

Frank Mazer

Quakeshake

A truly earth shaking experience

The bed is shaking. I sit up startled. “Dan, stop kicking the bed”, I mumble to my roommate. He is snoring on his bed a meter away. The light is dim as the time is about 6:00 a.m. The year is 1971. There are cracks coming down the walls. The fire alarm is sounding. I am trying not to soil my pajamas.

I am lying in bed in a dormitory at UCLA. As I sit up woozy I am trying to calculate what is happening. The room shakes and strange sounds come gurgling from the walls. I see a crack streak up the wall. Surely, the shaking will stop in a moment. I have been through many small earthquakes while living in California. It shakes for a few seconds. Laughs at you. Goes away. Just enough to leave you rattled. It provides you a primal sense of the power of nature. To make you feel like you are the size of an ant; only much more helpless. It is a great lesson in humility and false pride. Perhaps, if someone is filled with too much pride and far too full of themselves being caught in an earthquake will

bring them to their senses. If quakes could be forecast in the future, bringing such big headed folks to a quake experience could be a form of therapy. I recall, one time, seated on a toilet, 7 floors high, while working in central Los Angeles. Some shaking began. It turned out to be very minor. Seven floors up, amplified, it did not feel minor. It felt as if I was at the top of an out of control 100 meter pendulum with my pants down. Seated there with nothing to do but wait as the quake passed. After 20 seconds there had come a new found sense of being reminded dignity is not found in some moments.

On this college morning, now the shaking and rolling suddenly becomes more violent. The little fish is flipped out of its bowl on one of the shelves near the window. It flips onto the throw rug on the floor. The bowl topples off the shelf. I attempt to sit up and get out of the bed as panic begins to set in. Too late now silly fellow. The rumbling and the rolling of the room make it impossible to climb out of the bed. All energy and wits are needed to stabilize oneself. It seems as if the shaking is getting worse and will never end. Dan, red hair falling across his forehead , is looking over at me with frightened gigantic wide eyes. This does not calm me.

Suddenly it stops. The alarm is screaming. Things are

creaking. We are on the first floor above the ground. I pull on some jeans as Dan stumbles from the bed and does the same. Strange sounds are coming from the building. This cannot be good. We are trying to get out of what may be a building ready to crumble within minutes. We know the exit stairway is to the left and only two dormitory room doors down the hallway which is 2 meters across. I grab the door handle and pull it open toward me. I tell myself to be calm. I begin to take a step into the hallway but motion to my right grabs my attention. There he comes.

It's "Santa Claus". He who happens to weigh about 160 kilos. Thus, our dorm floor nickname for him. He is completely naked. He is screaming. He is running down the hall very rapidly. A powerful planetary mass. Being myself, of slim frame and 70 kilos, being struck by the mass of Santa would have been akin to an asteroid plowing into me. I am fortunate not to have leapt into the hallway. I watch. Santa reaches the hall's end and then turns around and runs back past me from whence he came. I shout not to panic. Too late for Santa. I reflexively pull back out of his way as he trundles past swerving from one wall to the other. I look at Dan. Our eyes meet. We wonder what chaos awaits. We walk a few steps to the emergency exit door and down the stairs outside to the parking area away from the building.

The alarm is still sounding. People are emerging from exits and gathering in the chill morning air outside. We begin to feel fortunate that the building still stands. Apparently it is not damaged badly. However, psyches are shaken and stirred. There are people crying, hugging, shouting.

Thoughts go to our loved ones, of course. My thoughts are with Shari. She is my girlfriend who lives in the womens' wing of the dormitory on the 4th floor. There are nights when she had been sharing my small dorm room bed, nights when Dan was gone to his parents or his girlfriend's house. Although women in the mens' dorm after 7:00pm was not permitted, it also was a rule ignored. Now I worried about her. I move among the dozens gathering in the parking lot and the dim morning light. I feel chills coming on. My eyes scan the groups gathered. There she is. Standing shaken, shivering, blanket around her. Looking for me. It feels good to be looked for. There is a sense of being alive. Loved.

We hold each other as two people who just escaped. Thankful for life and for each other. Thrust together more than ever by forces of time and space larger than us. We decide to go to my old small dark blue car. Underfoot, we can feel the earth trembling from an aftershock. Instinctively the eyes turn to look at some reference point to see if, indeed, there is more shaking. And how bad is it. One's eyes

look for something which might sway. A lightpost, a wire. Always aware to have stayed away from anywhere where electric cables can fall down. We sit in the car, turn on the radio. Immediately hear emergency news reports of horrible damage and death in the L.A. area. We are reminded of our good fortune. Warnings of aftershocks blare.

Feeling alive. For the moment. Knowing there can be more and worse to come. For reasons unknown, except for being equipped with silly rattled college student minds , we drive to the beach five miles away to see if the tsunami will arrive. The drive takes us to Pacific Palisades. We park at a place on a quiet street on top of 40 meter high cliffs with the beach and the ocean lying below on the other side of a small road running next to the beach. We sit and listen to the radio reports while we hold each other. In the midst of it all there is an amazing sense of quiet. Vast tranquility and stillness reign. A stark contrast to the wild internal and external noise of a quake. We hold each other and watch the daylight arrive amidst reports of chaos from around LA. No tsunami arrives. A wave of Sensibility arrives for us. We drive back to the campus.

The dormitory must be inspected. Will it be safe now? How will it withstand aftershocks? Hours pass and we are told to re-enter. Shari and I hold each other and then walk to our

rooms. Dan and I sit down across from each other. Stories are to be told. Levity brought to the situation. While we have front and center the big questions in quake country: when will it come? We know there will be no warning. Will it be a minor nudge of a reminder or a giant stomping his foot? One never knows, even when the shaking begins.

In years to come, amidst California quake country, I see the reminders. One morning, eating donuts in the teacher's lounge. The room shakes slightly. Five teachers dive under the big table in the center of the room. Others of us stand there wondering if it will stop or get worse. Then we hear the sound. It is not a quake. It was a large truck driving past outside causing some shaking. At least we know our teacher friends are trained to "duck and cover". They are too young to remember the "big one". They leap from under the table and say "that was scary". We smile. There is nothing to say except "oh yes".

California waits. At times, when visiting California ,I have driven back to the place above the sea. Looking and remembering. Humbled. Reminded that nature still rules. When it wishes it reminds that life is brief and we are not always at the controls.