

Total System Failure

by H. W. Moss

Rob Manor couldn't have been happier with the way his day had gone. The morning deposition was more revealing than he hoped and he felt completely prepared for trial Monday. Even the disarray and clutter on his desk didn't bother him as he 'commed Nell and informed her he was out the door.

"Enjoy the game, Mister Manor," she said in her perky way.

"Believe me, I intend to. And you have a nice weekend too."

He fumbled into his suit coat, grabbed his briefcase and ambled out into the common office area where a few heads turned. It was no secret he was leaving early for the third game of the World Series, but he still felt sheepish playing hooky even if he was merely stealing a few hours. It was a few hours he could not in all good conscience bill to a client.

Elevating down to the building's garage, he located his jet black 911 and popped the trunk. He traded his briefcase for a bundle of clothes and a wire coat hanger, went looking for the parking lot manager. He found Ray in his office, asked if it was okay to use the attendants' changing room which was merely a formality. They had discussed how he would need it weeks ago when Manor finally had his ticket in hand.

Ray looked properly envious.

Manor emerged from the washroom a different man: casually dressed in jeans and long-sleeve wool Pendleton, his suit and tie carefully folded over the hanger which he dropped unceremoniously into the trunk.

“Let the games begin!” he shouted gleefully as the gate was raised and he pulled the bill of his Giants cap tighter onto his skull. The guy in the attendant booth smirked at him. With five hours left of an eight hour shift, he would have to settle for a radio play-by-play.

It was an uneventful twenty minute ride south on 101 to the Third Street exit. Manor wound his way through the familiar blighted neighborhood which always seemed so out of place and in such stark contrast to the glory of the sporting events played close by. At one of the entrances to the Stick, he paid a fee and, to his mild but pleasant surprise, quickly found a parking space not far from the entry gate. He had a Polish sausage in one hand, a beer in the other and ten minutes to spare as he took his seat.

He was ready. The crowd was ready. The teams were ready.

And then the earth shook.

For one startling moment more than 50,000 people became instantly silenced. They rattled in their seats like fake snow in a paperweight. Seconds afterward they sat stunned and uncertain as they stared at a blank scoreboard. Cement dust filled the air and made it difficult to breathe.

A sense of normalcy eventually returned as the powder settled around them without further tremors. No one panicked. In fact, in the absence of any official word, the people next to Manor soon began yelling the names of favorite players, cat-calling them onto the field. Don't let a little thing like an earthquake get you. Go Giants. Go A's!

Manor immediately became worried about Jeannette and the kids. Tommy and Theresa would be home from school and their mother would be with them, thank God for that. Watching the game on television no doubt. He tried to remain cool. They would be

as concerned about him as he was for them and he automatically reached for the folded cellular telephone he carried in a belt pack. No dial tone. Steady. The communications net must be down is all.

Not until then did he actually feel a shiver run up his spine.

Of course, Jeannette would have everything under control. Keep calm. The kids are safe, the Pacific Heights condo is in a new building and should easily have withstood the shock.

Besides, Jeannette was such a catastrophe freak, he reassured himself. If anything, she was overly earthquake prepared. He was suddenly extremely glad of her vigilance and prayed it would be more than enough to pull the family safely through.

He had to call them and rose to his feet. Amazingly, few of the people in the surrounding seats seemed in the least bit fazed with only here and there someone walking casually up an aisle as if they were heading to get a beer. For the most part, he realized, everyone was still staring expectantly at the playing field. He sat down again feeling somewhat foolish.

“What can you expect in California?” the guy next to him asked. “Give me Toledo and a good tornado any day.”

Hearing the announcement over the generator-powered loud speakers hastily brought into use gave a sense of the enormity of the situation to the people in the stands.

“The game will not be played today,” the speakers crackled as they came to life. “Please remain in your seats and make an orderly exit out of the park. The game will be re-played next week. All tickets will be good at that time. Please keep your stubs.”

Manor gave up trying to find a payphone after someone told him they were all useless. He worked his way through the throng into the lot toward where he remembered he parked, but confusion reigned. There was little pushing and shoving although drivers soon clogged all exits. Cars trickled slowly out.

It took half an hour to decide he was standing on the exact spot where he parked. Then he spent another fifteen minutes walking in ever widening circles in search of his vehicle.

Occasionally he heard reports of how bad the disaster was. Car radios worked, but few stations were on the air. One small public station reported major destruction throughout San Francisco including, most incredible of all, the failure of the Bay Bridge.

Sketchy and, ultimately inaccurate, the devastation sounded far greater than anything Manor had ever experienced first hand. It occurred to him this must be what it was like to live in a war zone.

He heard that a section of one East Bay freeway referred to as the Cypress section, an unfamiliar name, collapsed. Hundreds if not thousands of people were stuck standing still in rush hour traffic and feared crushed to death beneath its massive concrete double decks.

He heard that window glass from a ten-story department store showered the sidewalk opposite Union Square and communications were reported cut throughout the Bay Area. It was reported the Marina District was on fire and he could see smoke rising in the distance, but did not know its source.

At last Manor decided he was not going to find his Porsche. It was gone. As the lot gradually emptied he had to admit his prized vehicle was simply not there and, finally, he struck out on his own. He was determined, if he must, to walk the entire way home.

An older woman who looked as if she had never given a hitch-hiker a ride in her life eventually motioned for him to climb into the passenger seat of her car. She introduced herself as Stanis, said her married daughter would have a fit if she knew Mom had picked up someone thumbing a ride. Traffic was incredibly slow.

“But this is a natural disaster and you gotta make exceptions,” she said good naturedly as she lit another low tar cigarette.

Adjusting the radio dial while she drove, Manor continued to find few stations broadcasting. What announcers he heard sounded determined but grim as they relayed stories coming in and played live telephone callers on the air. He learned later that residents who could still dial out were the world’s only source of news during those first few hours.

In town none of the traffic lights operated and every intersection became a four-way stop. Stanis drove many blocks out of her way to take him to his doorstep where he thanked her profusely and handed her his business card insisting they meet again after this was all over. He promised to buy her lunch. Upstairs he found the house cheerily lit with candles, his wife comforting the children in front of the fire place roasting marshmallows.

They couldn’t have been happier.

The phones were working the next day but too jammed for him to file a police report on the stolen vehicle. That had to wait until mid-Monday.

He heard nothing about it for four more days. Then, the Friday following the Loma Prieta temblor, Rob Manor received a phone call at his office. Nell said the Highway Patrol was on the line, did he wish to speak with them?

“Of course,” barely hiding his annoyance. They had certainly taken their sweet time getting back to him. The voice at the other end identified himself as a detective in the stolen vehicle detail.

“We located your Porsche, Mr. Manor.”

Which could be good news, or bad, depending on the condition in which it had been abandoned. Manor was sure it had been stripped for parts and asked the detective as much.

“No, sir, I’d say all its parts are there. And we found the driver.”

That sounded too good to be true. Someone to sue.

“The vehicle was discovered late this afternoon on highway 880 heading south. It was on the Cypress structure.”

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