

HOME SHOPPING INTERRUPTED

The woman's fingers tap the back of the sofa, making a soft thrumming. In her other hand is a cell phone. She'd been hoping for a call, but none has come. On the television, someone's hands are dribbling a gold chain back and forth from one delicate cumulonimbus palm to the other. The woman narrows the lids over her eyes so the television seems to house some kind of heavenly dance, the glinting gold an angel's ballet slippers and the cloud-like hands coaxing, propelling. It's herringbone. She could wear it to the club this weekend. She imagines the strobe lights flickering over her neck.

She holds the cell in front of her face to unlock it, summons the keypad. After dialing the first seven numbers, the power goes out. She squints at the screen, willing it to illuminate. Willing back the voice that had been explaining the number of karats, the origin of the chain, which is Italy.

Now the hands that had been on the television reappear in the woman's imagination, but bigger, like a god, and they slam the roof of her apartment building so the light fixtures and the windowpanes rattle.

With her palms covering her ears, the woman paces several times across the dull carpeting. Each time she reaches a wall, the wall leans toward her, as though her movement has unbalanced the building, and she turns and moves back in the other direction. Finally, she stops in the middle and lets her hands drop slowly to her sides. The sweat that had accumulated at the sides

of her face drips slowly and feels like melted ice cream. Her body is a cone, her head melting in the heat. The rocking continues, despite her standing still.

That is when she realizes it is an earthquake.

She grabs her phone and her purse and heads for the hallway, expecting to find it flooded with neighbors, few of whom she knows. There is an old woman across the hall whose daughter comes to visit every couple of weeks. She says hello, but doesn't know their names. There is an immigrant family at the end of the hall, and she has gone out of her way to smile, but she's never spoken to them. She thinks they are Latin American, but they could be from Syria.

The hall is empty. She pushes the elevator button, but nothing happens. Duh, she says. No electricity. With her purse strung diagonally across her body, she heads for the stairwell. The summer heat invades like an army that no one would ever be able to stop.

She reaches the heavy door, thinking of the gold chain and feeling cheated. She pushes with her shoulder, not wanting to touch anything. In the echoey stairwell, she can hear voices. She peers over the metal railing to see, several floors below, elbows dressed in tracksuits and shoulders jutting from tank tops and backpacks made of olive drab and dark blue nylon. People are yelling but she can't make out the words.

There are five floors, so this is nothing like the twin towers, but her brain revs, flashing images of couples jumping, people cramming stairwells, scattering as they emerge like tiny shards of something smashed.

She sits, unsure what to do. If this building were to collapse, it would be nice to be found with that Italian herringbone chain around her neck. She imagines the lobster clasp at the back of her neck, the delicate little tail dangling along the swells of her vertebrae, the links snug-

gled along her collarbone when a hunky fireman appears to save her. He'll look up from the necklace, his heart touched by the helpless victim, to see her face. She stops this fantasy, realizing that her face will be dead when the fireman sees it. She decides against being left behind, and is weirdly unsurprised that she'd considered it.

She stands and trots down the stairs, her purse bouncing.

She reaches the people, who are unable to get out.

She makes her way to the door. A man is telling her that the building has shifted; the structure is now unstable. She tries anyway, pushing the metal bar over and over, but the man pulls her away, and one of her neighbors, she recognizes him, a teenage son of the immigrant family, holds her arms with hands slick with sweat as the man explains that if the door opens, it could upset the balance, that the door jammed into the frame may be the only thing keeping the building from collapsing. He wears gold-rimmed glasses and has thinning gray-blond hair and a dimpled chin and he looks incredibly serious, although she can picture what he'd look like laughing, pushing a grandchild on a swing: higher, higher, grandpa! But now there are tears streaming down his cheeks. The woman hears someone say, What are we doing? Let's head to the other stairwell, and someone else responds there's only one stairwell and now there is the echoing scratchy sound of someone else coming down the stairs. It's the old woman from across the hall, she's grasping the railing with one hand and leaning on a cane with the other. Hello neighbors, she says. Isn't this a nice get together. But, we better get out of here, no?

The serious guy explains their predicament. The old woman sits on the step, puts both hands on the butt of her cane, rests her chin there. She reminds the woman of the old people she'd seen when she'd traveled to Venice with an ex-boyfriend. He'd been stingy with tips for

the gondoliers, and it was a slight she couldn't overlook, so she'd been curt and standoffish and he'd seemed annoyed by her and by the time they'd returned home, they hadn't even liked each other, let alone loved each other.

The woman climbs the few steps to approach the woman. She sits down and introduces herself.