

OP-ED

Imagining 'the Big One' – the series: 'I never thought it would be this bad'

BY JOHN STARK
For The Bellingham Herald

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Editor's note: *This is episodes 1-27 of a series of fictional account that imagines what life in Whatcom County would be like after a great earthquake. It was funded by the Riverstyx Foundation.*

Episode 1 - Day 1

The great quake

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‘I never thought it would be this bad.’

I couldn't tell you how many times I've heard somebody say that since the big quake finally hit us.

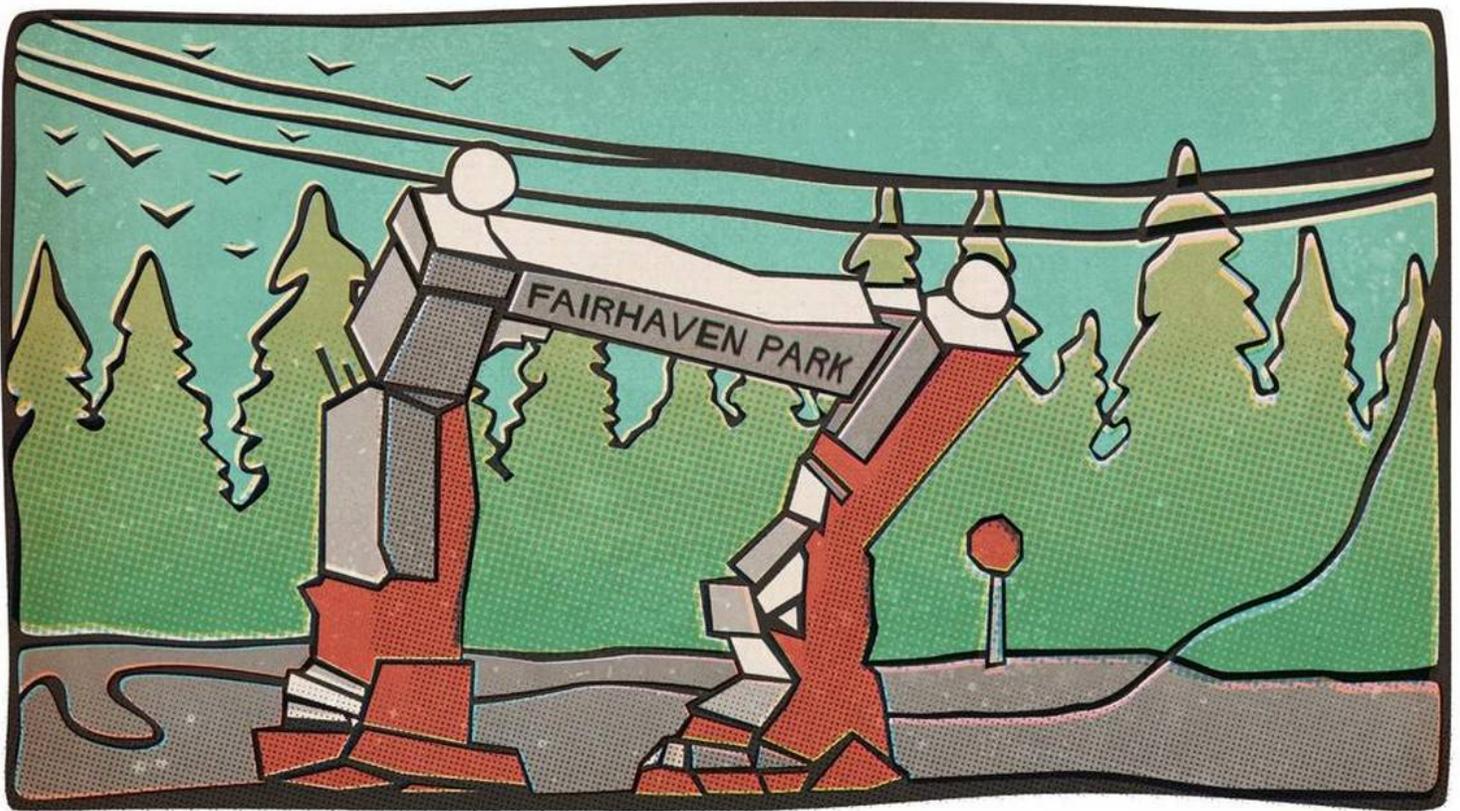
I know I've said it to myself a few thousand times.

