

Southern California Disasters Visited Series

THE 1987 LOS ANGELES EARTHQUAKE
of October 1, 1987 (and beyond)

written: October 8, 1987, etc.

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THE QUAKE

It was October 1 and the first day of my new work schedule. From now on I would be working Monday through Wednesday and be off Thursday and Friday to work on my upcoming best seller. The day would be spent setting up for some very serious writing.

Per usual I prepared a cup of coffee to stimulate myself into mental activity. I then stretched out on the back porch sofa to savor the brew and luxuriate awhile in my robe. Soon Fred entered the kitchen to wish me a good morning. Fred had recently asked if he could room with me for a few months while he sold his mobile home and became settled in a new place. He retired from Certified Life Insurance Company a couple of years ago. October 1 was his first official day as my temporary roommate.

At 7:41 A.M. I was still stretched out on the sofa holding the half-full cup of coffee, and Fred was standing in the doorway between the kitchen and back porch. Then IT hit without the slightest warning. The house began to shake violently, vibrating and pitching toward the south-southwest. Of course at the time I neither knew nor cared what direction things were pitching. I reverted to my if-incorrect response to earthquakes. I wanted out!

I leapt up and over the coffee table, spilling as I flew, and headed out the door and down the back stairs. All the time I was yelling "Fred, get out of here!" As soon as I was outside the door slammed shut when an ironing board fell against it.

Fred did not go out. He stayed in the doorway as things came down around him. Outside numerous auto alarms were screaming, adding to the sense of catastrophe. Then the earth stopped moving. Except for the alarms everything was unnaturally quiet, as if the world were temporarily stunned.

I had just reached the bottom of the stairs when the quake ceased. I ran back up and had to ask Fred to let me in. It took him awhile to gather his senses and wade through to the door. I wasn't inside more than a couple of minutes before a strong aftershock sent me back to the bottom of the stairs. A thousand things were running through my head regarding what to do and what to save. But every one of those thousand required going back into the flat.

I went back up after the first aftershock ceased and quickly went to my room to get dressed. Fred did likewise. In the meantime there were several short, strong shocks, each one grabbing hold of my adrenaline pump and giving my heart a squirt.

The kitchen and living room floors were covered with broken glass and crockery. So walking was dangerous. At some point during those frenzied preparations I hurt one of my toes and didn't realize how badly until taking off my socks that night. The toe wasn't

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cut, but it had been bleeding internally. Thus I can say I was injured during the L.A. Earthquake of 1987.

As soon as Fred was dressed he went outside in a pure state of shock. I took out some folding chairs and my portable radio and set them up out in front of the house. There were groups of people up and down the street standing far from their houses. The thought/question that kept going through my head was "When is your house your enemy?" After turning on the radio and finding out the quake had measured 6.1 on the Richter scale, centered about nine miles south of Pasadena, I went back up and retrieved a folder of important papers plus the original manuscript of my navy memoirs. It was then I saw Great-Grandma Franc's clock. It had fallen from the top of the living room wall unit, landed on its top and settled on its face. The back was partially off, the round glass face was open and the hinge twisted, and some of the case's seams had separated. I placed the clock under a table to protect it from further damage and took my first load of valuables to the car. Then I backed the car out of the garage and parked it on the street. Fred departed about this time and was gone all day. He wanted to see if all was okay with his mobile home and other possessions. However, as it turned out the quake had stirred up sediment in his gas tank, and the car spent the day in a repair shop. Sediment was also stirred up in the water lines, and several houses (including ours) had very low water pressure for several days.

I spent the morning and part of the afternoon preparing for the possible permanent evacuation of the house. This included removing irreplaceable possessions and stocking up some food, water and bedding in the back shed. Frequent aftershocks (more than three dozen registering 3.0 or higher over the next five days) proved a constant reminder that mother nature was asserting her rights as planet builder.

THE APARTMENT

By mid-afternoon I was beginning to survey the damage more closely and start cleaning up my apartment. The back porch wasn't too badly hit. The small fan Dad had given me on his last visit from Michigan had fallen onto the floor along with my iron, a bottle of distilled water (the cap of which had come off), assorted decorative baskets and a quantity of fine, black roofing debris which had fallen from the separation between the kitchen and back porch. I could look up and see daylight through the separation.

