

AFTERSHOCK



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The Write Word
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To my sweetheart Alice, who has undergone many temblors and rumbles throughout our long alliance, and who has stood her ground with humor and grace.

The happiness of most people is not ruined by great catastrophes or fatal errors, but by the repetition of slowly destructive little things.

— Ernest Dimnet

ONE

was thinking about my Studebaker when the quake hit. Though it's not exactly a showstopper, it's a '63 Lark, and pretty sweet. The Studey was on my mind because a moment before the building went bonkers I'd been looking at Diana's legs. She was wearing one of those napkin-sized skirts she sometimes wears and her legs are all the way up to there anyway. I always try not to stare—I've perfected this method of looking off in a fake distracted way and then flicking my eyes back. I can get away with zeroing in on her without getting caught, I think. It was almost quitting time, and I wasn't paying much actual attention to anything.

So there I was standing in my cubicle holding some papers and Diana was standing at the copy machine in that skirt and I was thinking that maybe if those Nazi mechanics of mine would fix that problem on the Studey, this time I could finally ask Diana out without worrying that my car would stall at a light and maybe leave us in the Tenderloin without wheels and me looking like Doofus Number One. And then the quake hit.

I felt it in my stomach first, a kind of squeezy uncomfortable feeling, like riding on one of those old centrifugal-force carnival rides where you lean against a wall on a spinning, circular platform, and then the floor drops away while you spin faster, pinning you

to the wall in an awful, verge-of-nausea way. I never liked those rides, really, but I would always ride 'em when I could. You can't be smart all the time.

So my stomach did a couple of pirouettes before I really even knew what was going on and then the floor started moving in a real greasy way, a kind of sliding, humping, fucked-up kind of way, and I was finally clued in that it was an earthquake—and that it was a big one. There seemed to be a second wave that had more kick than the first and then the building really stepped onto the dance floor. It swayed big-time, and I mean swayed like you've downed ten tequila shooters and slapped yourself in the temple with an unabridged dictionary. My heart was now hammering like a trapped animal was inside.

Now it's not like I'm a quake virgin or anything. I'm a California boy all the way, and have been through more than a couple shakers in my thirty-plus, including one in the 70s when I was staying in Santa Barbara where I watched a nearby hillside seem to turn to liquid—but that was just my eyes jiggling. And since I'd moved to San Francisco, I'd felt the earth skip a beat more than a couple of times. I've always sort of liked it—the land stretching its legs a bit and all. And now it was almost the 90s, and there hadn't been a real big bumper for a while. But this was different.

Different because Consolidated Leasing—yeah, that's where I work; could a business name be any more lame?—is on the eighth

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floor of a new building on the edge of downtown, and it's built to flex in a quake—and *man* was it flexing. But different yet, because even with the flex, even with me having rocked and rolled through my share of quakes, this shaker seemed special right from the get-go.

A jolt punched me into the edge of my cubicle, and I hit the corner about armpit height, hard, and then I stumbled to one knee. Though I pretty much forgot about scoping Diana, she was still right in front of me and I saw that she was clutching the sides of the copying machine with both arms, a love-death grip. From my angle it looked like the machine was actually lifting into the air a little, but maybe that's because I wasn't exactly the Rock of Gibraltar myself. Also from my angle I saw that her little skirt had hiked up even further so that I could see where the thighs of those fine legs moved right up into that round rump, which was covered by red panties. I filed that away in one of those micro-seconds because it's really no time for my standard lech act, considering that the office was in a state of total pandemonium, and I'm not completely convinced that the entire building wasn't going to go kablooeey right down onto Market Street. I tried to shout something out to Diana, but it came out like a strangled little bark.

Cubicles playing bumper cars with each other doesn't give me a lot of confidence. Since our building was getting so loosey-goosey, and we were on the top floor, office goods were really starting to

scoot around with each pendulum swing of the building. Two of the tallest filing cabinets toppled with a huge crash, but I could barely hear that because of the shouts and screams that were ricocheting around the office. After I'd righted myself a little using my cubicle wall, the next round of building flexing took my monitor tumbling off my desk, and it exploded on impact. *The novel!* My novel, the only damn thing that's seemed real to me in the last year, was on that computer. What if it was trashed too?

