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Abstract

Do you remember the earthquake of '46? Do you remember how the chimney fell through the roof of the elementary school and down through both storeys of classrooms and would have killed us all if this had not been a Sunday morning? Do you remember how the post office, which was the only brick building in the entire valley, collapsed in a heap of rubble where it had stood for 23 years, and how we were thrilled to think afterwards that it looked exactly as if it might have been bombed from the air? And how the bells on the little Anglican church went chiming, and the electric poles whipped back and forth like fly-fishermen's rods, and electric wires hooped low like skipping ropes and snapped tight and clearly sang, and how the earth came rolling up in waves and sent Cornelius Baxter's car out of control and up onto Millie Weston's porch?

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Then you may also remember my uncle, Neddie Desmond. Lived just down the road a ways from us in that little farm with the buttercup-yellow house. Well my Uncle Neddie was the first one out in our part of the valley to install an electric fence. Power had come as far as Waterville just the year before and none of us had become accustomed to its magic yet, nor learned to trust it. Neddie went out that morning to pull the inaugural switch, and to prepare himself to have a good laugh at the first cow to find out what it would mean from now on to stick her nose into a field where she wasn't wanted. Well Neddie pulled his switch and immediately the air began to hum, the world began to heave and roll, the trees began to dance and flop about and try to fly. Two guernseys dropped directly to their knees and started to bawl; a third went staggering sideways down the sloping earth and slammed into the cedar-shake wall of his barn. Chickens exploded out of their pen in a flurry of squawking feathers as if the jolt of electricity had somehow jumped a connection and zapped them. Naturally he thought that he and his fence were to blame for this upheaval but he could not make it stop by turning off his switch. Poor old Neddie had never been so frightened; he started to curse and blubber, he hollered for Gracie to get out and give him a hand. Never much of a man for religion, he promised God at the top of

his lungs that he would abandon his lifelong fascination with modern inventions immediately. But God took far too long to think this offer over; by the time the earth's convulsions had settled, all of his cattle had fallen and poor Ned had wrapped himself around a fence post and begun to cry.

Now the scariest thing about quakes is that they change the way a fellow looks at the world. You may also remember my other uncle, Tobias Desmond. Owned the little sawmill up at Comox Lake. Uncle Toby drove down from his mill an hour after the quake had worn itself out and told us the entire lake had emptied in front of his eyes. Truly! Right to the muddy bottom, he said — he saw drowned trees and slime. Drained entirely down a crack which had opened up in the earth, and must have gone right out to the ocean somewhere, because it came back with tangled knots of golden-brown kelp and furious crabs and bouquets of brilliant purple anemones torn off the ocean floor and flung up on to the driftwood and shoreline trees and the sorting deck of Uncle Toby's mill.

He was uneasy about going back to his sawmill after that. Though the sound of the lake emptying all at once like water down a sucking drainpipe had been horrible enough to haunt him for the next few years, it would not have the effect upon him of those remembered moments when he stood and watched the water returning to the empty lake — leaking in at first, and spreading, then racing outwards across the mud, and swelling, deepening, rising up the nearer slopes. *He* had no reason to believe it would know when to stop. By the time the first waves slapped against the pilings under his mill, he was in his truck with the motor running, yet later confessed that he knew he would not have the will to drive out of there even if that water had kept on climbing up the posts and started out over the land. He would just have to hang around to see what happened next.

Now my Uncle Toby was a truthful man. We believed him. You only had to walk along the lakeshore yourself to see things drying in the sunlight that shouldn't be there. The problem was that this incident would trouble him far too much, he couldn't stop telling people about it. And every time he told it there seemed to be something new he'd just remembered that he hadn't told before. A whole month had gone by when he turned away from the counter of the general store one afternoon, watched a car speed past outside, and turned again to Em at the till: 'My God, I just remembered! Why didn't I think of this before? There were two old men in a boat — I remember seeing them just before it started — two stiff gentlemen in coolie hats out on the lake in a punt.' They weren't

fishing or anything, he said. Just floating, talking, way out in the middle. When the waves started sloshing up they rocked and bobbed but didn't start rowing for shore. They started turning, slowly turning around, turning around and around this whirlpool that had opened up, this funnel that was sucking the entire body of water down a hole somewhere. They didn't stand up, they didn't holler for help, they just turned and turned and eventually slipped into the shute and corkscrewed down out of sight. 'Now what do you think of that?' said Uncle Toby. 'They didn't come back, they must've gone sailing out to sea.' Of course no one believed this new addition to his tale. But he continued to tell his story to anyone who would listen, adding every time a few more details that would make it just a little more exciting and improbable than it had been before. He seldom went back to the mill, or sold much lumber. He spent his time on the streets of town, or in a coffee shop, talking the ear off anyone who came along. The earthquake had given him the excuse he'd been looking for to avoid what he'd always hated doing most — an honest day's work.

