



Life On The Line

We all knew, of course, what it meant to live on the fault line. We all knew of the potential for danger, the disruption to our lives. We all knew that, one day, it could all come crashing down around us. But we settled there anyway. We enjoyed the beautiful California weather and ocean views that took your breath away. We built our lives up, put down roots, grew our families, made it a home. San Francisco, named for St Francis, for who better to protect the populous than a saint? We were blessed, the city expanded, grew up the hill; its people bohemian, light-hearted, turning a blind eye to the danger. Of course, none of that mattered when it came to it: nature cares not for the foibles of man. And so, we were forced to watch as our false sense of security came crashing down around our ears as quickly as the buildings across the city.

"Where were you?" people ask, "When the big one hit?"

"I was here", I would reply, "Here in the hospital, in the middle of a punishing long night shift, hours before dawn."

BOOM! The ground erupted, leaving us scrambling for safety. Lights flickered and the building shook perceptively from side to side. I ran for the doorway, slammed my arms and feet to the frame and tried to remain upright, as the world wobbled. I was shaken from side to side, desperate to cling on, to get through it, to survive. Machinery slid across the floor and monitors beeped their last and fell over. Screams filled the air, as the lights finally gave up and shut off. There was a moment of pitch blackness. Pitch blackness. I could hear my heart beating furiously in my ears, as I fought back the urge to panic and willed my eyes to adjust to the dark; the generators will kick in, I told myself, any minute now, the generators will kick in. Moments passed. Still the hallways remained shadowed. Suddenly, there was a buzz, a click, and a dim light came on above each doorway. Power was back, albeit weakly. That meant it was the backups rather than any kind of connection to the actual grid. The shaking lessened, then finally stopped. It took me a moment to recover myself, to pry my fingers from their death grip on the doorway, to step away, to breathe again.

Immediately, my thoughts turned to my charges. I ran down the corridor, ward to ward, checking on my patients. Fortunately, here in paediatrics, most of our charges had been asleep, and though sick enough to be in the hospital, none had a condition that required life assistance from electronic machinery. We moved systematically from child to child, checking drip stands, patting down beds, trying to calm fears, yet we knew the night was not over yet.

Sirens wailed in the distance, I took a moment to glance out of the window. The city below was in chaos. Although the block the hospital sat on was intact, I could see, up the hill, that other districts had not been so lucky. This quake had clearly been high on the Richter scale and some areas had

been ruined. My usual view had gaps, visible gaps, where streets had simply disappeared into the now visible fault lines of the tectonic plates we had made our home on. Power lines sparked where they had come to rest in the streets, amongst crashed cars and water hydrants gushing their lifeblood into giant dark pools. A sudden rumble was the only precursor to a wave of aftershocks, each one a reminder of just how precarious our city's existence was. Through each, we stopped, we sheltered, we saved lives. All through that endless night and long after our official shifts were over, we stayed there, honouring our training, our clinician's oath that we would fight to preserve life.

The next 48 hours passed in a blur. I must have slept, but I have no memory of when or where. I remained at the hospital, moving down to the Emergency Department as waves of injured were ferried in by scores of ambulances; in taxis; on friend's shoulders. We treated them all, saved most, grieved for the others and carried on. Life would continue, the city would be rebuilt. We remained, stoic, stubborn some might say. We might have to face another quake, but that was a battle we were willing to shoulder to live here, in the city of St Francis, in the land of the free, in San Francisco, in our homes.

San Francisco is an American city, built on hillside in Eastern California. It sits on the join of two of the Earth's plates, in an area where they often bump together (a fault line) causing earthquakes.

EXPLANATION FOCUS

1. What is the effect of the repetition of the phrase "we all knew" in the opening paragraph?
2. In the middle of the text, the author has used a lot of long, rambling, fragmented sentences, what are they trying to show about the narrator's state of mind?
3. What is the effect of using short sentences and italics in the sentence: "There was a moment of pitch blackness. Pitch blackness."?
4. Why has the author used a list in this sentence: "We moved systematically from child to child: checking drip stands; patting down beds; trying to calm fears; yet we knew the night was not over yet."?
5. Why is the phrase, "Through each, we stopped, we sheltered, we saved lives," an effective way to describe how the hospital staff got through each aftershock?

VIPERS QUESTIONS

- R** San Francisco is named after Saint Francis. Why did people believe that naming their city after a Saint was a good idea?
- I** What is "the big one"?
- V** What does the author mean by "the foibles of man"?
- I** How does what has happened to the water hydrants echo what is happening across the city?
- I** How does the narrator feel about living in San Francisco and working in the hospital?
- I** What is the significance of the title "Life on the line"?