When I whirled around to check out the computer itself, another tremor hit that seemed to run sideways from the direction of the first. I was plunked right down in the aisle between the cubicle rows so that I sort of fell on my back and my butt, with my legs a little in the air. That gave me a splendid view of some of the plasterboard roof panels of the acoustic ceiling above, which were now deserting the roof in droves and diving to the floor. I had to get out—fast—but I felt like I was moving in slow motion. The novel, damn. The building—double-damn!

I sprang up, but was staggered by a rolling motion of the building. I was kind of half-crouching, half crab-walking my way across the office because there were so many toppled things on the floor, and so much noise and dust. I couldn't see or hear anyone who seemed actually injured, but I wasn't sure. I was scared, very scared, and I could barely focus. I had to jump over the most egregious example of wretched corporate art that the office possessed (on a

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lease, of all things), which had fallen to its deserved death off the wall. It had been pierced by the weird sharp-edged desk lamp that one of the graphic artists had brought in to try and prove that she wasn't a corporate drone. I had a fleeting thought that I hadn't appreciated her creativity before. But no time for thoughts.

At least six people were crowded into the office's open double-doorway, seeking wall-joint strength like good Californians should. Unfortunately for them, that was also the primary office exit, leading to the elevators and staircases and what seemed now to be an impossibly long flight away from a building that was still rumbling like it was moving to a good belly laugh.

The bulk of the office populace was now pouring toward those open double doors, where that half-dozen of the first mad scramblers had fled. I was moving with the pour, in fact, kind of pulling on the shoulder of a guy in front of me for momentum, as the floors and walls did another little tango. The doorway people were half-crouching, some with arms entangled, all leaning on the person next to them, all wide-eyed and open-mouthed. They looked so scared that I had a new gut-clench of fear.

The doorway crew didn't intend to abandon their protected place in the doorway, but those intentions had to negotiate with those of the half-crazed stream of souls coming toward them who had no intention of remaining in the building. I glanced back at the cubicles, seeing two people from payroll standing wall-eyed in the

aisle, while a rivulet of a toppled Sparkletts bottle trickled between them toward me. When I turned back to continue for the door, my boss Megan was standing in front of me.

In front of me doesn't quite explain it though. When I turned back toward Megan, I was wearing her like an apron, since I had turned holding both my arms out from my waist and she had moved with her arms up and forward toward me. Since she's about a foot shorter than me, just in turning around I ended up involuntarily clasping her to my chest, which surprised us both.

I grabbed her by the shoulders and screamed "Megan!" which was all I could manage. My ante was too high for her, however—she couldn't even speak. We've all heard that phrase "white as a ghost." Just another phrase that's lost its elastic—but Megan brought a rich new meaning to a poor phrase.

I didn't have time to think this, but just absorbed it: She was drained of color, paste-white, a fully credible white that would never pretend to be the pallor of a living being. But I did detect a little pinkness in the center of her face: her tongue, usually as discreet as all of Megan's doings, now blatant because she was unable to engage it to make conversation. It rested limp on the bottom of her widely open mouth. Behind the heavy black horn-rims of her Elvis Costello glasses, Megan's bright blue eyes shrieked the words her tongue couldn't manage.

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I did a little *pas de deux* with her in the aisle, spinning her by the shoulders toward the exit. In thinking of it afterward, I longed for a video: my formidable boss, always cordial but always reserved, impenetrable and boss-like, spun like an addled child and pointed toward the door. “I think we should get out,” I said in as manly of a voice I could muster. But I was feeling some panic; my heart hadn’t let up, and for a second the pounding made me think I was having a heart attack.

We were near the tail end of the crowd moving through the doorways. The first human wall of resistance clinging to the entryway had been breached—and like bowling pins, most had scattered, choosing the staircase path preferred by the bulk of those in flight. Probably two minutes, three at most had passed since the initial shock hit, and the building still seemed to be reverberating, though I couldn’t judge time or the trembling with any accuracy.

I shepherded Megan past the lone doorway holdout, Squink from Accounting. He was gripping the doorsill with both hands, his eyes wet and dreamy as we went by. It was lucky I had Megan to tend, because that responsibility calmed my brimming panic.

“Squink, better head down. Maybe the worst of it’s over,” I said as we passed him. I thought I was getting the hang of this whole leadership-in-a-crisis thing, what with Megan acceding to every tiny pressure of my arm, and me feeling like most everything’s in control. It was only when my knees buckled at the first staircase

step that I realized that my whole body was slightly quivering, and that I had lost that fine motor control needed for precise movement.