We all knew it was coming. The local paper, the Seattle TV stations, NPR – they all ran reports with the same buzzwords: Subduction zone. Magnitude 9. Tsunami. The reports all ended the same way, with experts warning us to be ready. Stockpile food and drinking water, they said. We all shared that stuff on Facebook, and then joked about it.

But I did keep a couple of big plastic jugs of supermarket drinking water in the basement. I had a good flashlight with extra batteries. I stashed away three boxes of Minute Rice and some backpackers' foil pouch dinners from REI.

Then, just last week, I was down in the basement trying to box up all the stuff that needed to be thrown out or given away. I saw a jagged hole in the cardboard box that held my rations. Inside the box: shredded packaging, scattered grains of rice, rat droppings. I hadn't known there were rats in the basement. I had been meaning to buy replacement rations, and a big strong box to put them in.

It was about 10 o'clock Tuesday, a cloudy April morning with a bit of sprinkle. I was walking my shepherd-lab Daisy along a crushed gravel path in Fairhaven Park, just a few steps from the parking lot. I had her leash in one hand and my phone in the other, scrolling through Facebook posts with my thumb, ignoring my surroundings. Then Daisy snapped me out of it, flattening her ears and making a weird growling noise I had never heard before. At that same instant, every seagull along the bay to the west began to shriek. It reminded me of one summer's night years ago, when a loud thunderclap overhead had jolted all the sleeping seabirds awake.



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Then there was a sudden thump and a vibration under my feet. Wow. Earthquake!

It was a single jolt, nothing like the vibration I remembered from 2001, when the Nisqually quake rattled the windows for several seconds.

The seagull racket intensified. Daisy was straining at her leash.

Then the ground lurched sideways. I fell hard and landed on my right side. I dropped the phone; I let go of Daisy's leash without meaning to. She ran away. I managed to get onto my hands and knees as the ground beneath me heaved in slow-motion, watery swells, rolling me first one way and then the other.

Then the ground softened. I felt myself sinking into soil that had seemed dependably solid seconds before.

Why doesn't it stop? When will it stop? Oh my God, it seems to be getting worse.

I could hear horrible creaking, groaning, ripping noises to the north, where my house and my neighbors' houses were being twisted and shaken.

The chain link fence around the park tennis court was rippling and shuddering, making metallic grinds and squeaks. A woman and her daughter had been on the court hitting tennis balls. Now they were on all fours, scrambling in the middle of a gaggle of fluorescent orange balls that rolled and bounced one way, then another, as if alive.

The big Douglas fir trees at the edge of the park had come to life too, lurching, twitching, flailing as the earth heaved beneath them.

The park's asphalt parking lot pulled apart, then came together, grinding and disintegrating. I saw my blue Honda sinking down, front end first into the debris. The whole park seemed to be sliding toward Padden Creek.

Is this how I'm going to die?

No. The shaking tapered off. It stopped. I lay on my stomach gasping. There was one more shudder. Then stillness.

The earth, at least, was still. But there was a lot of noise. All the crows and seagulls were crying. The robins, the jays. Every dog was barking. I hoped one of them was Daisy. I called her name a couple of times, but she was nowhere to be seen.

Mixed in with all that I heard humans. Distant shouts. Screams. People calling their kids, their dogs. And a chorus of car alarms.

Then I heard the first explosion, off to the northwest. A loud, low, massive boom, but not too close. On any other day, it would have been alarming.

Still on my hands and knees, I looked around for the cellphone. It was sitting in the dirt, 10 feet from where I fell. No service, it said. I wasn't surprised. But it still showed the time: 10:05 a.m.

In just a few minutes, everything changed. Forever?

We thought it would be like other disasters – a big November windstorm, maybe, with more broken glass. The power might go out. We might be in the dark for a day or two until the guys in hardhats got around to restring a pole here and there. We would sweep up the shards on the kitchen floor, make plans to earthquake-proof the kitchen cabinets for next time, and everything would go back to normal.

Or maybe it would be as bad as a big hurricane on the Gulf Coast. Some homes would be destroyed. Power would be out for days. National Guardsmen would put up big green tents with kitchens, and we would stand in line for a plate of beans or something. Medics would bandage our wounds, give antibiotics to sick kids. The President would hand out bottles of drinking water. We would be on TV.

It hasn't been like that.

Episode 2 - Day 1

First aid and new friends

As I sat on the wet gravel and dirt where the path had been, staring at a cellphone that could only tell me the time of day, I noticed my hands were shaking. The horror had stopped. The ground was still. I was not dead or bleeding. But my central nervous system was still set to code red – heart pounding, chest heaving in air by the lungful.

