

SOLID GROUND

By Julie Pepper

I can see the electrodes stuck to the soft fleshy parts of her bony body. If she seems scared, they tell her it will be all right.

“Ssh,” they say, “It will be okay. You’ll feel better after it’s over.”

But she’s confused because she doesn’t really feel scared, just relaxed. Very relaxed. It’s the muscle relaxants they’ve given her so that she won’t hurt herself when they send the surge of electricity through her skin and bones and brain and she convulses. It’s a much more civilized procedure now than it used to be. No straight jackets necessary. No socks stuffed in the patient’s mouth. It’s not like the old mental patient movies and books that used to absorb me for hours at a time. But I wonder if they still strap you to the table. Because no matter how relaxed the drugs may make you look, I imagine it’s the most normal human impulse to try to leap off the table when electric shocks are being pumped into your body.

I fall asleep thinking about it and her and how much pain a person must be in to want this treatment. “Shock the depression out of me,” the body screams. “Wake me up,” the soul begs. “Send a jolt through my spine that will make me want live.”

And though I'm asleep I feel it. At first it's just a sound really—a creaking, crackling sound. But then like a boom of ferocious thunder or a train rumbling through a tunnel, it yells a warning. And within seconds, a jolt of energy surges through our bed, our floor, our walls, our home.

Before I realize I'm awake, I hear him saying, "Ssh, it's okay. It will be all right."

His arms hold me tightly, so tightly that when I look up to see what his face will tell me in the dark, I bump my lip on his chin. Ow, I think it will swell.

We're standing in the doorjamb of the bathroom. My eyes adjust to the darkness, but it's difficult to see. The windows rattle and the furniture falls into the center of the room and onto our bed. I hear crashing glass and porcelain, while wood bangs open and shut.

I feel him loosen his grasp and make a move to leave the doorway we stand huddled under.

"Get back under," I yell, "It's not over, yet." And it isn't. We stand swaying in the doorjamb for another 5 or 10 seconds before it's safe to move. But safe holds an entirely new meaning. Safe? There is no safe. There's safer. But there's nothing safe about the darkness we stand in and the threat. Of what—I don't know.

"Give me a hand with this," he says.

It's his dresser. It has fallen and is blocking our access out of the bathroom doorjamb. "Push," he says.

Push hard, I say to myself. Be strong. Once out of the doorway, we stare in shock, at the war zone that used to be our home.

"Put on shoes and socks," Chris says.

I try to get my socks, but they're stuck in the tower dresser, which is face down on our bed. "May I borrow a pair of yours?" I ask.

"Here," he says, tossing them to me. I put them on as fast as I can. "And here are your shoes," he says placing them by my feet.

I didn't know where they were. For a moment we stand perfectly still, as if in a trance, just trying to understand what's happened. We make our way through the broken glass and plaster to the front door. When we open it we hear voices.

"Is everybody okay? Is anyone hurt? Are you all right? Are you all right?"

"Yes," I say, when I realize the question is directed at me. It's so dark out I can't see anything.

I think of my mother-in-law. It's all so disorienting. I smell gas. Chris gets another neighbor to check on the main line with him. I'd hate to die in a gas explosion and Karra is smoking a cigarette. Before I can say anything, Chris is back and says, "We're going to turn off the main line, but everybody get out because there's a fire down the street, and Karra, is that a cigarette? Put it out."

Out. I understand out. Two at a time I take the stairs. All of our neighbors stand on the sidewalk. Some in bathrobes, some half dressed, half pajamed, and others fully clothed. Everyone's hair is a sleepy mess; each of them in their own state of shock, their neuroses breaking through their shaken psyches. Some smoke, some whisper, some try to make phone calls on their portable phones. I just want to know the best place to stand.

"Where's the best place to stand if it happens again?" I ask anyone within range.

"Away from power lines and large trees," several voices agree.

I try to find a spot like that, without looking too conspicuous, but it's hard. There are large trees and power lines almost everywhere. Still I like it better outside. You can't feel the shaking as much. I stand very still in the clearest opening I can find.

I imagine what it would be like if you had to be that cautious with everything you did—afraid of the land around you, the earth, the trees; afraid to walk, to drive, to work, to play, to laugh, to live. I think of my mother-in-law again. I think of her because that's the way she describes it. As if everything in life, from opening your eyes in the morning to stepping out your front door, is an insurmountable obstacle.

