

PROLOGUE

San Francisco Bay Area, March 1988

“This is a time of sudden catastrophic events,” began my *I Ching* fortune. An event of catastrophic proportions was unknown to me. My life to that point had been relatively easy—requiring little reflection—and the price one can pay for such circumstances is a life that is lived on the surface: the perfect look and, by all accounts, the perfect life, I suppose.

Several weeks after my twenty-sixth birthday, I was at home with my siblings Eugene and Genny; bored, we decided to do the *I Ching*, which is a 2,000-year-old system of fortunetelling from China. From the vast interpretations of this ancient oracle in contemporary terms, the book we had found most useful was by Sam Reifler. His book *I Ching: A New Interpretation for Modern Times* provides a comprehensive translation of the original texts.

Having been introduced to the oracle only a few years before, the readings had immediately appealed to our metaphysical sides—a way, perhaps, of receiving messages from the Universe. Yet we practiced it more as a diversion by occasionally consulting it and applying its answers to our questions when it felt right, thus relying more on intuition than anything else.

Although the *I Ching* can be consulted alone, we developed our own method of consulting it as a group. So, we sat in a circle on the living room floor that evening and decided that I should have the first turn. Initially, I didn’t have a particular question in mind. I had gotten engaged to my

boyfriend only a few months before, which diminished my uncertainties regarding our four-year relationship. With our wedding set for September, it was as if everything in my life was, in fact, a certainty. And so it came to be that on this particular evening, I was at a complete loss for a question.

After several minutes, I decided on a whim to ask if San Francisco's Big Earthquake would happen that year as many had predicted. Since the infamous earthquake in 1906, it has been said that an even stronger one, the Big One, would inevitably occur and result in the city's total destruction. It seemed as if different groups foretold it was "the year" for the dreaded event almost annually. I frequently came across such talk in newspaper or magazine articles that featured either some ancient prophecy or recognized and unknown psychics of the day. That year, it was rumored—within my circle of friends, at least—the fateful time had arrived.

Having decided on a question, my consultation began. I closed my eyes, shook three coins between my cupped hands, and concentrated on my question. Over and over, it went through my mind: *Will the Big Earthquake happen this year?* Once I felt I had concentrated enough, I tossed the coins onto the floor. On this occasion, Genny was tasked with reading aloud the outcome of the tosses.

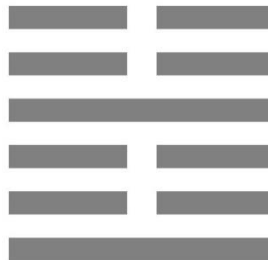
"Okay, you have two tails and one head," she said.

She then proceeded to write on a piece of paper the symbol that represents this specific combination of heads and tails, one straight line: _____. Another toss would later prompt Genny to write a broken line, ____ ____, which represents the corresponding combination of one tail and two heads. This process of asking a question and tossing the coins is repeated a total of six times; after each toss, a new line is written vertically and stacked on top of the previous line. The first

toss result is on the bottom, and each one that follows is above it. The symbol created at the end of the process refers to a particular reading, known as a “hexagram.”

Besides making the *I Ching* a group experience, our method included having a designated individual read the resulting hexagram out loud. One of the advantages of this group consultation was that we could then share our interpretations of the readings so that the questioner could arrive at a conclusion that felt right.

Each hexagram in the *I Ching* is interpreted in three different ways. First, there is a general reading that represents an overview of one’s life (Artha). Another addresses relationships (Kama), and the final reading speaks to one’s spiritual life (Moksha). The following were the six lines that I received that night:



As always, I shared my question with the others only after obtaining the hexagram. “My question is, ‘Will the Big Earthquake happen this year?’” Referring to a table in the book, Eugene then took over from Genny and quickly looked up my specific hexagram. I then received my “answer,” reading number 51, entitled, “The Thunderclap.” Eugene began to read:

One’s life (Artha):

This is a time of sudden catastrophic events. Remain cool. Expect a general reaction of shock and fear and then hysteria. Do not get caught up in it. If you retain a deep acceptance of the inevitability of the present moment, then you will ride out the present widespread catastrophe wiser and stronger than you were before.

Relationships (Kama):

You and Friend have been struck by an unforeseen and seemingly disastrous event. If you react with selfish anxieties you will start blaming each other for whatever has occurred. If you hysterically fantasize yourselves out of seeing the reality of the catastrophe, it will overcome you. If you remain calm and meet your problems in the same warm and loving spirit with which, up till now, you have met your pleasures, then this disaster can only benefit you in the long run by deepening the bond between you.

Spiritual life (Moksha):

A time of catastrophic “acts of God” is a good time to examine the depth of your spiritual commitment. With an enlightened point of view you have learned to accept the bad moments of your life. You have learned not to grasp possessively at the good moments. You have lived in a state of peace and equanimity. But in the face of the present disasters you are rediscovering fears and anxieties in yourself. Thus you do *not* completely, deeply, effortlessly accept the will of God. You have not thrown off your ego so thoroughly that you can face these times with a Buddhalike calm. It is good that you have discovered this. It points to where you must now strive on your path to complete enlightenment.

“Huh? What? What does that mean?” Genny, Eugene, and I asked one another. At the time, I could relate it neither to my question about the earthquake nor to my life in general. All this aside, what did it mean by “catastrophic events”? My sense from the reading was that this catastrophe was not characteristic of an earthquake but rather more of an individual experience, suggesting that it could impact my relationship with my fiancé. But with our wedding only six months away, I was certain that our loving and committed relationship would only continue to grow. In short, how could this hexagram be true when I was at a good point in my life?

After a while, when we still could not make sense of it, we simply decided it was a bad reading and moved on to the next person. As I’d later discover, the truth of this hexagram would be apparent in retrospect. I would later come to fully understand the meaning of the reading, and of the events that would radically alter the course of my life.

But please allow me to tell my story from the very beginning.