The kitchen was a real mess. All the dishes that had been near the front of my cupboard were now either collected in the sink or spread over the floor. What once had been a surfeit of cups and mugs was now a surfeit of rubbish. Included in the loss was a 1984 Olympic mug (one of the few souvenirs I had of that event) plus some Michigan and Hurst Castle mugs. There were also cans and jars of food from another cupboard, but luckily none of these had broken or punctured, so at least the mess wasn't slimy. Both the refrigerator and stove had moved out and turned toward the southwest. The refrigerator had opened and dumped a few innards, including one egg sunny side down, and the

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burners of the stove had lifted out of their sockets and were on their way to the stove's right side.

Broken glass also met me in the living room. I had lost all of my wine glasses including one of the little aperitif glasses from the set Mom had given me. My Akai reel-to-reel tape deck had left imprints on the wall where it had banged several times, one large Akai speaker had punched a hole in the wall, and both speakers had turned from facing west to facing west by northwest. The Funk and Wagnalls encyclopedia, located in the same wall unit as had been the home of the broken glasses and the injured clock, had slid out forming a nearly perfect crescent - with Volume 1 at the front edge of the shelf and Volume 27 at the back in its original location. All over the floor were books, magazines, cassettes and reel-to-reel tapes, etc.

The large mirror in the hallway had fallen from a four-foot height unharmed. Again there were books scattered, including a complete 480-page copy of my genealogical works which recently had been taken from a box to be bound. Now its unbound pages were scattered about in shuffled disarray.

The bathroom wasn't too bad except for most of the medicine cabinet emptying out and a thermometer breaking. Thank goodness for plastic bottles!

My bedroom was a mess, but nothing was broken. There were major cracks all over the interior of the house, but the ones in my bedroom were the worst. The brick chimney had broken loose from the house and had banged against the north wall in my room causing extensive wall damage. Thanks to a steel support added to the top of the chimney after the 1971 Sylmar quake the chimney didn't collapse. However, it split into sections and twisted ominously, the top coming to rest about six to eight inches from the house. Since my word processor sat against the north wall, the unit now was covered with pieces of plaster. I removed the typing unit from the desk and set it on the floor away from the wall. I would have taken it out of the room except for the solid-wired umbilical cord which attached it to the heavy main unit. Once again books and papers were strewn about the floor, and nearly all the pictures were off the walls. In Fred's room the bookshelves had collapsed sending the contents every which way.

By Thursday evening I had much of the mess cleaned/picked up. And Friday I finished the job, going after the plaster pieces/dust with a vacuum hose and washing all dishes that had been exposed to possible broken glass contamination. As far as writing went, I didn't even make an attempt.

THE NEIGHBORHOOD

As mentioned earlier, after the initial quake the neighbors flocked out of their houses. Many of them did not go back in for several hours. And some even spent the day at nearby parks to be away from structures in case of strong aftershocks. The commercial building directly south of us had sustained damage including and due to one chimney

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collapsing through the roof. Another chimney had broken and was near collapse. The building was once a church and for several recent years had been a Christian school for pre-teens. Last year it had been sold to Cantwell Construction Company as their corporate headquarters. Cantwell had spent a great amount of money refurbishing the premises. All day Thursday and part of Friday their people removed debris and repaired the roof. They also removed the other damaged chimney before it could fall on the roof. Tragically, during the 3:59 A.M., 5.5 aftershock which occurred Sunday, October 4, two walls in the same wing partially collapsed, and major structural cracks spider webbed the entire building. By Monday the building had been completely emptied and continues to crumble.

Two jazz musicians and their families live in the house directly north of us. The Thursday quake caused the unsecured upstairs water heater to pull vidently against the water lead-ins/outs causing them to rupture. One of the musicians—Dave—and I looked in vain for someplace to turn off the water. But the house was completely devoid of any shut-offs whatsoever. Finally, in desperation, we located the main shut-off between the house and the water main. However, we couldn't turn the valve due to inaccessibility and corrosion. A neighbor across the street eventually brought us his water shut-off tool (a remnant of his City Water and Power days), and we were able, with much effort, to close the valve.