I waited until I was sure my 67-year-old legs could keep me vertical. It took me a couple of tries, but I got those legs underneath me and staggered to my feet. My legs were still shaking. I sat back down, taking deep, slow breaths and trying to calm myself as I looked around at the landscape the quake had rearranged.

There was nothing calming to see under the leaden, still-sprinkling sky. The once-stately trees on the bluffs above Padden Creek were all awry. The parking lot was chunks of asphalt. The seismic jackhammer had been thorough. You could have scooped it all up with a front-end loader.

In the middle of that was my little Honda, leaning downward into the mess, its alarm blaring. I pulled the key out of my jeans pocket and pushed the red button for silence. One small bit of control amid the chaos.

Then I looked toward the wreckage of the tennis court, where that woman and her daughter were sitting, hugging and crying a soft, barely audible cry, almost in harmony. I felt envy. I wanted to hug and cry too. I wanted not to be a retired newspaperman whose wife died last year, with grown son and daughter on the other side of the country. But then I felt glad my kids were on the other side of the country.

I wanted to reach out to those crying strangers on the tennis court, to give and get help, but it seemed so impolite to intrude. Then I realized how silly it was to worry about that.



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I got my feet under me again and took a few clumsy steps toward them. I got as far as the mangled chain link fence, hung onto it, and stood there absurdly shy, hoping they would look up to acknowledge me. They didn't.

Then I felt cold water seeping into my shoes. I looked down and saw what looked like a spring bubbling up under my feet. It was the broken waterline that had fed the drinking fountain at courtside.

I stepped away from the water and called out.

“Hello? Are you two OK?”

Mom looked up with a start, eyes wide, mouth open.

“I think so,” she said. She was still breathing hard. So was I. She gulped, gasped and gave her daughter a squeeze. “Are you okay, Melissa? Does anything hurt?”

Melissa, about 10, kept her face buried in her mother's shoulder at first, clinging as hard as she could. Then she looked up, panting too, and looked at her right leg. There was a red scrape along her outer calf. Melissa scowled at her scrape, but she looked like an active kid who survived worse, most summers.

"I've got a first aid kit in my car," I said. "Is your car around here?"

"No," mom said. "We walked down here from Wilson Avenue. I home school Melissa."

"I live over that way too, on Larrabee Street. I drove over here with my dog."

"Where's your dog?" Melissa asked.

"I don't know. She ran away when the earthquake hit."

"Is that what it was?" Melissa asked.

"I guess so," mom said. She saw that her daughter was shivering, and hugged her tighter. Mom was shivering too, and I realized they were both cold in their lightweight black polyester sports gear.

"I've got a blanket in my car too. Let's get it, and put a bandage on that scrape, and head back home."

We made our way the few steps from the courts to the parking lot. I looked over to the spot where the broken pipe had wet my feet, expecting to see a growing pool of water. There wasn't one. The water wasn't flowing.

I worked my way to the back end of my car, stepping over the protruding chunks of asphalt. I pulled out my key again and pushed the button to pop the trunk. Nothing. Keyless entry not working. It actually took me a few seconds to find the old-fashioned keyhole I had never used before. To my relief, the trunk opened, although the lid seemed a tad askew.

I grabbed my old green blanket and handed it to Melissa. I found the first aid kit and handed it to mom.

"I'm Susan," she said as I put the little plastic box in her hand.

"I'm Bill."

Neither one of us smiled.

Susan popped open the plastic box: a roll of gauze, a tube of antiseptic ointment, adhesive bandages and tape, and some alcohol wipes sealed in foil. She ripped one open. Melissa shrank away, the way my kids used to do when they saw me coming at them with one of those things.

She handed the wipe to Melissa, who took it in one hand while she grabbed her mom's hand hard with the other. She clenched her eyes shut, gritted her teeth, and gave her scrape one fast but firm swipe with the alcohol. They had done this before.

"Once more," Susan said. Melissa swiped again and handed the lightly bloodied wipe back to her mom, who applied a layer of ointment and taped some gauze over the scrape.

I pulled a brown nylon duffel bag out of the trunk. Inside was an old hooded black sweatshirt that I handed to Susan and some foil-wrapped granola bars that had been in there for a while.

There was also an empty plastic water bottle, a couple of lightweight nylon jackets and a birding guide. Elsewhere in the trunk was a hank of nylon rope, a roll of paper towels and a fire extinguisher. I put it all in the duffel. I left the birding guide inside the duffel too – useless but comforting. Then I got my compact field glasses and flashlight out of the glove compartment.

"Let's head home," I said.

