

## When the World Shakes

by Joanell Serra

When the magnitude seven earthquake hit Northern California in December, I was at home, chatting on the phone with my oldest son in New York. My phone spit out a high pitch blaring alarm with an announcement: EARTHQUAKE NEAR YOU, SEEK COVER.

I dropped the phone and ran to check on my husband, Harry, who is fighting a tough cancer battle and had just headed out with the dog for a backyard rest.

*I'm fine.* He called out. *I'm staying out here.* I looked around—a wide grassy area, no trees above him. Good call. I squatted down as well and waited, but other than the slight shudder of an aftershock, we didn't feel it. I called my son back, but within minutes the screaming sound from my phone started again: TSUNAMI WARNING IN EFFECT. STAY AT LEAST ONE BLOCK INLAND.

This was not a problem for us—we live high on a hill nowhere close to shore. Because we travel back and forth from San Francisco for my husband's cancer treatments, my phone is set for alerts in both counties.

I scrambled to reach our two other adult children, both in San Francisco that day. My daughter lives about a mile from the ocean. I urged her to stay inside for the next hour just in case. My youngest had just arrived downtown for his shift at a retail store on Market Street. Our messages went from: *I'm at work. Can't talk,* to *They are closing the store and sending us home.* That meant crossing the Golden Gate Bridge. I jumped on the phone and implored him not to cross the bay in the next hour. He sighed.

*My buddies are at the beach and they say it isn't anything yet.*

I almost suggested he say goodbye to his surfing buddies, but I held back.

*Just promise me you won't go near the beach.*

In the two years since my husband's diagnosis, we have faced chemo, radiation, emergency brain surgery, and more treatments. He is doing fairly well, but we carry a constant sense of waiting for the next crisis. Whenever I call one of the kids and they

don't pick up, I quickly text a follow up. *Everything is fine! Just saying hello.* I know they'll worry when they see the missed call.

Before the diagnosis, if I had asked my youngest to avoid the beach on the day of a potential Tsunami he would have pushed back, telling me these waves would be the experience of a lifetime. Now he instead responds, *Sure. I'll stay inland. Don't worry.* We treat one other like we are all one bad day from a breakdown. And that's not totally wrong.

The tsunami warning rolled through the Bay Area. BART trains that cross under the bay were stopped. West Berkeley prepared to evacuate. Businesses closed. I saw a tweet that the zoo had closed and started moving the animals "to higher ground," something I couldn't quite picture. Elephants and tigers strolling uphill?

And then another announcement came: *No tsunami today after all. Nothing to see here.* I felt a collective sigh of relief. But also, I found some comfort at how prepared the emergency system seemed to be, in how quickly all three kids were in touch, that they now make rational choices.

My son went back to selling jeans about a block from his dad's old office. My daughter headed out to walk her dog in the same neighborhood she lived in as an infant. It's strange and wonderful to have them spending their twenties in the city where I spent mine, and it brings up memories constantly. I met their father the day I arrived in San Francisco and lived in the city for my first real job out of college, working with the homeless on the streets of the Tenderloin. I lived there for two years of graduate school and through the milestones of getting married, having our first child, then our second. It's where so much of my adult life began. We moved out of the city years ago to raise the kids just outside the city, and then moved further North, to the wine country, to wait out the pandemic surrounded by nature. But for the last eighteen months we have been in San Francisco almost full time, in an apartment just across from the hospital. On our chemo free days we walk in waterfront parks Harry helped plan, see a Giants game at the ballpark he spent fifteen years negotiating, belong to museums for which he fought diligently. It's a literal walk down memory lane.

When I arrived in San Francisco, I had just finished college in New Jersey. A lifelong east coaster, I planned to move Manhattan after a year or two in San Francisco.

I envisioned a cute apartment in the West Village for a few years, then imagined raising a family in the Catskills. But as I was falling in love with my husband, I was also falling for San Francisco. Ironically, my relationship with both the city and Harry solidified on the day the earth below us liquefied.

When the Loma Prieta earthquake hit in 1989, the graduate psychology class I was taking was on a “process” break. The professor was covering the effects of trauma in early childhood, and she felt the class needed many breaks. My friend Jill and I were drinking tea and commiserating about our perceived fragility. I split a Snickers bar in two for us, noting that at this rate we would never get through the chapter that day. Jill agreed. Then she pointed at the window:

*What is happening out there?*

I looked up and caught my breath. Valencia Street rippled, as if the asphalt had turned into a black pond, and the streetlights were swaying like trees in the wind. Car alarms up and down the block rang out as the couch beneath me shimmied. I did not connect the word “earthquake” to these events. The earth crumpled; the city shimmered. Solid became not solid. Things flowed; other things crashed. And eventually, yes, a shudder, as if the world was a merry-go-round and it had suddenly stopped.

But earthquake? I had never been in one, and this is not what I imagined. The professors spilled out into the lobby, calling for everyone to gather in the classroom, to *process what’s happening*. Jill’s eyes rolled like a cartoon cat. *Seriously? Now? Do we have to?*

Once it became clear that this was indeed an earthquake, and that our program had no real plan to manage this emergency, Jill and I tossed our books into our backpacks and left. We needed to get back to our neighborhoods—the Upper Haight for me—which was three miles from our campus. The buses had stopped, and this was long before Uber. We would walk, we decided. Phone and power lines had collapsed, and we skirted live wires bouncing and sparking in the streets. Traversing the city on foot seemed foolish, but what else was there to do?