We walk down the crumbling dark streets to my sister-in-law, Lena's place. It's only about five blocks, but it seems further. Every few steps, there are couples or clusters of survivors, settling into folding chairs, waving flashlights, or huddling around someone's car radio, grasping for a sign of what's to come. I walk fast, afraid of things falling on my head. Chris is slower, trying to get a clear station on our portable radio. I tried earlier without much success. All that came in was this guy being interviewed on what he felt like when he experienced his first earthquake. It sounded like a promo for a rock concert.

"And I was sitting on the bed with my dog and WOW! We started shaking and rolling," he laughed.

"Yeah, that must have been something, huh?" the news guy said.

Everything they said related to an earlier time, not this one. Not this huge thing we just felt. Not the one where all the car alarms in the neighborhood got together and screamed shrilly at the vibration. Not the one where we thought we were going to die.

Once we see that Lena's all right, we think we should go home.

"Do you want to stop by your Dad's first?" Chris asks me.

"I don't know," I say.

"Maybe we should just go back to the house," he says.

"I don't know," I say.

Soon it's light out and we can see and smell everything much more clearly. Soy sauce, sesame seed oil, Wesson and a variety of pungent vinegars, make our home smell like a revolting salad dressing. The floor and cabinets are splattered with them and yet we feel hungry. We'll face it later. For now we go back out into the streets to get away from the sound of glass crunching into our neighbor's garbage cans and to explore.

Everywhere I look there's another sign of the power of the earth's convulsions. A piece of a sign on the sidewalk makes us look up and see what piece is left behind. So "Von's" grocery store sign becomes "or". We only see a person or two every fourth block or so,

and the traffic is equal to an early Sunday morning. I feel like we're in one of those Sci-Fi movies, where we're the only ones that survived.

We venture out with Lena and her boyfriend, Alex. He's just come from the Valley, where he was when it all happened. It's good to be around people, I notice. The destruction seems sort of arbitrary and I can't help wondering how the bar where I work has been affected. I hope it's okay, but I don't want to go to work. I want to stay with Chris for as long as possible.

Wilshire Boulevard is like a battleground—glass and plaster, big broken open store windows that you could climb through if you wanted to. We go to a health food store, the only store that seems to be open. We buy some stuff. They get sandwiches, but I don't feel a normal hunger, sort of unclear whether it's breakfast or lunchtime. I end up with a weird combination of food: carrot chips and a power bar. We sit right in the middle of the sidewalk.

Alex says, "I'm too tired and too hungry, I need to stop here." "You guys go ahead if you want to," he says, as his legs seem to fold under him into a cross-legged position.

A bum walks by and he seems unsure if he should ask us for anything, not really sure if we're one of him. Other people pass, but they don't seem to notice us. We picnic in front of the old bookstore. Its frame is the only thing left standing.

The day goes on in this kind of daze. Some of the time is spent beginning to clean up, some trying to figure out what's going on with our jobs. We go to Westwood to try to retrieve Chris's wallet, which he thinks he left at work on Friday. The elevators are out of service and they are forbidding anyone to remain in the building, so we know he's not expected. We walk around Westwood, hungry again. It's as if nothing has happened here.

We find a Pizzeria and a phone. Our phone is out and so is our gas. I call work and am relieved to hear my owner's voice say, "We will be closed, Monday, January 17th, due to the earthquake. We will re-open for lunch and dinner on Tuesday, January

18th.” I finally get to call my Mom in NY, to tell her I’m alive. She’s been glued to the news, looking for me under a building.

That night Chris and I spend the whole night wrapped in each other’s arms. I need to hold him, not just because I like to, but because his body gives me something to hold onto. We try to sleep, but I bounce up and run towards the doorjamb with every aftershock. Chris tells me I can’t jump for each one, but I don’t understand that.

Monday night, his boss has left a message not to come to work on Tuesday. I’m glad because I never work on Tuesday, anyway, and I think it’s important to stick together for a while. But in the morning after we return from breakfast, his boss’ tune has changed to, “Come in. We’ve got deadlines to make.”

