

BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
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EARTHQUAKE!

Sunday, March 28, 1965. I was in Chile, staying with friends in Santiago. Over breakfast my host suggested going to Viña del Mar for lunch. With his two children, my friends and contemporaries, we packed into the car and off we went to the coast. It was a pleasant drive on a bright, sunny day and we were there in a couple of hours.

The coast road skirts the Pacific. With a hill rising about a hundred yards on one side, and a twenty-foot drop to huge boulders and lapping waves on the other. There was a shoulder on the ocean side of the road, a dirt strip wide enough for vehicles to park. We parked and stepped out of the car. On the other side of the road, scattered across the hillside, were a dozen or so shacks, makeshift structures with tin roofs. They were seafood restaurants, very humble and unpretentious, where the rustic simplicity was a charming backdrop to the grilled fish and other delights, which were said to be sublime. I was looking forward to lunch.

As I closed the car door, with my back to ocean, the earth shuddered under my feet and I heard a distant rumbling. At first, I didn't know what to think of it. I looked at my host and his face went as white as a sheet. He said, "Stand close to the car and hold onto it. Hang onto the car." The earth was now shaking, jerking back and forth, and the rumbling was much louder. I reached up and grabbed the luggage rack on the roof of the car. Then a number of things happened all at once. Women and children raced out of their shacks, screaming at the top of their lungs. Huge swaths of hillside broke free and slid downhill, leaving wide gashes of exposed soil and rock. Shacks



collapsed, walls toppling, roofs sliding off, everything shaking. Somewhere near the top of the hill a water main burst, sending a stream of water high into the air and turning the churning earth to mud. More swaths of hillside broke loose and slid down towards the road. The rumbling was now a deafening roar and it was all around us. The air was throbbing and my skull felt as though it was about to burst.

I looked at the hillside sliding towards me, then turned and looked at the sea. If the landslide kept coming, we would soon be buried in mud or pushed over the edge beyond the road. Any vague hopes I may have had of escaping into the water were dashed by the surging backlash of waves that were building and crashing over the rocks, now glistening sharp and threatening. The earth had not stopped shaking, and now it was bucking and heaving, and cracks opened in the dirt under my feet. Small cracks that opened and closed then opened a little wider, and a little wider, till some were about four or five inches across. I was terrified that the cracks would open wide enough to suck me down into the black, suffocating darkness. I knew that if I went down there I would never come back. I didn't see my life flash before my eyes but I was pretty

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sure I was going to die, and I was scared stiff, hanging onto the car, my body pressed against the back door. I was having difficulty breathing as panic squeezed my throat. I had never been so afraid.

After about a minute the shaking stopped. The rumbling did too. The women stopped screaming and there was a sudden eerie silence. We all held our breath; the only sound was a baby crying. Then the earth shook again, rough and hard, and the air was filled with rumbling and screaming and a fine, choking dust. But not for long. It stopped. And then started again. It did that about five or six times and each time the sheer terror was almost too much to bear. The aftershocks were the cruelest part because they showed that we had no idea how long they might last. But the shaking finally stopped for good.

Slowly, very cautiously, we moved away from the car. The road was crisscrossed with cracks of varying widths. Up ahead some of the shoulder had crumbled away into the sea. The hillside above us looked as though it had been bombed. The shacks were all in ruins but, amazingly, nobody seemed to have been hurt. We were all dazed, moving sluggishly as though in a dream, and it took us a little while to get a grip. Then we piled back into the car and drove on down the road. Around the first bend the way was blocked: the hillside had swept down, buried the road, and tumbled into the sea. We thanked our lucky stars we hadn't parked there.

Retreating from the coast, we found downtown Viña del Mar to be deserted. We settled into the bar at the Hotel O'Higgins on the Plaza Latorre, where I was introduced to the very delicious local drink, the pisco sour. Already emotionally drained and lightheaded from fear, the pisco wafted me off to a place where the terror finally subsided. After the

second round I had trouble standing up, and I slept all the way home.

We didn't know it at the time, but the earthquake measured 7.6 on the Richter scale. It was felt as far away as Mendoza and Buenos Aires, many miles to the east on the other side of the Andes. The epicenter was inland and a little north from Viña del Mar, up in the foothills near the La Calera mining area, where a village downhill from a burst reservoir was entombed under a sea of mud and slag. Hundreds of lives were lost. In Santiago, a terrified woman jumped to her death from a second-floor hospital window. Another victim was trampled to death in a stampede for the exits at the race track where a grandstand collapsed. Temblors in Valparaiso destroyed the public market and demolished hundreds of ramshackle hovels in the slums. Witnesses said "there were huge cracks in the street and the sidewalk. We thought the earth was going to swallow us." Those cracks have yawned beneath my feet in nightmares ever since.