So you see — that's the other thing. People will use an earthquake for their own purposes. My uncle's sawmill eventually collapsed from neglect, under a heavy fall of snow, but he hardly noticed. That's the worrying part. They're telling us now that we're just about overdue for another one. For an island situated smack on the Pacific rim of fire, as they like to call it, we've sat back for far too long and smugly watched disasters strike other parts of the world. Apparently all those tremors we've wakened to in the night have not done anything but delay the inevitable; we will soon be facing the real thing all over again, with its aftermath of legend.

Myself, I was nearly eight at the time. My brother was five. My sister was less than a year, and still asleep in her crib in one corner of my parent's bedroom. My mother, who was kneading a batch of bread dough at the kitchen counter, encouraged the two of us boys to hurry and finish breakfast and get outside. It appeared to be the beginning of a warm June day. My father had gone out to milk Star, the little jersey. He'd soon begin the task of sharpening the little triangular blades of his hay mower, which would be needed within the next few weeks for the field between the house and the wooden gate. Now, he had just started back towards the house with a pail of milk in order to run it through the verandah separator, when it seemed the air had begun to hum around his ears. Something smelled, an odour of unfamiliar gas. Off across the nearer pasture the line of firs began to sway, as though from a sudden

burst of wind. The hayfield swelled up and moved towards him in a series of ripples. Suddenly he felt as if he were on a rocking ship, in need of sea legs, with a whole ocean beneath him trying to upset his balance. He could not proceed. He stopped and braced his legs apart to keep from falling. The milk sloshed from side to side in the pail and slopped over the rim. Before him, our old two-storey house he was still in the process of renovating had begun to dance a jig. The chimney bent as if made of rubber bricks, then swivelled a half-turn and toppled. Red bricks spilled down the slope of the roof and dropped to the lean-to roof of the verandah, then spilled down that in a race to the eave where they could drop to the ground directly above the door I was throwing open at that precise moment in order to rush outside and join him. This was the end of the world he'd been warned about as a child himself; it was happening in exactly the way his own father had told him it would. In a moment a crack would open up somewhere and snake across his land to divide beneath his feet and swallow him, would swallow his house and his family and his farm and all his animals at once, but not until he'd been forced to stand helpless and unable to move on the bucking surface of earth while he watched his family bludgeoned to death by the spilling cascade of bricks.

My brother laughed, but wouldn't leave his chair at the kitchen table. The sight of a fried egg dancing on his plate was not an entertainment to walk away from. Cutlery chattered on the table-cloth. Milk tossed up bubbly sprays from his glass and splashed on his nose. His piece of toast hopped off his plate and landed in his lap. This was a matter for giggling. The world had decided to entertain him in a manner he'd always thought it capable of and this would make a difference to his life. From this day on, he would take it for granted that he might demand any sort of pleasant diversion he wished and needed only wait for all laws of nature to be suspended for the purpose of giving him a laugh.

My mother screamed. Cupboard doors flew open and spewed dishes onto her counter. Drinking glasses and cups spilled onto the bread dough. Saucers crashed in the sink. Through the window she could see her husband swaying like a drunken man in the lane that led to the barn. When she turned — crying, 'The baby!' — she saw the drying rack above the stove sway like a gentle porch swing, swishing boiled underwear and shirts back and forth over the heat. She snatched the clothing down and tossed it all in a heap on a chair. 'You boys — get outside quick!' She went flying off through the french door and across the

living room and into the bedroom. 'I can't! I can't!' I heard her calling and ran to help. The crib had danced across the floor and was blocking the door. We pushed it open. She snatched up my sister and cried, 'Grab your brother and follow.' As it turned out, she was the one who would follow. The outside door off the living room was blocked by the china cabinet which had taken up the tune and gone dancing, its contents of silver and heirloom china clanging behind the glass. The baby cried at her hip. Between us we leaned against the cabinet but it would not move. 'The other door!' she cried. But we had only got out as far as the verandah, saw my father hollering something at us we couldn't hear over a clatter on the roof above us, saw him waving his arms — he might have been signalling us to hurry and join him, he might have been telling us to stay where we were — when that fall of cascading bricks came crashing down off the roof just less than a running step before us. Beyond it, my father, rushing towards us, fell to one knee. We looked at one another, my father and I, with that thundering fall of red clay bricks between us. He might as well have been on the opposite side of an opening chasm, he might as well have been on the shore while we were going down a drain hole, he might as well have been left behind on earth while we went sailing off into eternity. That's what he was thinking. Even trapped in a house that was shaking itself into collapse around our ears I could see what he was thinking in his eyes. What sort of a father could not put a halt to a tumbling wall of bricks? I was thinking the same myself.