And from that moment on it’s life conforming to advertising, not the other way around. That night, his first day at work since the earthquake, he’s not home until 8’ o’ clock. I’m not ready to be alone yet. I spend the day scrubbing the house clean, because it makes me feel better and when I’m totally exhausted I go over to my Dad’s apartment.

I spend a lot of time over at his place in the next week because Chris is never home. He’s working on ten ads and his mind just doesn’t have to time to think about every new tremor. But when *I* go to work it’s only a reminder of what’s happened. The first question I ask people as a bartender is, “How ya doing?” And they’re happy to tell me. The trouble is I can’t determine when they’re going to tell me a true story and when they’re going to hit me with some sensationalized prediction, so I just listen, and though I resist, I believe everything I hear.

One of my customers tells me, “The lesbian looking seismologist says there’s a good chance we’ll have an earthquake as great or greater than the 6.6 we had on Monday morning, within the next week.”

I know whom he’s talking about because I’ve become a media freak myself, but I say, “Bullshit.” I say, “She didn’t say that. When did she say that?”

“A little while ago,” he says. “On the news. What time did you get to work?”

Now he's got me wondering. She might've said it while I was at work, away from my television. "Really?" I ask.

"Yeah, I swear," he says.

I go down the bar to the next reliable looking customer, and try it on for size. "Those guys down there," I thumb my hand casually in their direction, "They say they heard on the news that a big earthquake, maybe even bigger than the one we had, might happen within the next week." I say it kind of smiling and kind of sneering as if to say, "Aren't those guys jerks?"

But the customer isn't intimidated. He says, "Yeah, I heard the same thing."

"It's not over yet," his buddy says. "Where do you live?" he asks me.

"In Santa Monica," I say.

"Wow," he says. "My friend lives there, you're in deep shit."

This kind of conversation goes on all night long. And by the time I hear that the electronic engineer that predicted *this* one, is predicting *another* big one on Sunday, it's time to go home.

I get my coat and begin my drive home. I'm scared alone in my car, even though they say it's one of the safest places to be, as long as it's not such a strong one that you completely lose control and crash. I want to go far away from the shaking. I crawl into bed and watch Chris' eyes, waiting for them to open. "Arizona," I say when they pop open. "Can we go to Arizona this weekend?" But he reminds me that we promised we'd go to Santa Barbara to see his Mom in the hospital.

As we drive out of town, Chris says, "At least we're moving away from the storm."

I don't even notice the clouds until later and I assume by storm he means the earthquake. My toes have been clinging to the soles of my shoes, and my shoulders have been so close to my earlobes it's as if they struggle to kiss them. Everything starts to shift a little, as we move away from the epicenter.

The hospital is bright and clean. We head for the psychiatric ward and are buzzed in. Her room is filled with flowers and her face looks beautiful and serene as she says a warm hello—not at all what I expected.

Some of my sister-in-laws and their loud little children are visiting also. Together we make a noisy bunch. “The earthquake survivors,” one of my sister-in-laws, Mindy, says as Lena, Chris and I enter. And “Where are your survivor T-Shirts?” she says as she gives us a hug.

“Hi, how are you?” everyone seems to be saying all at once. I wonder if it’s too noisy for my mother-in-law. I know it is for me.

“Okay,” she says simply.

“You look wonderful,” Chris says.

“I do?” she asks.

“Yeah, you really do,” some of us say.

“You’re really thin,” Lena says. And then, “How do you do it? What’s your secret?”

Mom smiles a little smile, but it’s so brief if you’re not looking at exactly the right moment you miss it. “How do you feel?” Chris asks.

“I feel okay,” she says.

“Are you depressed?” he asks.

“No,” she says slowly, thinking about it. “I’m not depressed.”

“Well that’s good news,” I say so cheerfully that it’s funny. She smiles and I laugh, I guess because that’s the very news we’ve all been waiting for. Even though she’s confused, she can see herself. She smiles knowing this can’t be what ‘cured’ would look like. In fact, if she didn’t tell us that she wasn’t depressed, we probably wouldn’t have known.

It's the shock. It seems to have cut off any real feeling at all. No real feeling of desire, interest, joy, anger or excitement—only a very uncomfortable disorientation. The whole family takes turns asking her if she wants to go home. “I don't know,” she says.

“But wouldn't you like to go home?”

“I don't know,” she says.

“Who will be there?” she asks.