Dave, his wife and family live downstairs and are very good friends of Tyrone and Lisa who live upstairs. Lisa had given birth only a month before and was especially terrified since her husband wasn't home and the telephones only worked sporadically. Lisa's elderly mother had recently moved in with them from Sacramento. She asked me if it was always like this.

After the imminent emergencies were over I tried sitting out in front and reading. But my mind would not focus on any one thing with any sort of concentration. Thank providence for leftover pizza from the night before. Otherwise I probably wouldn't have eaten. In the meantime the temperature continued to climb until it reached over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. This heat finally drove me back into the house, where I found a tentative perch near the living room air conditioner.

Mike, my downstairs neighbor, busily cleaned up the mess in his apartment. He deals in buying and selling antiques and had recently made a killing at an estate sale. He had purchased numerous glass and crystal lamps and original paintings and was planning to double or treble his original cash outlay. Several of the lamps were destroyed, and some of his paintings were badly damaged by heavy objects falling against them. His living room wall also sustained damage from the quake activities of the chimney and fireplace. He didn't go into shock until the next day.

A couple of hours after the quake I drove over to the landlord's house to see if he was okay. Bill was sitting in his kitchen reading the morning paper and eating a plateful of

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scrambled eggs. When he answered the door I told him about the damage—especially about the chimney. I asked if his place had sustained damage, and he said a few knickknacks had fallen from shelves but that was all. He then said the ceiling in a house a few doors down the street had caved in. After he promised to stop by later to survey the situation, I left and returned home to spend the day as best I could.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Nearly all of the chimneys nearby, and many others in Los Angeles county, were damaged or destroyed by the quake. Numerous inferior buildings not designed to resist quakes were irreparably damaged. The village of Whittier, the hardest hit, was virtually destroyed. I called my friends Eric, Rob and Ven to discover how each had fared. Eric's house, which is much closer to the epicenter than ours, suffered a large crack near its foundation which widened during the October 4 aftershock. Eric's mother had run about the house during the quake trying to catch lamps and such while the children crouched under a table. Eric had been on the freeway when it hit, and he thought his car had some kind of mechanical problem or flat tire. He was clued in when everybody began pulling off to the side of the freeway.

Rob and his wife Becky were separated when the quake hit. Becky was home and Rob was taking the kids to school. He, too, at first thought the car had had a flat tire. When he got home he found Becky standing amongst an absolute mess. There wasn't much breakage, just masses of loose cassette tapes, knickknacks and a beer bottle collection jumbled about.

Ven had the least damage or mess. The large mirror in his living room had fallen unharmed, and his nephew Sammy had kept the television and video machine from falling.

There were many fires caused mostly by leaking gas. A gas main ruptured in Century City (just south of Beverly Hills) causing fire and a great deal of concern. To sum things up, the area was a mess. Many people were left homeless, and some of the shelters set up to house them had to be evacuated after the October 4 aftershock. All the time the weather remained unseasonably warm. By Saturday the noontime temperature was reaching 105 degrees. Nights hovered around an uncomfortable 75-80 degrees. Some people believed the heat and quake were somehow related. However, no experts admitted to any possible connection save pure coincidence. Was it also coincidental that the Pope had just been here for a few days? Perhaps his report to the Almighty was not favorable.

PINKIE AND THE BULGE

For the past several months I've been fascinated by a "bulge" in my living room's floor. It became noticeable about a year ago and within the recent past has become pronounced. I

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figured the house was settling, but as the boards pushed up harder against the carpet I became alarmed that something sinister might be happening to the house. After the Thursday quake the bulge went down significantly, leaving a much smaller rise. The Sunday shock reduced the height even more. I developed the hypothesis that the bulge was caused by the house being situated over a fault. As the pressure on the affected fault increased, it contorted the house as expressed by the stress on the floor boards. Each shock relieved some of the stress allowing the boards to settle back closer to their natural position. I even went so far as to call the California Institute of Technology (CalTech) Seismology Department. I was told that the stress was caused by the house settling. That was that. Maybe so, but the bulge has been increasing once again during the last few days.

