

## EARTHQUAKE IN SAN FRANCISCO

1957

The cement floor rumbled and roared. The stone cold, medieval walls began cracking as I stood quietly in a corner of the room. Adolescent girls threw themselves on the floor and writhed in fear. A nun, who was suppose to be our instructor and protector fell to the ground. While on her knees, she clutched her white knuckled fingers together in prayer and demanded through tears - not to save us but to save herself, "Oh dear lord, don't let me die. I'm sorry I have sinned!" She shriek.

When the earth stood still, Mother Compassion, another of our nuns, swept into the room and as though finally convinced of the presence of malevolent beings, said loud enough to move the earth again, "Maybe now you'll believe there's a God!"

Soon, we all returned to our seats in the cafeteria, to our starchy lunch, to the silence of our own chewing and breathing. The girls comforted each other during the after shocks that disturbed our sleep in the dormitory. We were not allowed to watch the news on TV. and no one had her own private radio. Since we were cloistered in this school and had no contact with the outside world, I wondered if anyone else felt it - if the rest of the city was still standing - if anyone cared that the long dormitories of cast iron beds held girls who were afraid to sleep and who screamed at every jolt.

I was 13 years old in March of 1957 when this particularly strong quake hit. I lived in the Excelsior district of San Francisco, at the Convent of the Good Shepherd, home for delinquent girls. They were the same buildings that Dan White created his platform for supervisor. The city wanted to buy the emptied buildings in 1977 to house mentally disturbed children. He did not want mentally disturbed children in his district. For some reason no one in politics knew the convent took in

disturbed children for more than half a century. I've wondered if this was what sent Dan White "over the edge" to kill the mayor and a supervisor. It was also the alma mater of Barbara Graham, who later died in the gas chamber.

The buildings that captured my fantasies were the houses in the posh Marina district of The City. I remember seeing them for the first time in 1958 when the convent arranged a private bus tour of The City for its students. There they were, houses that stood for all a poor American could ever dream about - Opulence people could shamelessly bathe in.

Thirty-two years later, the Marina after the October 1989 earthquake, was like a war zone. It was a surreal picture in the early morning sun. The sidewalks looked as though a giant had picked them up and threw them down again. The earth swallowed some of the buildings. A woman was standing outside a police barricade, eyes wide in shock. She had been up all night, spending part of her time at the Marina shelter. She said she lived in a building that looked like a one story structure. Before the quake it was a three floors structure that within seconds sunk into the ground. She said that she came home from work and began dinner when the earth started to move. She ran for the front door and it collapsed. She went to the fire escape fully intending to go down flights of stairs and found she was on the ground floor.

Across the street, an elderly lady was sweeping in front of her pink stucco house. Her house and sidewalk were undisturbed - not a crack. "My husband's mad 'cause a lamp broke," she said, "I got a call from my cousin's daughter in Italy. He died and I didn't even know he had a daughter and I didn't know he died."

Down a ways a young woman stood in the middle of the street with a blanket wrapped around her. She was looking up at a building that was crumbling before our eyes. She said her husband was inside trying to salvage what he could. She said all she wanted were her pictures and to leave this awful city.

I was overwhelmed by the magnitude of what I saw. It is too much to take in, too unreal. I thought these things only happen in other countries - shown to us on television. I continue to this day to buy at least one lotto ticket a month in hopes of winning enough money to buy a house like the houses in the Marina. Those strong buildings that only an "act of God" could bring down. I loved to walk around the Marina before the earthquake and imagine what the people in those SUNSET MAGAZINE homes were doing.

It was about 7:00 AM, October 18 and news people were arriving from every direction. I looked for a place to eat on Chestnut Street. Everything was closed. Thousands of wide eyed people were walking up and down the street. It felt like we were in the thick of a horror movie. We were all rather mindless - at the complete whim of any aliens who wanted to step in and take control of our lives. There was no electricity, clocks are frozen at 5:04 P.M. and we are in the Twilight Zone. If I'd paid closer attention the day before I would have realized it was earthquake weather... warm and still...nothing moving...no birds singing in the trees that live in the trees just outside of my window. Did they know and have the good sense to leave?

I drove by the ocean. The sand was as smooth as a stone. All the foot prints and wrinkles wiped away by a single jolt.

Then it was night. There were no signal lights, no house lights, no street lights and barely visible crowds of people in the too intense car lights. There was the dread of hitting other cars and I was concerned about people walking in front of my car.

