him before I went down the hall to our bedroom.

I switched off the lamp next to the bed and just before the room fell dark, I saw the picture on the opposite wall. A picture of me and Jack. I am in the pristine white gown that was once my mother’s and he is wearing a black tux. Our radiant smiles, full of expectation, stay fixed in my mind as I lie in bed and wait for him.

I’ve wondered why we never look into each other’s eyes. I’ve tried to remember what it was like all those years ago and what made me think I was in love. And, I’ve tried to remember when he stopped sneaking up behind me, slipping his arms around my waist, saying “You are so sexy.” It must have been after Denny was born and the only things I had time for then were diapering, sleeping, and nursing, which turned my nipples dry and cracked and bleeding, making me declare one day to Jack, “Until further notice, my tits are off limits!” I’ve tried to remember whether or not I ever gave further notice.

I’ve wondered why he doesn’t run his hands over my skin the way he used to, but I won’t ask him if he still finds me attractive for fear he might say, “no.”

As I lie in bed thinking about what’s been lost—what I want—a hard-edged feeling moves through me, and I shudder because I can’t remember what I once felt, though I tell myself I must have felt something once, something that resembled, love.

When Jack does come to bed, soft as a whisper, thinking I’m asleep, and slides under the covers, I feel the warmth of his skin before it touches me. His scent drifts by me on a stir of air—shampoo and soap, a cover for his natural smell. A smell that is musky, too animal-like for my senses I’ve realized lately.

I turn to face him in the dark and whisper, “I miss you,” not really knowing if that’s true. But, I want to say something to get his attention, to make him see that things are not right.

“What did you say?” he asks.

“I miss you,” I say again.

I feel him grow hard against my thigh. I listen to what my words have done—surprised him to the point of a quietness that startles me, too.

I wait for him to say something back.

When he finally says, “What do you mean? What’s wrong?” I open up from the inside out. While he holds me, I cry and tell him I am lonely and that I never thought, in a million years, I could feel like this. That I am dying inside. I tell him how my loneliness has set up inside me, cold and hard, like cement. I tell him I feel things I can’t explain, that I don’t know what to do and that once, this life I am living had been enough. Then, when I don’t know what else to say, I cry until I can’t anymore.

When I’ve drained myself dry, cleaned myself out, I say, “Something is wrong.”

“What?” he says. “What’s wrong?”

“I want to know I matter to you,” I say.

“Of course you do—“

“No, not like that. I mean... that I’m first with you. Before anything else. That in your heart I come before everything. Even your mother. That you’d pick me out of a room full of women.”

“Claire,” he says in a tone that I find too close to condescending, “I *did* pick you. I married you.”

“I mean now. I want to know that after all these years you’d do it all again. Today.”

I want hear him tell me in a voice and with words that make my stomach dance. I hold in my tears, thinking if I make a sound, I may miss his response.

The room stays silent, and I wait for Jack to answer. I want something more than a suggestion that we go out to dinner, spend some alone time together. I wait for him to ask me if it’s that time of the month.

I want to tell him I am near the end of the line, but I know he couldn’t possibly take me seriously; I have given him no clue that anything is wrong until now. I haven’t known myself. I know saying something like that would be an empty threat; I don’t have the financial means to make it on my own.

And if I threaten once, it will be easier the next time. Then soon, my words will have empty meaning and whenever I try to explain this loneliness to him, we'll both know that after I cry, I'll be okay again, for awhile. So I stay quiet, next to him, and wait.

"Claire," he says and edges his body on top of mine. He feels too heavy and sticky with sweat. He kisses my cheek, my neck. Then, he says, "I wish I knew what to do for you. What can I do?"

"I don't know," I tell him, not wanting to admit what I fear—that he can't give me what I want.

He tugs at my night shirt, and I lift my body to free the back side of it, which he shoves up to my waist. With his knee, he wedges my legs apart. He kisses my face, and I can smell his spit, feel it on my skin.

I close my eyes and forget Jack is there. I see my mystery man in the doorway, and my nerve endings rouse. He holds out his hand and the part of me that is who I am, that only he can find, the part that resides under my cold, hard block of loneliness, rises up and out of my body and goes to him. We walk, without speaking, through the house. I stand in an oval of light cast on the rug while he slides the back door open. He takes my hand and leads me across the deck, to the grass. He holds my shoulders, and the muted view I just had of his figure fades as several dark clouds float in front of the full moon.

"It's going to rain," I tell him.

"It's okay," he answers back, then kisses me. "I want to feel your breath on my neck," he says. He takes my hand, which had been holding the collar of my nightshirt closed, and moves it away. He undoes two buttons and says, "I love the way you smell."

"The neighbors," I say.

He kisses my mouth.

"What about the kids?" I say. "What if they come out?"

"They won't," he says and finishes with the last button. He shoves my nightshirt off my shoulders. It slides down my body and falls at my feet. The clouds clear for a moment. He stands back and looks at me in the moonlight. He looks at me for a long time. "You make my heart shake," he says.

