

Little Earthquakes

a novel

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New York London Toronto Sydney

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ISBN: 0-7434-7009-5

First Atria Books hardcover edition September 2004

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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For Lucy Jane

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”

—MARGERY WILLIAMS
The Velveteen Rabbit

Little Earthquakes

April

LIA

I watched her for three days, sitting by myself in the park underneath an elm tree, beside an empty fountain with a series of uneaten sandwiches in my lap and my purse at my side.

Purse. It's not a purse, really. Before, I had purses—a fake Prada bag, a real Chanel baguette Sam had bought me for my birthday. What I have now is a gigantic, pink, floral-printed Vera Bradley bag big enough to hold a human head. If this bag were a person, it would be somebody's dowdy, gray-haired great-aunt, smelling of mothballs and butterscotch candies and insisting on pinching your cheeks. It's horrific. But nobody notices it any more than they notice me.

Once upon a time, I might have taken steps to assure that I'd be invisible: a pulled-down baseball cap or a hooded sweatshirt to help me dodge the questions that always began *Hey, aren't you?* and always ended with a name that wasn't mine. *No, wait, don't tell me. Didn't I see you in something? Don't I know who you are?*

Now, nobody stares, and nobody asks, and nobody spares me so much as a second glance. I might as well be a piece of furniture. Last week a squirrel ran over my foot.

But that's okay. That's good. I'm not here to be seen; I'm here to watch. Usually it's three o'clock or so when she shows up. I set aside my sandwich and hold the bag tightly against me like a pillow or a pet, and I stare. At first I couldn't really tell anything, but yesterday she stopped halfway past my fountain and stretched with her hands

pressing the small of her back. *I did that*, I thought, feeling my throat close. *I did that, too.*

I used to love this park. Growing up in Northeast Philadelphia, my father would take me into town three times each year. We'd go to the zoo in the summer, to the flower show each spring, and to Wanamaker's for the Christmas light show in December. He'd buy me a treat—a hot chocolate, a strawberry ice cream cone—and we'd sit on a bench, and my father would make up stories about the people walking by. A teenager with a backpack was a rock star in disguise; a blue-haired lady in an ankle-length fur coat was carrying secrets for the Russians. When I was on the plane, somewhere over Virginia, I thought about this park, and the taste of strawberries and chocolate, and my father's arm around me. I thought I'd feel safe here. I was wrong. Every time I blinked, every time I breathed, I could feel the ground beneath me wobble and slide sideways. I could feel things starting to break.

It had been this way since it happened. Nothing could make me feel safe. Not my husband, Sam, holding me, not the sad-eyed, sweet-voiced therapist he'd found, the one who'd told me, "Nothing but time will really help, and you just have to get through one day at a time."

That's what we'd been doing. Getting through the days. Eating food without tasting it, throwing out the Styrofoam containers. Brushing our teeth and making the bed. On a Wednesday afternoon, three weeks after it happened, Sam had suggested a movie. He'd laid out clothes for me to wear—lime-green linen capris that I still couldn't quite zip, an ivory silk blouse with pink-ribbon embroidery, a pair of pink slides. When I'd picked up the diaper bag by the door, Sam had looked at me strangely, but he hadn't said anything. I'd been carrying it instead of a purse before, and I'd kept right on carrying it after, like a teddy bear or a well-loved blanket, like something I loved that I couldn't bring myself to let go.

I was fine getting into the car. Fine as we pulled into the parking garage and Sam held the door for me and walked me into the red-

velvet lobby that smelled like popcorn and fake butter. And then I stood there, and I couldn't move another inch.