I found I could not bare to stay in my own apartment although there was no damage done to the building. I tumbled back in time. I had to slip past Mother Compassion, the angry nun from my past, and get out. I volunteered for the red cross. I went to Moscone Center, which is the size of a football stadium and where there were wall to wall cots. All around the vast rooms were people with baffled child expressions

on their faces. Moscone Center was analogous to a giant detention center. All the people were accused of being homeless and arrested on the spot. Some were milling around others were sitting in tight little groups staring at poorly working television sets. Many were merely staring into space.

At the entrance there were a number of long tables. A sign informs us that no alcohol and no drugs are allowed. Everyone is carefully quizzed once inside. It is imperative to know who each person is and what they want. There seemed to be some anxiety about the "real" homeless people trying to get in. Such as the people who were afraid to sleep under crumbling freeways. I walked miles to the kitchen, after being assigned to "kitchen duty".

It was being run by angry street people, "Put the bread like this. Then put the mayonnaise on, then give it to them and they'll add the lettuce," a woman ordered soberly. I wondered if maybe a little "booze" wouldn't hurt at a time like this. We made sandwiches in an assembly line. While we slapped mayonnaise on the bread, some people in a mysterious other part of the building sliced tomatoes and tore up lettuce. So part by part thousands of turkey sandwiches got made and were shoved into little plastic bags.

I was quite suddenly overwhelmed by a flashback, to the Convent of the Good Shepherd, and I was taken by panic. My body was in perspiring fear of not being able to leave the building. I dropped the bread and knife and headed back to the front doors. I am disabled with a mobility problem which means I walk slowly and with a cane. It took me fifteen minutes to walk from the kitchen to the front entrance. It took fifteen SECONDS for the freeway to collapse and kill people. I thought I would never get out alive.

Then I was embarrassed about leaving. I told one of the red cross "check-in" people that I have a disability and I would need to sit down, "Yes, a job where I am sitting." And she was sitting behind a long table. She told me to wait a minute. I

had hoped to sit with her and register volunteers. She was near the door and windows where I could look out and escape. The long table next to us was registering hungry people who were staying at the shelter. They were told they would not be able to eat unless they registered.

I should have said something. I should have said, "If people are hungry, feed them." There was plenty of food. Many of the stores in that area were closed and people could not shop. But I was not able to speak because I was not able to separate myself from their travail. I could just as easily have been in that line. A little part of me dreaded staying and yet to leave would have been cowardly.

"You can go help in the press room," the woman says just as I was ready to make a run for the door. "Wonderful", I thought privately, that should keep me a safe distance from reality.

I was assigned to Niala, an ex-junky, ex-prostitute, long time homeless woman. She arrived at Moscone as soon as the red cross began setting up. She had a place to live now and felt it was her duty to help others.

There were two or three women from Marin county in our group. They had wanted to volunteer at the Marina, where the rich and visible were homeless but, alas, they were told the Marina had too many volunteers already so they were sent here - and no one told them what it would be like.

The problem is when people come into The City from elegant suburbs, their minds tend to be filled with media like stereo types.

One Marin woman asked Niala where the homeless children "normally" went to school. Niala said they very often didn't. If they didn't have an address how could they go to school. "Well," the woman spoke with her arms folded and her head held a little too high "that's too bad because that's why they continue this awful welfare cycle."

She heard Niala tell me about some of the street people she saw. Niala told the woman earlier about her own escapades in trying to survive. Then another Marin woman asked Niala why she didn't go to school and learn some skills. Niala looked weary. She had been up all night helping in her South of Market neighborhood. "I have a B.A. degree and a certificate as a lab technician," she said in a tired voice. I kept waiting for her to curse at them but she was too well mannered to stoop to their rudeness. The Marin women finally stopped their annoying interrogation. Maybe this was their first genuine contact with the struggling masses.

The press section was a row of phones against one wall, sectioned off by chairs. We were told the "people" could not use these phones. The people were the inmates. It was as though they were singled out for disaster. Niala bent the rules more than once for the "inmates". I was at Moscone from until late the next evening and maybe three press people even approached the press section. They were all interested in a food riot from the day before that was shown around the globe. Otherwise who cared about a bunch of poor folks who lived in run down hotels. Unlike the Marina this was nobody's shattered American dream. This was the nightmare everyone wanted to avoid.