He takes my hands again and kisses my fingertips, then my eyes, still moist with tears, and I think I'm going to cry all over again. He folds his arms around me and leans me back onto the long grass, which is still soggy and wet from the afternoon rain, cold on my skin, and shocks me back to reality for a moment; I'm in my bedroom with Jack on top of me.

I have this down to a science: if I time this right, Jack won't come before I do. I know it won't be long now because I hear the change in his breathing, and he's not even in me yet.

I close my eyes again. My mystery man is over me. "I want to feel you inside me," he says. "I want to feel you pass right through me."

I feel Jack's body stiffen when he presses himself into me. I pinch my eyes closed hard and tip my hips. I look at my mystery man's face again, and as we kiss, we both come at once. His groan, which comes from the center of him enters my mouth and travels deep inside me, and I let out a sound that fuses with his and becomes one aching low melodious tone in the night.

I am back in my bed again. My body has responded the way in which it's designed. A record, I think. Five minutes.

When Jack has finished, his heart thudding, we fall silent. After awhile, he kisses the top of my head and says, "Everything will be okay." I nod my head.

He climbs off to lie beside me, our skin making a moist sound as we pull our bodies apart. He puts his arm under my neck when I lift my head. I stay quiet, staring at the ceiling, at the deep fissure that he still hasn't repaired. Just as I begin to doze off, Casey cries out.

"Do you want me to go?" he asks.

"No. She'll want me," I say.

I untangle my nightshirt from under my arms and push it back down to my knees. I walk down the hall to my daughter's bedroom, stopping first in the bathroom to wipe away the slimy trail that has run down my leg.

In her doorway, I say softly, "Case?"

From under the covers I hear, "Mommy, I peed my bed."

“It’s okay,” I tell her. “Come here.” I lift her pee-soaked nightgown up off her small body, lead her to the bathroom and clean her off. She shivers until I have her dressed again and huddled under a blanket while I put the new sheets on her bed. Then I rock her until she’s asleep again and slide her between the covers. At her window, I see it has started to rain again. Drops sprinkle against the glass and reflect the moon’s light; I watch them cling to the pane, fuse together, slide down out of sight.

I walk up the hall to my bedroom; Jack is already asleep and snoring. I look into our dark room, discerning only the vague shape of him, a sticky spineless-looking hump in the center of the bed. I want him to move. I want him to say something, do something. I want him to understand that I am caught by emotions I can’t pin names on. I want him to talk to me, help me figure out what they are. Then, it’s as if this furious wanting of mine shakes something loose; I feel a short, but potent tremble inside me.

I think about my life and wonder what I’ll do next.

I see a movement in the corner, and when I look closer, I see that my mystery man is back. I want to go to him, but he says, “Wait. Look.” He holds his hands out in front of him. They are cupped, as if holding something. “Look,” he says again and holds them up for me to see.

I see a glint, a sparkle, something shining. “What is it?” I ask him.

“It’s you,” he says. He uncups his hands and reveals the most ravishing jewel-like object I’ve ever seen.

My eyes fill up. I can barely breathe. “It’s beautiful,” I say.

“I know,” he says.

Then I take a closer look at him, try to discern, once again, a face. As I strain to see, his figure begins to shift and wobble. “Wait,” I tell him. “Don’t go yet.” The edges of him become vague. His form ripples and pulsates like heat waves. “Wait, I say again.”

Then he says something I can’t make out. I listen harder. “What? I can’t hear you.”

He speaks again, in a voice that’s not familiar to me.

“Keep talking,” I say. “I can’t hear you. I want to hear you.”

“Look,” the voice says again, and I can finally name whose it is.

It’s mine.

“Look,” I tell myself. “Look at what I found.”

My mystery man is gone, and in his place, I stand.

I look back at my husband sleeping, and as I watch him, I feel the shaking again. It is subtle at first, barely noticeable.

I look back at myself in the corner and try to quiet my shuddering body. “It’s okay,” I tell myself. “Go ahead.”

The shaking grows. It rattles my body, makes me tremble. I lift my arms out to my sides, tip my head up to the ceiling and let the tremor pass through my skin, shoot out my pores and fill the room.

The bed shakes. My great grandparent’s picture falls flat on its face. The walls begin to rock, then warp, leaving deeper cracks in the old crumbling plaster. The crack in the ceiling buckles, sending down showers of white, salting my husband’s sleeping body. I’m shocked and horrified: he’s still asleep, oblivious to my fury. I wonder what I will have to do to get his attention.

I spread my fingers, and open my mouth, and a sound that is so loud and high-pitched leaves me and breaks the window, sending crystalline shards flying, making a ferociously beautiful tinkling sound.

When the glass splinters have settled and the scraping and grinding of our home, this old run-down structure in which we live, dissipates, I hear the sound of rain through the broken window. It patters against the ground, an irregular rhythm, like a faulty stopwatch ticking off the years of my life. It releases the smell of the earth.