Another point of interest was the sudden disappearance of my downstairs neighbor's cat Pinkie. The cat was gone after the Thursday quake and didn't return home until Thursday morning of the following week. The cat returned scrawny and disoriented, and it polished off a can-and-a-half of cat food in addition to a full bowl of milk. I only hope the fortuitous return of Pinkie cancels out the foreboding bulge in my living room. Only time will tell (nice cliché), but I personally believe there is yet more to come. For this reason I am slow to normalize the apartment.

POSTSCRIPT #1

The death toll from the quake and shocks was very low, considering. Most of those who died were heart attack victims. There was also at least one electrocution, one fellow was unlucky enough to be down in a hole and was suffocated when the sides caved in, a college student walking out of the school's parking lot with her sister was killed when a two-ton decorative piece dislodged from the parking structure and fell on her, and a luckless guy was taking a shower at 7:41 A.M. on October 1. He panicked and tried to leap from a second story window but tripped and fell head-first to his death. The building was unharmed. One might say that in many of the above instances terror was the killer. And terror was definitely here for a visit. Just try to imagine waking up screaming. This is what I did at 3:59 A.M. on Sunday, October 4. Although this aftershock did very little to further damage or mess up my apartment, I awoke as the black world around me was shaking to pieces. I don't recommend waking this way.

POSTSCRIPT #2

The upper two-thirds of the chimney has since been removed leaving only the fireplace section, which will remain as decoration only. I can now see daylight through the north wall's cracks. The landlord promises that this will be corrected soon.

POSTSCRIPT #3

Since October 1 I have been sleeping on the back porch, and Fred hasn't slept here one additional night. Unless he recovers and decides the house is safe enough, he may not be

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a roommate for long. Personally I have come to appreciate the fact that the house did hold up and hold up well. So I am reconciled to remain.

However, until the wall in my room is repaired I'll sleep on the porch. Another shock could bring down large chunks of the already weakened plaster.

POSTSCRIPT #4

I didn't remove GreatGrandma Franc's clock from under the table until Friday, October 2. After doing so I removed the clockworks and repaired the case as best I could. Then I re-inserted the clockworks and started it up. A week later it is still going strong. The bump on its head will be a lasting reminder that it went through the Los Angeles Earthquake of 1987.

The above was completed by:
October 8, 1987
Pasadena, California

POSTSCRIPT #5

Friday, October 16-

Today some men are here to begin repairs on the inside of the house. My landlord told me a few days ago that a wall in the downstairs flat had buckled during the quake. That is the first thing to be repaired today. Something I've recently noticed is that few of the doors in my flat will close any more. The ones that won't close have sprung. This isn't a good sign regarding the stability of the house. In fact, I am beginning to psychologically prepare myself for the possibility of having to move to a different apartment. Financially, it would not be advisable for me to move at this time, but fate may not be giving me any options.

POSTSCRIPT #6

Thursday, October 29-

My downstairs neighbor, Mike, and I are now barely on speaking terms. He has been a bit wacky since the quake and completely unreasonable in some respects. Basically, the root of the problem is that Mike is monopolizing the carpenter's time by insisting the guy work only in his apartment. If it hadn't been for the landlord interceding, the damage in my room wouldn't have been fixed even as yet. However, despite Mike, the plaster in my room has been repaired, at least the major cracks. Painting will come later.

POSTSCRIPT #7

Monday, June 23, 1997-

My bedroom and living room were completely repaired and repainted shortly after my PostScript #6 entry. However, the sprung doors and remainder of the apartment had to wait until March of 1996 before they were fixed. That month finally brought complete repair throughout the apartment, resetting doors and filling cracks produced and/or enlarged by numerous quakes and aftershocks.

The landlord paid for all repairs and half of the new, emerald-green carpet. I paid half on the carpet to assure its good quality. Now for a time, who knows how long, I am thoroughly enjoying an apartment that is brought up to par after so many years.¹

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¹I have lived in the same flat for eighteen years, the last seventeen of which were consecutive. The apartment had been in excellent condition prior to the 1987 episode.