

Southern California Disasters Visited Series

THE 1991 SIERRA MADRE EARTHQUAKE

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Wednesday, June 26, I received a very unexpected request from Mary, a co-worker at Bank of America. (Mary is a single parent, heavy set Afro-American with a little boy. Recently I helped her get through a traumatic experience with a now-former roommate, Tony, whom she strongly suspecting of physically abusing her son. During the best of times Mary walks a tight rope between calm and hysteria. Anything sets her off.) In this instance, the reason for her upset was a large moth that had chosen the ceiling above her head as a resting place. She asked me to kill it.

I shot at the moth with rubber bands, making it uncomfortably self conscious until it flew to an area near the french windows several feet behind Mary's desk. Of course we all made a big deal out the situation, chiding Mary for her terror. Though she wasn't too happy with the compromise, she finally let it slide. Then the wrong thing was said by our South American compatriot, Myrna. She just *had* to say that when a moth flies into a room, someone will die within a few days. I had never heard the superstition, but she was adamant with an emphatic "wait and see!"

Once again I had to talk with Mary, who was convinced the death would be hers. I was able to make her realize that she was not the only person in the room when the moth arrived. Most importantly, the whole saying about the moth was nothing but superstition, anyway.

Friday, June 28, was "casual" day at Loan Adjustment Department. Usually I forget that casual clothing may be worn to work on the last working day of the month. This time I remembered. It was 7:43 o'clock A.M.. Everybody was accelerating into their daily routines. Computers were on. On the credit collections side of the unit, heavy pressure was being exerted by managers to make the day count, since this month we were very short of goal. I was at my desk preparing to do the staff report, telling the department's Operations Unit of any absences and the like. We coffee drinkers in the unit were watching the coffee pot in anticipation of the ready light turning on.

Nancy, manager of our unit's Support Section, had just handed me a poster tube and returned to her desk. I twisted around in my chair to deposit the tube on a shelf behind my desk when things suddenly began to shake.

Proper procedure for earthquakes, in our department, is to duck under a desk or table as quickly as safely possible. I hesitated from getting under my desk only long enough to ascertain that the shaking was going to be more than just a little rattle. No such luck. The building jerked and twisted violently, as pictures fell off walls, articles flew off shelves and tables, and the fire extinguisher sprinkler outlets tore chunks from the surrounding acoustic ceiling tiles. Power failed immediately, with a few lights blinking on in response to the building's emergency generator kicking in.

Several of us yelled out to get under desks for the benefit of those who were thinking of panicking or couldn't think at all under the circumstances. The shaking only lasted a few seconds, though the duration seemed much longer. While down under I could feel the metal floor plating move under the carpet and heard the grating sound produced.

The safety coordinators were the first to leave their desks to make the rounds and check things out. All others were advised to remain under their desks for a few more minutes in case of large aftershocks. Lawsuit Unit coordinators were Nancy, Armando, Ezequiel and myself.

During my rounds I turned off electronic equipment, picked up some fallen pictures and broken glass, and removed clocks and pictures remaining on walls to ensure they wouldn't cause

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problems should we have a violent aftershock. I discovered that Nancy had been hit in the head by a plastic, performance award frame, as it flew from a shelf, and had torn her dress when ducking under her desk. Except for Nancy's minor mishaps, only composure was shattered in the other staff.

Gradually, everybody came out from under. All except Mary. She had freaked out and refused to leave the safety of the floor beneath her desk. Mary's manager, Susie, sat in a chair nearby to give Mary some comfort.

We felt only one somewhat strong aftershock, which occurred shortly after the quake. The department's safety coordinator head, Fernando, reminded us, over the public address system powered by the building's emergency generator, to stay away from the windows in case they should shatter. Soon he came through and shut the blinds. The reason for this precaution was to channel glass downward should the windows break.

Meanwhile, the entire staff tried getting accustomed to the situation. A few calls went out and some came in, as people connected with loved ones. Mostly we just sat in semi-darkness, drank nearly-hot coffee and chatted to relieve the heavy tension.