"Lia?" Sam asked me. I shook my head. I was remembering the last time we'd gone to the movies. Sam bought me malted milk balls and Gummi worms and the giant Coke I'd wanted, even though caffeine was verboten and every sip caused me to burp. When the movie ended, he had to use both hands to haul me out of my seat. *I had everything then*, I thought. My eyes started to burn, my lips started to tremble, and I could feel my knees and neck wobbling, as if they'd been packed full of grease and ball bearings. I set one hand against the wall to steady myself so I wouldn't start to slide sideways. I remembered reading somewhere about how a news crew had interviewed someone caught in the '94 Northridge earthquake. *How long did it go on?* the bland, tan newsman asked. The woman who'd lost her home and her husband had looked at him with haunted eyes and said, *It's still happening*.

"Lia?" Sam asked again. I looked at him—his blue eyes that were still bloodshot, his strong jaw, his smooth skin. *Handsome is as handsome does*, my mother used to say, but Sam had been so sweet to me, ever since I'd met him. Ever since it had happened, he'd been nothing but sweet. And I'd brought him tragedy. Every time he looked at me, he'd see what we had lost; every time I looked at him, I'd see the same thing. I couldn't stay. I couldn't stay and hurt him anymore.

"I'll be right back," I said. "I'm just going to run to the bathroom." I slung my Vera Bradley bag over my shoulder, bypassed the bathroom, and slipped out the front door.

Our apartment was as we'd left it. The couch was in the living room, the bed was in the bedroom. The room at the end of the hall was empty. Completely empty. There wasn't so much as a dust mote in the air. *Who had done it?* I wondered, as I walked into the bedroom, grabbed handfuls of underwear and T-shirts and put them into the bag. *I hadn't even noticed*, I thought. *How could I not have noticed?* One day the room had been full of toys and furniture, a crib and a rocker, and the next day, nothing. Was there some service you could call, a number you could dial, a website you could access, men who would

come with garbage bags and vacuum cleaners and take everything away?

Sam, I'm so sorry, I wrote. *I can't stay here anymore. I can't watch you be so sad and know that it's my fault. Please don't look for me. I'll call when I'm ready. I'm sorry . . .* I stopped writing. There weren't even words for it. Nothing came close. *I'm sorry for everything*, I wrote, and then I ran out the door.

The cab was waiting for me outside of our apartment building's front door, and, for once, the 405 was moving. Half an hour later, I was at the airport with a stack of crisp, ATM-fresh bills in my hand. "Just one way?" the girl behind the counter had asked me.

"One way," I told her and paid for my ticket home. The place where they have to take you in. My mother hadn't seemed too happy about it, but then, she hadn't been happy about anything to do with me—or, really, anything at all—since I was a teenager and my father left. But there was a roof over my head, a bed to sleep in. She'd even given me a coat to wear on a cold day the week before.

The woman I've been watching walked across the park, reddish-gold curls piled on her head, a canvas tote bag in her hand, and I leaned forward, holding tight to the edges of the bench, trying to make the spinning stop. She set her bag down on the lip of the fountain and bent down to pet a little black-and-white-spotted dog. *Now*, I thought, and I reached into my sleepover-size sack and pulled out the silver rattle. *Should we get it monogrammed?* Sam had asked. I'd just rolled my eyes and told him that there were two kinds of people in the world, the ones who got things monogrammed at Tiffany's and the ones who didn't, and we were definitely Type Twos. One silver rattle from Tiffany's, unmonogrammed, never used. I walked carefully over to the fountain before I remembered that I'd become invisible and that nobody would look at me no matter what I did. I slid the rattle into her bag and then I slipped away.