“We all will,” someone says.

“Will Daddy?”

“Yes, of course he will,” Chris reassures her.

Lena and Chris tell her about the earthquake. She doesn't seem to know too much about it. They tell her our homes were hit hard and that it was bad. She listens carefully, but doesn't seem too worried. Her teeth grind on the inside of her right cheek. I guess *bad* is a relative thing.

My brother-in-law, Sean, who still lives with Mom and Dad, asks if she'd like to go outside, get some fresh air. “If you want,” she says. “Whatever you want.”

“Did Dr. Stern come by today?” he asks.

“No, not today,” she says.

“I'm going to see if I can find him. Maybe you can go home today. Wouldn't that be nice?”

“I don't know. Am I going home today?” she asks.

“Maybe. Let's go to the courtyard and get some fresh air and I'll try to find out.”

We go outside and I think how peaceful it is here. I can hardly sense any rocking. We all look for a seat under the umbrella. I see the seat that I want. And I feel kind of panicked; kind of reminiscent of the pressure I used to feel in that childhood game musical chairs. Where you had to walk around the chairs while the music played, but be in your seat when the music stopped and there was always one less chair than there was people.

The seat I want is a lounge chair—the only one. I want to stretch out on it. I want my whole body to relax, because for the first time since all the shaking, I feel like I might be able to. I look around me, but no one seems to be competing for it and so I casually slip into it. My head slips back and my arms sit comfortably on the chair’s arms as I extend my feet with a point and flex of my toes, and then watch them fall to the right and left. The sides of the building form a U- shape behind us and around us, and the only thing I can see in front of me are lots of mountains and sky. It’s very still. It feels safe. I’d like to check myself in.

“Daddy,” my father-in-law, comes to the courtyard after we’ve been there enjoying the fresh air a little while.

“Hi,” he says. “How are you feeling?”

“Okay,” she says. “You’re back so soon?”

“Yes, I left the conference early. I came by before to see you, but you were in therapy session.”

We’ve already told her five times that he came by while she was in art therapy, but she can’t remember. She’s even shown us the watercolor she made when she was at therapy. She knows she was at therapy.

“Oh, I didn’t know,” she says.

“Bet you also didn’t know that Dad’s taking cooking lessons so he can cook for you, did you?” Chris says.

“No. I didn’t know,” she says.

“Well what do you think?” he asks.

“Yeah, I believe it,” she says.

“Mom,” Dad says. “Are you looking forward to coming home?”

“Yes,” she says. “You’ll be there?” she asks.

“Yes, I’ll be there. Are you happy to see all your children here?” he asks.

“Yes, very happy,” she says forcing a tiny little smile.

The grandchildren are asked to leave moments later—some of the patients complained of too much noise.

We leave soon, too, hungry again. But Lena, Sean, Chris and I come back later. It's nighttime. We find her in her room, sitting on her bed, thinking, I guess. She's fully dressed, which I don't find that unusual since I've been sleeping in my clothes ever since the earthquake. It's quiet here and she's very quiet. Lena and Sean ask her if she wants to change into a nightgown and she says no. But then she starts scratching because her skin is so dry. She's wearing a long sleeved sweater and it's probably irritating her skin. Sean brings out all her nightgowns to give her a selection. After going through all seven or eight she chooses the first one. The guys leave the room and we help her into her nightgown. First, Sean whispers to me, "You know, she's had a double mastectomy." I didn't.

Just the three of us now, the room grows more quiet. I make a tentative move at assisting, but Lena goes right in, lifting Mom's sweater off and pulling her under shirt away from her skin with such grace and assertion that I take advantage. I hang back a little, convincing myself that they don't need my help. It's because I'm afraid of what I'll see, and afraid of them seeing me see. I stall for time, and just as Lena goes to remove Mom's pretty camisole like shirt, she says, "I want to keep it on." She wears it like an under shirt and it sticks out slightly from under her nightgown.

Once dressed, Sean and Lena each begin to caress her arms and legs, while massaging moisturizer into her skin. I lie on one side of her bed and watch how tender they are with her. Chris tries to remind her of when she used to take him to the opera.

He says, "You would always tell me when I could clap because I always used to clap at the wrong time before they were finished singing."

"I told you?" she says.