More than half an hour passed and Mary still had not emerged from her bunker. I went over and relieved Susie from her "bed" sitting. When Mary saw me she cracked a smile and admitted that she was very uncomfortable. Soon she was up, and within another half an hour made the trek to the coffee maker to get a cup of liquid life. Later still she walked even farther from her desk to take advantage of a "smoking section" made available for the trapped smokers suffering nicotine fits. (Ordinarily, the entire building is off limits to smoking.)

After Mary recovered her composure, I began wishing I could gag her. Apparently the religious sect she belongs to is heavily promoting the arrival of Armageddon. To Mary, the earthquake was just another bit of evidence along this line. She quieted down when it became obvious that nobody would take her seriously. (No wonder Mary teeters on the brink of hysteria.) Myrna remained very quiet at all times. Perhaps she was thinking of messages from moths.

Accentuating the situation was noise showering us from outside the building. The chop-chopping sound of many helicopters inspecting damage, and screams of ambulance and fire truck sirens constantly filled the air. As time passed more of us chanced looking out windows to see a few collapsed roofs and much broken glass on the street (Colorado Boulevard) resulting from what we learned was a 6.0 quake.

We could see The Pasadena Playhouse two blocks away, where, according to the radio, there was damage to the outside brick wall. We couldn't see the damage from our vantage, however. Later it was announced that the current play being performed at the Playhouse, a revival of Cole Porter's "You Never Know," would go on that evening as scheduled.

We also could see the Pasadena Main branch of Bank of America next to the Playhouse. Armando's wife worked there. Soon she showed up on our floor, having to climb several flights of stairs, much to Armando's relief. Her building, an older, masonry structure, had been evacuated due to possible structural damage and need for extensive cleanup. There, while employees huddled under desks, the desks dumped their contents, including all computer equipment. Also, the acoustic ceiling fell and several lighting fixtures came loose.

Time passed and still no electrical power. Anxiety about loved ones and property damage to homes grew, while those in charge determined if and when we should be allowed to leave the building. Harkening to my mind were visions of the mess at my apartment in October, 1987. Imagination elaborated on these with visions of collapsed floors.

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It was 9:30 o'clock when the decision to let us leave the building finally came. The floors then were evacuated one by one to prevent overcrowding the stairs, parking lots, and the already sluggish streets. Susan, a co-workers, asked if I had walked to work, and I said yes. When she volunteered to drop me off home I was quick to accept the offer.

Like everyone on the premises, we left by way of the stairs. (Elevators were not used from the time of the tremor.) As we started down, the power came on. Someone made the offhand comment that "we'd better hurry before they change their minds" (about our leaving). Before us, several jagged cracks had appeared in the stairway walls.

Susan had parked across the street in the J.W. Robinson's department store parking lot. The traffic lights were out, so we had to cross Colorado Boulevard carefully. Traffic was heavy and slow. Down the street we could see where cordons had been placed to detour foot traffic around damaged buildings. As we walked up Hudson Avenue to the parking lot, we had to step around shards of glass that had dropped from Robinson's side windows.

When we arrived at the three-tiered lot, all entrances had been chained closed except for one on the other side now being used exclusively as an exit. Then I noticed huge cracks in some support beams holding up the third tier. Susan was parked on the ground level, or first tier, so we attempted to leave without delay. The old Chevy Nova's cold engine stalled a few times before we finally made the exit, where a policeman stood to ensure nobody drove in. (The concrete tiers were reinforced by wood and steel over the weekend, and the lot was open to parking by Monday. However, there is much more damage than just weakened supports.)

Susan stayed off busy Lake Avenue, opting instead to take the smaller El Molino Street north to Orange Grove Boulevard, then east. En route the only damage we saw was glass breakage and ruined chimneys, some of which undoubtedly had been repaired since the 1987 quake. She let me off at the corner of Elmira Street and Orange Grove and continued home. (I discovered later that she found her house carpeted in glass and with a sizable plumbing problem, i.e., broken pipes. She and her husband were kept busy all weekend repairing and cleaning. For Susan there was also crying, since most of the broken dishes were heirlooms and things once belonging to her now-deceased mother.)