Melissa had gone back for the tennis gear. She rounded up the stray balls and put them in her own duffel bag, along with the two racquets. Useless, but comforting. She slung the bag over her shoulder and rejoined us.

I wondered when they would use those tennis racquets again.

Episode 3 - Day 1

Fording the creek

Melissa, her black ponytail bobbing, led us back east the way she and her mother had come.

As we descended the remains of the trail downhill towards the creek, we walked on white petals scattered by a couple of wild cherry trees shedding their blossoms. We had to climb over the trunk of an old alder tree, rotten at its core that had shattered and fallen.

After a few more steps, we saw more evidence of the quake's power – unimaginable power we no longer had to imagine.

The bluff above had slipped into the creek, diverting the water across the trail we were trying to follow.

“It doesn’t look like we’re gonna get home without getting our feet wet,” Susan said.

My feet were already wet. I took the first steps into the shallow, muddy water.



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“Wait,” Melissa yelled. She handed me a long stick she’d grabbed along the trail. Smart kid. I poked the stick into the water ahead of me to make sure I wouldn’t step into a hole or a soft spot. Melissa and Susan grabbed sticks too, we got across the creek, scrambling up through the loose dirt, fallen branches and chunks of crumbly sandstone on the other side, working our way toward the bridge that crosses the creek into the trailhead parking lot just south of Old Fairhaven Parkway.

The creek had been at about medium flow – not the torpid trickle of August or the surging November runoff that brings the chum salmon home to spawn. But it seemed to be rising, flowing faster, even though the sky had barely sprinkled all day. I wondered if the quake had widened the

creek's outlet from Lake Padden. Or maybe it was being fed by broken water lines – or sewer lines.

“We should probably hurry,” I said, without mentioning the lake upstream.

Now we were approaching what had been a strip of sidewalk between the parkway and the recently built apartment buildings to the south. Seeing the sidewalk slabs jumbled on the slope was not astonishing at this point.

As we threaded our way among the rocks, concrete chunks and fallen tree branches, we saw some of the apartment dwellers outside. Some were gathered in twos and threes, talking quietly. Others were sobbing, shouting, yelling obscenities. A circle of six people stood holding hands, eyes closed in prayer. Three college-age guys were sitting on the grass drinking cans of Kulshan.

A maintenance guy with a big pipe wrench was working on the gas shutoff valves outside one of the buildings. Car alarms were still blaring here and there. The buildings themselves seemed mostly intact, but many of the windows had shattered and pavement had buckled. A chimney had toppled onto a white minivan, smashing its windshield.

We heard distant sirens, getting closer, but then fading away. A helicopter pounded the air overhead, then another and another, flying south.

In a few more minutes we were at the new bridge that was supposed to get us over the creek crossing. It had been a handsome span with rusted metal rails, but it had slipped off its footing on our side of the creek, and the end of the bridge was below us, in water that was unmistakably getting faster, deeper and muddier by the minute.

“Let's get going,” Susan said. She and Melissa worked their way down the bank that had been newly replanted with small native trees. I followed. The water in the creek looked to be knee-deep now.

“Hold my hand,” Susan said. Melissa grabbed her mom's hand tight with her left hand, keeping her walking stick in her right, with the tennis duffel still slung over her shoulder.

“Let me help,” I said, grabbing the duffel and slinging it onto my shoulder along with the duffel I already carried. I also took the blanket I had given her and wadded it up under my arm.

The three of us headed into the water – first Susan, holding Melissa's hand, then me. I stepped on an invisible, slippery boulder and fell backwards into the water.

I scrambled up and kept moving before they had a chance to think about whether they should turn back to help me. I had let go of the blanket, but I snagged it with my stick and retrieved it before it could make a getaway.

Soon the three of us were on the opposite bank, sitting for a minute. The nylon duffels hadn't taken on too much water, but the blanket was pretty soggy. I kept it, thinking it still might come in handy if we ever got it dry. Melissa's leg bandage was soggy too. Susan stripped it off and applied a new one.

We scrambled up the opposite bank and got to the parkway, which was cracked and buckled. Tough going for passenger cars, or for the WTA bus stopped at a bus shelter and going nowhere for now. The passengers were out on the street wondering what to do.

We crossed the parkway and headed towards Wilson Avenue.

Episode 4 - Day 1

Shattered homes

As we walked along 19th Street toward Wilson Avenue, we saw dozens of people in the streets. The newer houses were still standing, with windows shattered and chimneys toppled. A satellite dish had fallen from somebody's roof and bounced into the street.