"Yeah," he says. "But one time you clapped at the wrong time and I had to tell *you*," he laughs.

“Really? I don’t remember.”

Lena asks if she wants her to do her nails. “Okay,” she says.

As she does them, we talk about manicures and pedicures. Lena has a manicure once a week and a pedicure every two weeks. This comes as no surprise to me. She takes very good care of herself. I watch her. Her long black hair falls down her back, her skin is smooth and dark, and her body looks like a sculpture.

“I’ve never had a pedicure,” I say.

“You should,” Lena says. “Especially with how hard we are on our bodies and particularly our feet.” We’re both aerobics instructors. She says, “They rub off the dead skin and trim away the dead cuticles.”

I think that this might be better for me than Lena even knows. I’ve had a deep, dark, secret lodged in my toes for as long back as I can remember. It’s an itch right on the tips of them, an itch that follows me everywhere.

I don’t remember when they first began to curse me with their irritating presence, but I remember once they surfaced, the endless attempts my mom and I had made to rid me of them. We visited every fungus doctor we could find. We saw a fungus specialist. At that time it looked kind of fungus-like—a little yellow around the edges, with a kind of thick callousy skin surrounding the nail. My mother had never cut my toenails as a child. She cut my fingernails, which grew long and strong, almost peculiarly for a little girl. But my toenails had been forgotten and became weak like paper. I could peel them off after a while, no need for scissors.

Each time we returned home from the doctor’s my mom was filled with new hope and new ointments. She followed the doctor’s orders to the letter.

Each time we began the new treatments I would feel a little better. The cooling creams, the antiseptic potions we would mix in a basin filled with water, the warm baths, the Epsom salts, all acted as a kind of instant relief. Each time we tried a remedy, I was convinced it had outperformed the last. But after several years, I became less convinced.

I became angry that I had to soak my little toes every night and every morning. It made me sick to follow that ritual of pouring the orange liquid medicine over my toes and then soaking them in the gray, tin basin filled with water, first thing in the morning and just before bed. I had seen my Grandmother soak her feet. She soaked them in Epsom salts because they would swell and hurt. I felt like an old lady. Sometimes it was awkward to use the cream. After applying it, we'd have to put my shoes and socks on right over it. I hated it all. I even hated the stupid tubes the medicine would come in. We changed medications so often we had a basket filled with yellowing tubes of various expirations.

And then one day we went to the doctor and he said, there was nothing there anymore. Nothing. Eventually, I thought if the doctors don't see anything, I must be imagining this constant itching. I began to talk myself out of it. I began to move on. They didn't itch so much. No, it was hardly noticeable. I began to deny their existence. As time went on, I began to forget. I was a little girl, and this—I don't know what you'd call it, disease—was standing in my way. I just wanted to feel normal again.

I was thirty when I realized the itch hadn't ever really disappeared. One day Chris and I were sitting on the couch, and I whispered, "There's something I've never told you." It was a couple of months before we were going to be married. He looked at me so attentively and asked me, "What?" That's when I blurted it out.

"I have ITCHY TOES," I said. "My toes itch sometimes."

His face was so warm and understanding. Not at all what I had anticipated. Then a look of pain and shame shot across his face and he imitated me. "My toes itch," he said, as if he was saying, "I killed someone." He picked my feet up onto his lap and I was laughing.

Then he smiled and said, "So your toes itch, huh?" I went on to tell him how I had just been reminded of this ailment recently, because of my Dr. Marten boots. My Dr. Marten's, known for their soles indestructibility, had remained perfectly intact on the

outside, while the inside looked like a cat had clawed through the thick layers of cushion, because there were two large holes right beneath where the big toes are generally situated. Actually it was from my big toes curling under in an effort to scratch themselves.

“Why don’t you make an appointment for a pedicure?” Chris says, coming over to Mom’s bed and taking my hand. “That would be nice for you.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I’ve just always felt a little shy about a stranger touching my toes.”

Lena says, “You should do it. It would be good for you.”

I feel sleepy and Sean says, “Doesn’t it just make you sleepy here?”

“It does,” I say.

“It always makes me sleepy to be here,” he says.

We tuck Mom into bed and she says, “I love you.”

“See you in the morning,” we all say. “We’ll be back before eleven.”