The hundred yards walk to my place was filled with thoughts of potential damage and images of what my place looked like in October, 1987. A fellow was inspecting the old, single-story, masonry Cantwell building on the corner. I asked how it fared, but he had only just arrived. In 1987 the building had become headquarters for the Cantwell Construction Company. In October of that year it suffered major damage, especially to its roof and east wall, and had to be evacuated. Several months passed before the structure was repaired and brought up to earthquake code. Cantwell never moved back in but leased it instead to the city for use by "Foothill Area Community Services." I only saw one small crack, and it was a reopening of an old one. (As it turned out, the building came through the quake in excellent condition, and Monday it was "business as usual.")

Now I was home. Everything looked okay from the outside. Inside I was very relieved that the place had fared well. Of course there were things on the floor. Cupboards had opened and spilled a few things, the stove and refrigerator had begun their earthquake walk with half turns toward the east, and the microwave oven, that sits on the refrigerator, was hanging over the edge. Yet only two things had broken, and both were drinking glasses of no particular value. Some books, several cassette tapes, and a heavy, wood carved bookend also had fallen. Two out of three potted plants on back porch sills had toppled. Each was caught by a table, thus reducing the amount of spill. In all modesty I must admit that much of the credit for low

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breakage and fall out was due to placement. This fellow learned a few things from his 1987 adventures.

Though I cannot see any new cracks in my apartment (those I already had simply got exercised), Mike Blackbird, downstairs, has some new ones. He had been standing out in the back yard when the shock hit. He said the lifting and undulation felt like a monster with dorsal fins was moving beneath him underground. He turned to see the house twist and heave and heard it cracking. Due to the shingles that slid off, he predicts leaks when it next rains. Later that evening I received a call from Fred, the fellow who shared the October, 1987, shaker with me. He said that, during the episode, his motor home lifted and dropped with a startling thud.

The electricity came on in my apartment about 10:30 o'clock A.M.. The refrigerator, which had remained open for more than two hours and had not run in three hours, was already defrosting. Defrost wasn't fully arrested until early afternoon. Then I extracted water from the melt.

Later in the day I went shopping at Ralphs supermarket on Lake Avenue. The place was humming with business, and to look into the faces of the shoppers, one would never guess that anything at all unusual had happened. At the check-out I got to talking with the checker, who said the place had been a real mess that morning. Practically everything had come down into the aisles. Outside the traffic remained heavy all day mostly due to rubberneckers (looky-lews) come to see what all the fuss was about. Personally I feel that the whole thing was arranged by the city fathers due to their concern that Pasadena wasn't in the news enough these days.

The casualty list was quite small for a quake that was even larger than those of 1987. Only two deaths were attributed to the tremor. One was a sixty-eight year old woman who suffered a heart attack. The other was a young woman who was exercising horses at the Santa Anita racetrack in Santa Anita, just east of Pasadena. In her case, a steel beam broke loose and fell on her. A woman TV news person tried to interview the young trainer's brother shortly after he had been notified. The fellow was obviously overwrought with emotion and shock. The news person asked some extremely inane questions, and the fellow dug deep to remain civil with her. Later, the TV station for which the reporter worked apologized for the thoughtless invasion of the grieving man's privacy. (Good for them!)

The shaker occurred on the same fault line as did the 1987 Whittier tremor, though it was much farther north. Sierra Madre is a small community a few miles north of Pasadena, and the epicenter was a few miles farther still. Luckily, it was in a sparsely populated area in the mountains, whereas the Whittier quake was centered in a densely inhabited region. Another major difference was that the Whittier had more of a rolling motion. Sierra Madre's was a thrusting movement that, it is said, caused some of the San Gabriel mountain range to lift a few more inches.

Occasional earthquakes is a price we pay for living in California. Keeping in mind that there is no place on earth where one is totally free of potential catastrophe (in many places such exposure is perennial), it isn't too high a price. Elsewhere there may be volcanoes, or a higher frequency of floods, blizzards, tornadoes and other storms. Like a great terrestrial lottery, only Fortune decides who will pay the most.

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