Two phones were used for incoming calls. I received a call from someone in Minnesota who wanted to know if her 63 year old cousin was there. I looked though the masses then put a notice up on the board near the food line. Fully cynical by this point, I wondered if the cousin just wanted to be part of the limelight. She was certain she had, "seen her cousin on TV. and her leg was in a cast". Maybe the cousin was avoiding her family for years only to be found by them during this unfortunate time.

People began to line up for lunch. It was 1:00 p.m. They were pushing and shoving each other. A few press people walked around with cameras, snapping pictures with blinding flashes like tourist. There is no privacy except behind a stall in the

bathroom. All human habits from annoying to outrageous to down right vulgar were shared with strangers. Numerous people were in casts and had bandages around their heads. Some had patches over their eyes. At one point a very chubby little girl in a dress that was too tight walked through the crowds crying. She didn't seem lost or looking for anyone, just terribly sad.

As it got closer to time for lunch, I was reminded of feeding time for the lions in the zoo. The keeper has a huge pile of meat that he transports on a wheelbarrow. The lions roar loudly as he walks slowly to the cages. He throws a slab of meat to one lion who growls and noisily rips the meat. The keeper, to the delight of the public, waits a bit before giving the others meat. The roaring in the lion house is thrilling to people. The lions bare their teeth and thrust their paws through the bars on the cage. They are in separate cages so they won't kill each other over the meat. They try to claw the paw they see extended from the bars in the next cage. The lion keeper slowly tosses meat to each one.

At Moscone two national guardsmen stand in front of the food lines and order people to move back if they want to be fed. There were over a thousand people who wanted to be fed. The food was brought up from the kitchen. We could smell the food but no one was allowed to eat because people in the line, "just won't move back". Some people started pushing each other. It looked as though a fight would break out. The crowd was roaring with anger. Everyone was hungry including me, especially me. Hunger makes the stomach sore and the head ache. A woman is arrested violently by the police for cutting in front of someone in line. Her arms are ripped this way and that.

By 2:00 p.m., people were finally let through to collect trays of food, one by one, one by one. I did not know what happened to the turkey sandwiches but they were not there. We were all given a hot lunch. There is little generosity where people are the most desperate. The elderly and disabled wait in the same line as beefy young

men. A young man with a soft voice spoke on the makeshift PA system, "Stay clam. There is plenty of food for every one".

We received a call that Jessie Jackson was on his way from the airport. Even though the people have been fed they are more homeless than ever and there is no end in sight.

One of the papers our founding fathers wrote has something in it about the pursuit of happiness and about respect for the individual. Do these concepts not also apply to poor people who appear to be treated with a uniform disrespect?

Hours passed since I helped make turkey sandwiches. Then they arrived, large trays of sandwiches. Some of the people who ate them got sick. This was accepted like everything else. Like the stories Niala told us about the residential hotels that were destroyed. That they were owned by the same family. She told how the owners would evict people before they were suppose to. She said they charged the tenants by the hour, if they had visitors. And how the city paid three times as much to the hotels for rooms as was paid to the average hotel and how the people got many times less. The rooms had peeling paint and roaches and rats. A few bathrooms were shared by several and were never cleaned except by the tenants.

Meanwhile, some very posh hotels offered free rooms for residence of the Marina.

A vehicle was set up outside of the Marina shelter for the purpose of giving away food. But, at the door of Moscone center a sign read No food beyond this point."

Jessie Jackson came. He was in the very back of the room where there were many children. Most of the population was lined up for dinner. No one moved from the line, Jessie or no Jessie. It had become too difficult between getting a meal ticket and dragging one's belongings around to avoid theft, to leave the line to see Jessie. Suddenly, from no where, appeared dozens of press people snapping photos, video taping and asking questions.

Reverend Jackson spent about 20 minutes having oodles of pictures taken with

children, then left. He was whisked through a side door and did not go near the long line of hungry people. It is too bad because many were hungry for more than food at that point.

I dragged myself home, down through the South of Market past the cordoned off buildings, past a building where a brick wall tumbled over people on the ground and killed them. "How can we believe in anything if the very earth we stand on is not safe and predictable?" A friend from the midwest asked. I don't know how to answer because I have known the earth to be unpredictable for a long time.

I am thankful to have a place to live. It did not sink into the ground. It is not owned by slum lords. I can eat when I want to and the national guard won't make me wait. I get to take a shower for as long as I like. There were no showers at Moscone Center.

The dirt and grime from falling buildings stretched our pores. It was as though a millions of rugs shook over the city and it was days before the soot and dust settled. So much time has passed and the City looks much as it did before the earthquake, yet I still harbor images of its destruction.