BECKY

Her cell phone trilled as she straightened her back. The dog gave one sharp bark and trotted away, and the woman with the long blond hair in the long blue coat walked past her, stepping so close that their shoulders brushed. Becky Rothstein-Rabinowitz brushed her curls out of her eyes, pulled the phone out of her pocket, winced when she saw the number displayed on the screen, and replaced the phone without answering. “Shit,” she muttered to no one in particular. That marked her mother-in-law Mimi’s fifth call in the last two hours. She and Mimi had had a reasonably peaceful *détente* when Mimi had lived in Texas with the latest in her five-husband series, but the marriage hadn’t lasted. Now Mimi was moving to Philadelphia, and she couldn’t seem to grasp the simple fact that her daughter-in-law had both a job and a baby on the way and, hence, better things to do than “just drop by” the shop that Mimi’s decorator had recommended and “take a l’il look” at Mimi’s custom-ordered drapes. Nor did Becky have “just a quick sec” to drive half an hour to Merion and “sneak a peek” at how construction was proceeding (her mother-in-law was in the process of building a pillared, gabled, verandaed minimansion that looked, to Becky’s eyes, like Scarlett O’Hara’s abode, if Tara had gotten shrunk in the wash). Becky picked up her bag and walked briskly across the park to her restaurant, Mas.

It was three o’clock in the afternoon, and the little kitchen was al-

ready steamy and warm with the scent of braised pork shoulder in a cinnamon-spiked sauce, cilantro and garlic salsa, and roasting peppers for the savory flan. Becky took a deep, happy breath and stretched her arms over her head.

"Thought you were off today," said Sarah Trujillo, her partner and best friend.

"I'm just stopping by," Becky said, as her cell phone trilled again.

"Let me guess," Sarah said.

Becky sighed, looked at the number, then smiled, and flipped the phone open. "Hi, honey," she said. They'd been married for two years, and they'd dated for three years before that, but the sound of Andrew's voice still gave her butterflies.

"Hi. Are you all right?"

She looked down at herself. Bag, boobs, belly, feet, all present and accounted for. "Yeah, I'm fine. Why?"

"Well, my mother just paged me and said she's been trying to reach you, but you weren't picking up your phone."

Shit, Becky thought again.

"Look, I know she can be demanding. I had to live with her, remember?"

"Yes," Becky said. *And how you turned out normal is one of the mysteries of the ages*, she refrained from adding.

"Just humor her a little bit. Ask her how things are going with the move."

"I can humor her," Becky replied, "but I don't have time to run her errands."

"I know," her husband answered. Becky could hear hospital sounds in the background, some doctor being paged. "You don't have to. I don't expect you to. Mimi doesn't, either."

Then why does she keep asking? Becky wondered.

"Just talk to her," Andrew said. "She's lonely."

She's crazy, Becky thought. "Okay," she said. "Next time she calls, I'll talk to her. But I have to turn my phone off soon. Yoga."

Sarah raised her eyebrows. *Yoga?* she mouthed.

"Yoga," Becky repeated and hung up the phone. "Don't laugh."

"Why would I laugh?" Sarah said, smiling sweetly. Sarah had eyes the color of bittersweet chocolate, glossy black hair, and a dancer's body, although she hadn't laced up her pointe shoes since she'd blown out both knees at seventeen. She was the reason that Mas's six-seat bar was packed three deep every week night and four deep on Fridays; the reason that of all the restaurants on Rittenhouse Square, Mas could keep each one of its thirty-six seats full all night long, in spite of the two-hour wait. When Sarah would put on red lipstick and snake-hip through the throng, a plate of complimentary empanadas in her hands and high-heeled sandals on her feet, the grumbles would evaporate and the watch-glancing would cease. "What's the soup again?" Sarah asked.

"Garlic and white-bean puree with truffle oil," Becky said, as she picked up her bag and surveyed the still-empty dining room, each of the twelve tables set with fresh linen and wineglasses and a little blue glass dish of spiced almonds in the center.

"And why do you think I'd be laughing about yoga?"

"Well," said Becky, picking up her canvas bag. "Just because I haven't exercised in . . ." Becky paused, counting the months. The years. ". . . in a while." Her last experience with organized fitness had been in college, where she had to pass a semester of phys. ed. before she graduated. She'd let Sarah talk her into Interpretive Dance, where she spent four months waving a scarf around, pretending to be, alternately, a tree in the wind, a child of alcoholics, and resignation. She'd been half hoping that her obstetrician would put the kibosh on exercise and tell her to just stay home with her feet up for the last twelve weeks of her pregnancy, but Dr. Mendlow had been almost indecently enthusiastic when Becky had called for permission to enroll.