Now what does it feel like to be an eight-year-old boy on a Sunday morning in June with the world deciding to throw itself into convulsions and scare everyone half to death? Why, how had I got to such an age, I'd like to know, still believing that earth would stay steady beneath your feet forever, fathers stay capable of heroic rescues forever, mothers stay calm in every sort of emergency forever, and houses you lived in stay solid and still and safe and true till the end of time?

Let me tell you this: when I was two my mother came up into the attic bedroom to tuck me in every night carrying a coal-oil lamp. One night when she had kissed me she turned to go down the stairs but tripped and fell, and fell down the length of the stairs to the landing. I ran to the head of the stairs and looked: there she was in a heap, surrounded by flames, with fire already starting up the trail of spilled oil towards me. In no time at all, my father had beat those flames out with a blanket and helped my mother away. I didn't have even the time to think he might not. Let me also tell this: When I was in my first year of school my father did not come home one day from work in the logging camp at the time he was

supposed to. He did not come home that night at all; he came home the next morning from the hospital with his head wrapped up in great white bandages, nothing of him showing but two eyes, two nostrils, and a gaping hole for a mouth. He laughed. A falling limb had nearly taken off one ear, had opened up his nose. But he laughed. I could take him to school tomorrow for show-and-tell, he said, and tell that teacher and all those other kids I'd dug him up in the yard where he'd been buried by the Egyptians five or six thousand years before. He would lie stiff, he said, until everyone was through poking at him and smelling him and making notes for an assignment on the pleasures of archeology, and then he would let out a long groan and sit up and scare the teacher into immediate retirement. 'This isn't funny,' my mother said. 'You might have been killed.' But of course my father could laugh in the teeth of anything that would try to kill him in the world. The earth beneath our feet stayed firm.

Then this. What do you make of it? The bricks stopped falling. The house settled. Not a sound could be heard. It was as if the earth, worn out from its convulsion, had taken in a deep breath, and held it, while it gathered up its strength to buck and heave some more and go into another fit. Still we didn't move — my father down on one knee with his spilled milk bucket not far away in the grass, my mother holding my crying sister in her arms, my brother no longer giggling but looking as though he just might get scared at last. We held our positions as if we waited for someone's permission to move. Something foul-smelling had been released into the air. The light was wrong. Far off, if you listened hard, a rumbling could be heard going away beyond the trees.

Inside, one final piece of china crashed to the kitchen floor. This was a signal. Now, could you heave a sigh and laugh to show that it was all right? Nobody laughed. My brother, like the baby, started to cry. My father stood up and whipped off his cap to slap the dirt from his knees. He picked up the pail, and stood looking into it. Was he wondering where the milk had gone? It was splashed out all around him and already drying on the leaves of grass and on the gravel along the lane. My mother made a tentative move down onto the top step, and staggered a little. 'What *was* that?' she said. 'What *was* that? I thought for a moment the war might have started up again, an invasion or something.'

'Quake,' said my dad. He took a step towards my mother, found that he could keep his balance after all, and sort of threw himself into a lope in our direction.

'You wouldn't believe what went through my head!' my mother said.

‘I thought something might have happened in the barn. You and that cow —’ She was almost laughing now, but almost crying as well. ‘Blowing yourselves to kingdom come and taking the rest of us with you!’

My father took the baby in one of his arms to hush her, and used his other arm to hold my mother against him. ‘You okay?’ he said to me. I nodded. He didn’t smile. Not yet. He would make a joke of it later but for the time being he solemnly held my gaze with his to acknowledge what we both now knew what he must have known already himself but had kept secret from me too long. What was this thing we shared? That the world could no longer be trusted to stay steady beneath our feet? Perhaps, and that a father and son in such a world must expect to view each other across a space of falling debris.

Fifteen minutes later my Uncle Neddie and his housekeeper Grace were upon us in their pickup truck, to see how much damage had been done. By this time we had already heard on the battery radio that we’d been at the very centre of this quake, and that it had measured 7.3 on the Richter scale — the worst to hit the island since 1918. Grace drew fiercely on her cigarette, blew smoke down her nose, and viewed the world at a sideways glance to show she would never trust it again. She was not one to thrive on drama. Uncle Ned was white, and shaky. ‘My lord, I thought I’d caused it!’ he said. He wasn’t laughing either. He looked as if he could still be convinced he’d been the one to blame.

‘That sounds pretty normal,’ my father said. ‘I thought I’d caused it myself. I was just coming across from the barn and thinking how maybe we shouldn’t’ve moved into this old house before I’d finished the renovations. Not with little kids — y’know? What a person ought to be able to do, I thought, was just pick up an old house like that and give it a shake and see what’s left that’s safe.’