The three-mile journey included crossing Market Street with no streetlights, and surmounting several enormous hills. As we walked, we witnessed humanity in its various shades: People crying, men in tight muscle shirts outside gay bars drinking beer and

joking, children whining at their mothers like any other evening, cops shoos us away from areas with cavities in the ground. There were streetlights down, storefronts smashed, dogs peeing right into the newly widened cracks in the street. Some people took their garbage out, as if the trucks might come by the next day, and other people came out and offered us water, as if we were crossing the Sahara. It was a normal-not-normal type of crisis.

No one seemed sure just how bad things were. We didn't know that the part of the Bay Bridge had collapsed or that the Marina was on fire. We heard sirens, but also the sunset was beautiful. I became increasingly worried about Harry, still a boyfriend not a husband, but a boyfriend I had recently moved in with. Older, more experienced in life and the possessor of self-confidence I envied, I generally thought of him as invincible. But he had gone to a World Series game that day. Could he still be there? Would a baseball stadium be a safe place to ride out an earthquake? Then I thought of my sister, who had recently moved an hour away and was now nine months pregnant. And my parents, who were visiting her while waiting for the baby. I worried about the homeless clients I worked with, about my acupuncturist and my friends and my friends' dogs and...and I froze. For the first time in my twenty-four-year-old life, I considered everyone I knew being unsafe. My loved ones, I realized, were vulnerable, human, and mortal. Now I wished I had stayed for the process group back at my grad program.

Jill peeled off at her place, and I walked the last thirty minutes alone. By the time I arrived home it was dark, and there was no power in our building. It took two laps of walking through our tiny one-bedroom apartment to accept that Harry was not there. My heart hurt as I scrambled through jumbled drawers to find a candle. There was a lighter in the little bag where Harry kept his weed. There was fresh water in a bottle on the counter. I took stock, trying not to panic.

I ate an apple sitting by the bay window, the candle flickering on the table, staring at a gorgeous view of the dimming city. The phones were still dead, leaving me utterly cut off from everyone I knew. I was not scared for myself. But I needed to know that my people were all still on this planet, unharmed. I needed it so much I could not swallow the bites of apple. I curled around my hungry, hard, stomach and waited. An hour later, I

heard Harry at the door, and I ran into his arms, smelling his shoulder, touching his bristly hair. Inhaling him. Alive. Alive. Alive.

He told me that the ballpark lost power, and the game had to be canceled, a first for a World Series game. He had stumbled out of the park with a few friends, dazed. They walked through the Bayview neighborhood for a few blocks before a total stranger picked them up and drove them all the way across the city to their respective homes. An angel stranger. We sat in one chair together, breathing in and out our relief, staring into the darkness outside, where usually there were lights dotting the horizon.

My niece was born a few days later. Because the Bay Bridge was out of commission, we weren't sure how to get to Sacramento. California was still a large land mass to me; one I didn't understand. We opened our road maps and figured out a circuitous route, which included passing miles of marshland. I watched gorgeous birds I'd never seen before—Egrets, Herons and Ibises—coast over the wetlands. I wondered what the earthquake had felt like to them.

When we arrived at my sister's, I stood in the adorably adorned nursery, holding my tiny, perfect niece. I didn't know yet when I would be married or pregnant or a mother. But I sensed in my bones that I would hold my own child someday, and that it would be Harry's child too. Even if he wasn't so sure yet.

The landscape of the city was forever changed after the earthquake. Harry went on to work as a lawyer on projects throughout the city—museums, schools, hospitals, and even a new baseball park—all that need to be retrofitted or built fresh, because of the day the city became a pond.

I didn't take my touchy-feely graduate program for granted after that day. Nor the building it was in that stayed strong, keeping Jill and I and our snark safe inside while the earth shook. I appreciated everything that held—the firefighters, nurses and doctors who rushed in to help, the strangers who drove other strangers home, the mothers who carried their children across bridges, the journalists who jumped into helicopters to film the city so the rest of the world knew what was happening—everyone who brought kindness to a nightmare.

This was the day that San Francisco became my home, instead of a place I was living. It's the point I realized that disasters happen collectively and that the Bay Area was a pretty decent place to face disasters. Also, after that day, I wrote Harry's name down whenever I was asked for my emergency contact. Because ultimately, he was the one I needed most to come home.

Thirty-five years later, I put my phone down, today's emergencies passed. Two weeks ago, our phone blasted a flash flood warning. Four years ago, we watched our phones every minute for wildfire updates and counted the number of Covid cases hospitalized. Life seems to have gotten more precarious for all of us. Or maybe it just feels that way, because our family journey has edged along so many cliffs.

Facing the possible loss of my favorite person means that there are personal "aftershocks" every day. Memories lie dormant until I turn the wrong corner in San Francisco and remember diagnosis day, the night of the brain tumor surgery, or the time I brought home Covid to my fragile spouse. From that perspective, there is something almost validating about an earthquake. When the outer world shakes and everyone recognizes how unstable this experience of living really is, I want to say, "See? Life is dangerous game! Even the ground beneath us can dissolve." Also, the person you love most might have a tumor no one noticed. Also, that hint of smoke in the air might be someone's house burning. And those waves barreling towards the coast? They could sweep us all away.

But, I could add, that person standing across the room on the day you step off the plane in a new city might be the love of your life. And also, he is still here. I can hear him humming to a John Prine song in the kitchen and feeding the dog. That happened today too.



**Joannell Serra** is a Northern California writer, with work published in numerous journals and anthologies. Her books include *The Vines We Planted* (Wido, 2018) and *(Her)otics Anthology*, a collection of women’s essays about the pandemic (Regal House Publishing, 2021). She is currently finishing her MFA at Randolph College. More of her work is available on her [website](#).