I grabbed the handrail to steady myself, though Megan, in full zombie mode, didn't notice my stumble. At that moment, she might not have noticed if I had a long scaly tail and flippers. We merged into a mass of semi-orderly building deserters, moving haltingly down the staircases mostly three abreast. I saw Diana ahead of us, looking back with an alarmed look and then lurching forward. My crew, Silvie and Crenshaw, was ahead of her—I could see Silvie throw her arms up while she talked to Crenshaw as they descended. She had a characteristic way of flinging her arms about; she always wore about twenty bangles and wrist bracelets on each arm that clicked and clattered when she jostled them. I was glad to see they were both all right.

The only person I could see that had an injury was Mr. McManus, the portly Vice President, who had a pretty good gash on his forehead, against which he held a bloody handkerchief. There was a lot of tangible tension going down the stairs, which was a process less than brisk. "What if there's another quake? We're going to get squashed here!" someone said. "God, I wonder what my house looks like? I just put all this decorative glass on shelves in my living room," somebody else answered. "Goddamn. I thought the whole goddamn building was going down! The whole damn

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thing!” said one of the lawyers, who’d just come into the office before it hit. I had a strong urge to push everyone out of my way and rush down the stairs. *Calm down*, I said to myself. But I was anything but calm.

We came to the seventh-floor landing, where we met a surge of employees from the big insurance firm that worked there. I could see a couple of women who were crying, and several people who looked disheveled and shaken up, but no major injuries. An older man in a suit was standing on the side of the stairwell saying over and over, “Just move slowly and watch out for your neighbor. It’s OK, move slowly down and watch out for your neighbor.”

Just a few steps ahead someone I didn’t know had a portable radio pinned to his ear. “Seven-point five! They’re saying seven-point five, and major damage in the City. Big fires in the Marina. Not certain where it actually hit yet.” We were slowing way down on the stairs as we came in contact with people emptying out of the sixth-floor offices. People were getting more anxious, pushing a little, and I could see a big guy ahead of us trying to force his way through. I felt a strong pressure in my gut, and tried to push back against it. But when I looked down at Megan, she looked weirdly calm. Some color had started to come back into her face.

“Megan, are you feeling better? You OK?”

She turned to me and nodded and softly said, “Yes.” Her eyes still looked as if their owner was off vacationing, but at least she

resembled the upright—if not uptight—boss that I reported to that morning. I turned into a bit of a robot myself after that, just moving kind of numbly with the crowd, listening to people speculate on what had happened, the fear squeezing their voices. But I kept jerking a bit as I went down the stairs—as we walked, it felt like there were more aftershocks, but I think my body might have been having little fear spasms. I couldn't tell.

A picture of my house on fire zipped through my mind. Sure, it was a rental, so it's not my house, but it had been hard enough finding the place after I left Santa Cruz in such a hurry a year before. It's a big Victorian, with a huge bay window in the Lower Haight. I hoped Drew, my housemate, hadn't been standing in front of that window debating his next decorating move. We hadn't lost any windows in our office, but I was plenty worried that big old house wouldn't have flexed quite like our spiffy new building.

It might have been thirty, forty minutes to get down to the lobby—it seemed like hours. Then, suddenly, we burst out onto Market Street. The noise was the first shock. The combined sounds—shouts, crashes, horns, machine noises, police sirens—hit with a physical impact, so that I ducked a little when I stepped out onto the street. It was pandemonium. I felt terrified all over again. The street and sidewalks were teeming with people, some milling about, some standing alone, many walking in waves up and down Market.

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Traffic was completely stopped, with some cars left at odd angles in the middle of the street. I saw an empty Muni bus almost sideways, straddling both lanes with its door open. There was smashed glass all over the place, much of it from sidewalk-level storefront windows. Police cars were parked or in movement in all directions. I saw water gushing over a low rooftop wall and down the front of a nearby five- or six-story building onto the sidewalk below. Then I watched an ambulance pull up on the sidewalk of the building right next to ours and spill out its attendants, who rushed inside. I could hear sirens near and far. I noticed the big office building right across the street—it had thick white smoke pushing out of broken windows on the third floor. It was madness. I was breathing very fast, in short gulps and gasps.