The next morning Sean is anxious until he picks her up. He fidgets back and forth in the kitchen straightening things and moving them and checking his watch frequently.

“What time do you want to go?” he asks Dad every few minutes.

“Soon,” Dad says.

But not soon enough for Sean who eventually says, “I think I’ll just go, now, and get her.”

Once she’s home and safe he seems more relaxed. She’s quiet at first, an observer in her own home, but as the day progresses she interacts more. She even eats dinner.

Most of the kids have gone back to LA, but Chris and I stay until the last possible moment. Dad asks me if I would mind helping Mom with her bath. I don’t mind at all, I only wish I could climb in there with her and give her a big hug and tell her everything will be all right.

I run the water for her in their beautiful tub. The faucet is wide and flat instead of round, and the water flows like a waterfall. It is a marble tub with three marble steps leading up to it. It is so quiet, only the classical music piped throughout the house, making a sound.

Chris helps her find her pink nightgown in her huge walk-in closet.

“The red one,” she says.

But I think of it as pink. I help her undress and get into the tub. This time it’s just the two of us. I don’t want to stare.

It makes me so angry, it’s difficult to think about. I can’t even imagine it really. But before I enter the bathroom, I try to, so that my reaction will be undetectable. I expect the worse. Just two empty spots, maybe, with a little chopped off tissue remaining, baby tree stumps scarring the place where the breasts used to be. I envision the doctor in his white lab coat, but I keep getting an image of a butcher in his blood smeared, white apron, instead. That’s why as I stand there, looking at her very pretty face, and then down her neck to that place, I’m surprised—two soft, lovely mounds of flesh with the slightest cracks, tiny fissures, instead of nipples.

“Is it hot enough?” I ask.

“Yes, it’s fine,” she says.

But it doesn’t seem hot enough and I can’t get it hotter. She looks cold, so I go find her a warm bathrobe for after.

“Would you like me to wash your hair?” I ask.

“No, thank you,” she says. Lena has made a hair appointment for me for tomorrow.”

And I remember, she has. But was it hair on Monday and nails and toes on Wednesday? I’m not sure. I’m not sure if she wants me to stay with her while she bathes, but she doesn’t ask me to leave, so I don’t. I enjoy the quiet and am careful not to interrupt hers. I listen to the sound of the water as she runs her fingers through it and

rings out her pink washcloth. Her vanity is on the other side of the room—powders, lipsticks, hair stuff and moisturizers line the mirrors—all the things that are supposed to make a woman feel good to be one.

At this moment I wish I could stay, right here, forever. I don't want to go back. This room is perfect. The plush carpet, marble tub, the huge closets with their shoes all lined up in rows, the mirrors all around, everything has its place. We share the silence while we try to find our way into our own place. I think it will perhaps be easier for *me*. As she soaks, I steal a peak into the dictionary that sits on the shelf under her night table. I look up *stable*. It says:

1: a building in which domestic animals are sheltered and fed; *especially* : such a building having stalls or compartments <a horse *stable*>

2

a : the racehorses of one owner

b : a group of people (as athletes, writers, or performers) under one management

1a : firmly established : **fixed, steadfast** <*stable* opinions>

b : not changing or fluctuating : **unvarying** <in *stable* condition>

c : **permanent, enduring** <*stable* civilizations>

2

a : steady in purpose : firm in resolution

b : not subject to insecurity or emotional illness : **sane, rational** <a *stable* personality>

3

a (1) : placed so as to resist forces tending to cause motion or change of motion (2) : designed so as to develop forces that restore the original condition when disturbed from a condition of equilibrium or steady motion

b (1) : not readily altering in chemical makeup or physical state
<*stable emulsions*> **(2) : not spontaneously radioactive**

I wrap her in her warm soft bathrobe. The deep green color looks good on her. We drive back to LA and in the morning I do something I never do. I make an appointment for a manicure, pedicure, haircut, and color—all for the same day.

There are still many evident fissures and signs of the earth's eruption, yet, somehow now, there is a richness in every detailed texture I come across and in fact, I want to touch everything and everyone I am lucky enough to meet along my path. I feel steady in purpose, firm in resolution and mostly, sane, in my passion to restore equilibrium. It's as if I am stepping out of the numbness that shock brings and into the vibrancy of an electrical current, which ignites me and moves me effortlessly forward.