‘I was making bread,’ my mother said. ‘You know how they make fun of the way I punch down the dough like I’m mad. This time I thought well *now* I’ve gone and done it, this dough’s begun to fight back.’

None of this was comfort to Uncle Ned, who was holding his hands together, then putting them into his pockets, then clenching them into fists that he pressed to his sides. ‘I mean I thought I’d *really* started it!’ he said. ‘I pulled the switch on my electric fence and away she started to rip! I nearly peed my pants.’ So Uncle Ned told us what it was like: how he pulled the switch, and the earth heaved up, and the cows fell, and chickens exploded out of their pen, and the fence posts shook themselves free of the ground. Naturally we laughed. Naturally he had to laugh himself. Then he said, ‘I guess I had to come over and find out how far

my damage had spread. But that don't mean I'm gonna get up on that roof and fix your chimney!'

Apparently it was all right to laugh. No one was hurt. The house was still standing. How important grownups must think they are! It had never occurred to me to think I was at fault. 'Reminds me of that time we was kids,' said Uncle Ned to my father. 'You remember that? You and me and Toby was sleepin' up over the garage and the Old Man he comes hollering out to wake us up? This was the time that fire got loose up behind Wolf Lake and started down across the valley towards us. The sky was red and boiling black, the whole world was lit up by its flames and you could hear them roarin' across the tops of the trees. You could hear the cattle bellowin' too, scared to death. Well you know what *he* was like, he got us up on the roof with gunny sacks slappin' at sparks that flew our way. Even when that fire'd nearly surrounded us he wouldn't let us high-tail it out of there.' He was talking to my mother now. 'Well it wasn't until the next day when the wind had turned it away that we found out he'd been broodin' about some little root-fire he'd started that he shouldn't have, and couldn't get it out of his head that he somehow might've sent up the spark that started that whole mountain burning — and sweeping down to give him his punishment. Hell, I bet every farmer in the valley had some reason for thinking the same! What's the matter with us that we can't believe things happen just because?'

My father looked at me for a moment before he said anything to that. 'I'd know, Ned. Maybe we'd really *rather* be the cause of these things ourselves. On the other hand, maybe we're right. Who's to say it isn't a person's thoughts that do the damage?'

Uncle Ned shook his head. Of course he wasn't satisfied. He wouldn't be satisfied until he'd made some sense of this. He bent to pick up a brick from the front step, and then another, and stacked them up on the floor of the verandah. 'I know this, I'll tell you for sure. I'm gonna dismantle that fence. Barbed wire is good enough for any cow, I'll just shoot the ones that don't pay attention to it. I know this too: I ain't never gonna flick a light switch on the wall of my house without flinchin' a bit while I do it, just in case. How's a fellow s'posed to know what to trust?'

My mother took the baby back inside. The rest of us started collecting the bricks, and stacking them on the verandah, and kept on picking up bricks until my Uncle Tobias' truck came roaring in through the gate and down the driveway. We stood up to watch him approach. Uncle Toby was out of that truck before it had even come to its usual stop against the walnut tree, and was running across the yard towards us holding his

baseball cap on his head with one of his hands. 'You feel that?' he shouted. 'You feel that here?' I guess he was too excited to notice our stack of bricks.

'Feel what?' my father said. 'What do you mean? We didn't feel anything here.' He put one hand on my shoulder. 'Look around. You see anything here that's *changed*?'

MANUEL FERNANDES

A Broken Pipe Dream

The night they broke the water pipe, Safia lay on the mat in a stupor, barely conscious of her husband rushing out with an empty pitcher. Later on the authorities described the breakage as an act of gross sabotage. A local welfare organization protested this description with a statement to the press and tried to organize the slum dwellers for a *morcha*. But the will to unite was lost for they felt guilty; not over the broken pipe but because of an incident which went along with breaking it. Finally, the slum was bulldozed out of existence. What really happened in the Gandhi Nagar slum was this.

Ever since she had married the watchman Kamruddin, Safia would walk with the women of the neighbouring huts to a well about a kilometer away. When her daughter Razia was a baby, the number of trips to and from the well were more as one arm had to accommodate the infant. But as Razia grew up, the trips became fewer, not only because the mother's hand was freed, but also a small pot fitted snugly on the little girl's hip. Safia, like the others, further reduced her trips by doing her washing at the well. The slum dwellers used the well water for washing, bathing, drinking. Sometimes they fell ill but recovered. Sometimes they died. Kerosene was too precious to waste on boiling water.

Many times, particularly before the elections — municipal, legislative, parliament candidates would come and promise the slum dwellers a tap.