People from our office had gathered in a loose circle on the sidewalk edge and in the street, trying to decide what to do. One of the sales guys was trying to get people to go to the Gnome's Hat, a dive bar around the corner, but nobody was listening. I thought I should try to call Drew at the house, but the only phone in sight had six or seven people crowded around it. I spun around in a small circle, looking up and down the street, and at my fellow workers, who didn't seem to be able to put a plan of action together. Silvie and Crenshaw stood off to the side, Silvie waving her arms and Crenshaw sucking on a cigarette with fierce concentration.

Then I noticed Megan staring at me. Though her complexion was returning to normal, she still looked stricken. She looked at me steadily for a moment and then said, slowly, in a tight-throated way that made her words croak a bit, “Hayden, I would greatly appreciate if you would walk me to my apartment. I’m feeling quite ill.” She fluttered her arm toward my shoulder, and briefly rested it there and then she looked away. I thought I could see her trembling a little.

“Well, that’d probably be OK, Megan. I’ll just try and call my place from your house—I’m a little worried because it’s an old building.” I tried not to smile too broadly when I said, “I’m glad to see you’re getting some blood back—your face was the color of printer paper up there.”

She touched one of her earlobes, covering one of her tiny pearl earrings. “Well, that’s probably true. This is my first earthquake, and I’d like the number to stop there.” She looked out at the crazed street scene and shuddered a little. “At the moment, I think I’d take the peril of Boston drivers over San Francisco earthquakes hands down.”

Megan had come to Consolidated from Boston only two years before. She’d been an editor there, but also (because it was a small company) the Traffic Manager or some such ungodly title at a small boutique publisher in Boston, routing manuscripts, messages, contracts and communications through that office and across that

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quadrant of the East Coast's literary world. She did have all kinds of exchanges with agents and name authors, but that didn't count much at Consolidated. But damn, that contract work did: Now she ensured that leases had signatures, executives had quarterly reports and that meetings had 100% attendance. Consolidated leaned on her small frame with a vengeance, but she never seemed to be caught with a contract—or a sandy-blond hair—out of place.

First things first—get off of Market Street. I knew Megan lived somewhere on Taylor in Russian Hill, so I figured we'd walk up to California and maybe move north on Stockton, skirting Chinatown. I knew that would first take us through some of the big-boy buildings in the financial district, but I didn't want to flank the Embarcadero—I'd remembered that big waves can follow an earthquake, and though that seemed pretty unlikely in the Bay, I'd always had a strong fear of drowning. Megan still seemed only semi-coherent, so I just gestured the way with a pointing index finger up the street, and we moved through the chaos. I kept looking up at the tops of the buildings, expecting something to fall on us.

We started walking up to where California hits Market and I saw Leg Man, in his usual spot, not far from Consolidated. I saw him almost every morning, since he set up shop near the coffee stand where I regularly fueled up. Leg Man was a homeless guy, or at least he looked like a homeless guy, and like many of the homeless on Market, he had a regular spot where he plied his trade. The

ways the homeless folks hit you up for dough on Market Street varied: some would try a story on every passerby, walking with you a bit to fast-talk a dollar. Some had crude or artistic signs with jokes on them—"Homeless man needs money for college and beer," or sad descriptions of their plight. Others would just sit slumped on the sidewalk, not looking at the masses moving by, maybe with a plastic cup to take any donations.

Leg Man was different. Leg Man had an artificial leg that he set up on the sidewalk, and at the top of the leg, a little above the knee, there was a little platform and connecting bracket. He'd position a small metal can there for people to drop money in. He usually stood stock-still back off the sidewalk from his leg—he didn't seem to need the leg to stand—looking at everyone passing by, a small scowl on his face. He was late forties, maybe fifty, black, a big, stocky guy with a small afro of wild, graying hair. Today, amidst the madness, his leg was next to him against the storefront wall he normally leaned against. He undoubtedly knew that pickings would be slim on a day when the entire City was upside-down.

I gave him a nod, and his eyes tightened a bit, but otherwise, he gave me no acknowledgment. But he gave Megan a long, sharp look and then gazed down the crowded street. He'd seen me many times, but I never knew if he recognized me or not, though I'd pushed a buck his way a few times. I wondered for a second if he knew Megan, but then we turned up toward California.