"You probably think yoga's for wimps."

"No, no!" said Sarah. "Yoga's very demanding. I'm impressed that you're doing this for yourself and, of course, for your darling little wee one."

Becky stared at her friend and narrowed her eyes. “You want something, right?”

“Can you switch Saturdays with me?”

“Fine, fine,” Becky grumbled. She didn’t really mind working Saturday night. Andrew was going to be on call, which, more than likely, meant she’d be abandoned in front of the television set at least once so that her husband could go tend to someone’s inflamed appendix or obstructed bowel. Or, most likely, she would have to field more phone calls from Mimi.

Sarah scraped the jicama she’d been julienned into a bowl, wiped her cutting board, and tossed the towel into a basket in the corner. Becky retrieved it and threw it back to her. “Two towels a night, remember? The laundry bill last month was killer.”

“A thousand pardons,” Sarah said, as she started scraping kernels of corn off the cob for the roasted-corn salad.

Becky headed up the back staircase to a tiny room at the top—a converted closet in the old row house that was Mas. She closed the blinds and took another appreciative sniff of dinner coming together—the mole simmering, the spice-rubbed brisket slow-roasting, the undertone of garlic, and the bright notes of cilantro and lime. She could hear the sounds of the dinner crew arriving—waitresses laughing in the kitchen, the dishwashers turning the radio from WXPN to the salsa station. She set her bag onto the desk, on top of the stacks of invoices and ordering forms, and reached into the locker where she’d put her yoga outfit. “Loose-fitting, comfortable clothing,” the yoga flyer had said. Which, luckily, was pretty much all she ever wore.

Becky pulled off her elastic-waisted black pants, exchanging them for a pair of elastic-waisted blue ones and added an exercise bra that had taken her forty-five minutes on the Internet to find at a site called, God help her, Bigmamas.com. She pulled on a long T-shirt, slipped her feet into her sneakers, and pulled her curls into a bun that she skewered into place with one of the chopsticks Sarah had left on

the desk. “Gentle, rhythmic stretching,” the flyer had said. “Creative visualization and meditation for the mother-to-be.” She figured she could handle that. And if not, she’d just say something about heart-burn and head for the door.

As she stuffed her clothes into the bag, her fingertips brushed against something cold and unfamiliar. She dug around and pulled out a silver baby rattle. She felt around in her bag some more, but she couldn’t find a card or wrapping paper or a ribbon. Just one little rattle.

She turned it over, gave it a shake, then headed down the stairs to the kitchen, where Sarah had been joined by the dishwasher, the sous chef, and the pastry chef. “Is this from you?” she asked Sarah.

“No, but it’s nice,” she said.

“I don’t know where it came from.”

“The stork?” Sarah offered.

Becky rolled her eyes, then stood sideways in front of the mirror beside the dining-room door for another round of what was becoming her favorite game: *Pregnant or Just Fat?*

It was so unfair, she thought, as she twisted and turned and sucked in her cheekbones. She’d dreamed of pregnancy as the great equalizer, the thing she’d been waiting for her entire life, the moment when all the women got big so nobody talked or worried about their weight for nine blissful months. Well, fat chance. Pun intended. The skinny girls stayed skinny, except they developed adorable little tight-as-a-drum basketball bellies, whereas women Becky’s size just looked as though they’d had too much for lunch.

And plus-size maternity clothes? Forget about it. Normal-size women get to wear little Lycra-blend sporty numbers that proclaim to the viewing public *Hey! I’m pregnant!* Meanwhile, any pregnant woman bigger than a breadbox gets to choose from the offerings from exactly one—yes, one—maternity-wear manufacturer, whose stirrup pants and oversized tunics scream *Hey! I’m a time traveler from 1987! And I’m even fatter than normal!*