But the quake showed no mercy to lovely older homes, the pride of the neighborhood. Some had twisted, their walls torn asunder. Some had slipped right off their foundations and were leaning precariously.

Utility poles were askew, and power lines crisscrossed the street.

Neighbors were going from door to door, checking to make sure everyone was OK. A 50-something woman in a blue ski jacket ran up to us.

"Susan! Melissa! You're OK! I was just at your house, pounding on the door. Your car was parked out front, I thought you were home and when nobody answered I thought something horrible had happened. I was trying to find somebody to help me knock the door down..."

She and Susan had themselves a long bear-hug.



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“Most folks seem to be okay, but we don’t know how many people might be trapped in some of those houses that got wrecked,” Marge said. “A couple of people cut their feet on broken glass. God, what a mess.”

She started to cry, then stifled it.

“We don’t know how to get help,” she said. “None of the phones are working. We’ve got to get organized and see who needs to be rescued...”

Just then we saw a column of gray smoke coming from someplace about two blocks away. In seconds, the smoke turned from gray to black and got a lot bigger.

We could hear people yelling, screaming for help that wasn’t likely to come.

There was a much bigger column of black smoke visible farther away to the north. It wasn’t as big as the volcanic-sized cloud I remembered from the pipeline disaster, but it was still pretty scary.

Marge sat down on the curb and started to cry again.

Then Susan turned back to me.

“That’s our house, right there.”

I followed her and Melissa up to the front door of the old white craftsman. She turned her key in the lock and pushed. Then pushed again, harder. Then both of us pushed together, the door popped open, and we stumbled inside, with Melissa right behind us.

The windows and old plaster walls were cracked and broken everywhere, with some plate-sized slabs of the stuff smashed on the floor. But the place seemed to be hanging together. Maybe she’d had her home fastened to the foundation, like I did.

The floor we were standing on was actually the broken ceiling that had shaken apart. The bookshelves were bare. The books were in heaps on the carpet, in a pool of water from the aquarium that had crashed off its stand. Melissa walked over and picked up two dead goldfish – the fancy kind. Then she dropped them. That got to her. All at once a teardrop was hanging from the end of her nose.

Susan headed for the kitchen. She had to step over the refrigerator lying on its side, blocking the entrance. She went to the sink and turned the tap, needing to confirm what we both knew. There was a dribble of water, then nothing.

“What are we going to do, Mommy?” Melissa asked.

Susan just locked her in a hug and I slipped toward the door. Nothing I could do for them now. I had my own house to worry about. I couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Don’t forget your sweatshirt,” Susan said.

I turned. She pulled it off and handed it to me with a “thanks.”

“Thanks to you two. I’ll probably see you guys around.”

Around what? I thought. Around a cooking fire? Or waiting in line at a Porta Potty? How long would it take before somebody came along to set up a few of those?

“I hope you find your dog,” Melissa said.

“I’m hoping she’ll be at home to greet me,” I said.

She was. Before I got home, in fact, she came running at me and jumped up, paws on my shoulders. It was something I trained her not to do six years ago, when she was half-grown. But now, I was glad to see how much she cared.

She led me to the front door of our little home. I was relieved when my own door opened without too much extra effort. Inside, I smelled two things: whiskey and gas. I saw the shattered bottle of Canadian Club on the floor in front of the shelf where it had been sitting next to a stack of old National Geographics, which were now helping to soak up the liquor.

Leaving the door hanging open for ventilation – needlessly, since most of my windows had broken – I went around to the gas connection at the back of the house. Here was something I was prepared to face: The gas company had sent a little warning notice in one of my gas bills, telling me to be ready to shut off my gas in an emergency. I had a big wrench stashed nearby in a garbage bag, just like the gas company had suggested. I retrieved it and tried to turn the valve. I wasn't really surprised when it wouldn't budge.

“Hold on there, Bill. I got what you need.”

It was Les, the indispensable neighbor – the guy with the pickup truck who actually seemed to enjoy hauling off other peoples' yard waste on a Saturday afternoon. Now he had a wrench and a sledge hammer. He bustled right in and set to wrenching and banging until the valve was closed.

He smiled his familiar smile, but for the first time in his life he was faking it. His smile couldn't hide the fear we both felt. More than fear. Terror.

“Wow,” he said. “I guess they weren't kidding. The big one. I didn't think it would be this bad. There's no power, no gas, no water, no phones. The radio stations are off the air. Some people are starting to lose it. We gotta come up with a plan, get things organized.”

“Yeah,” I said.

His knuckles were skinned and bleeding.

Episode 5 - Day 1

Neighbors gather

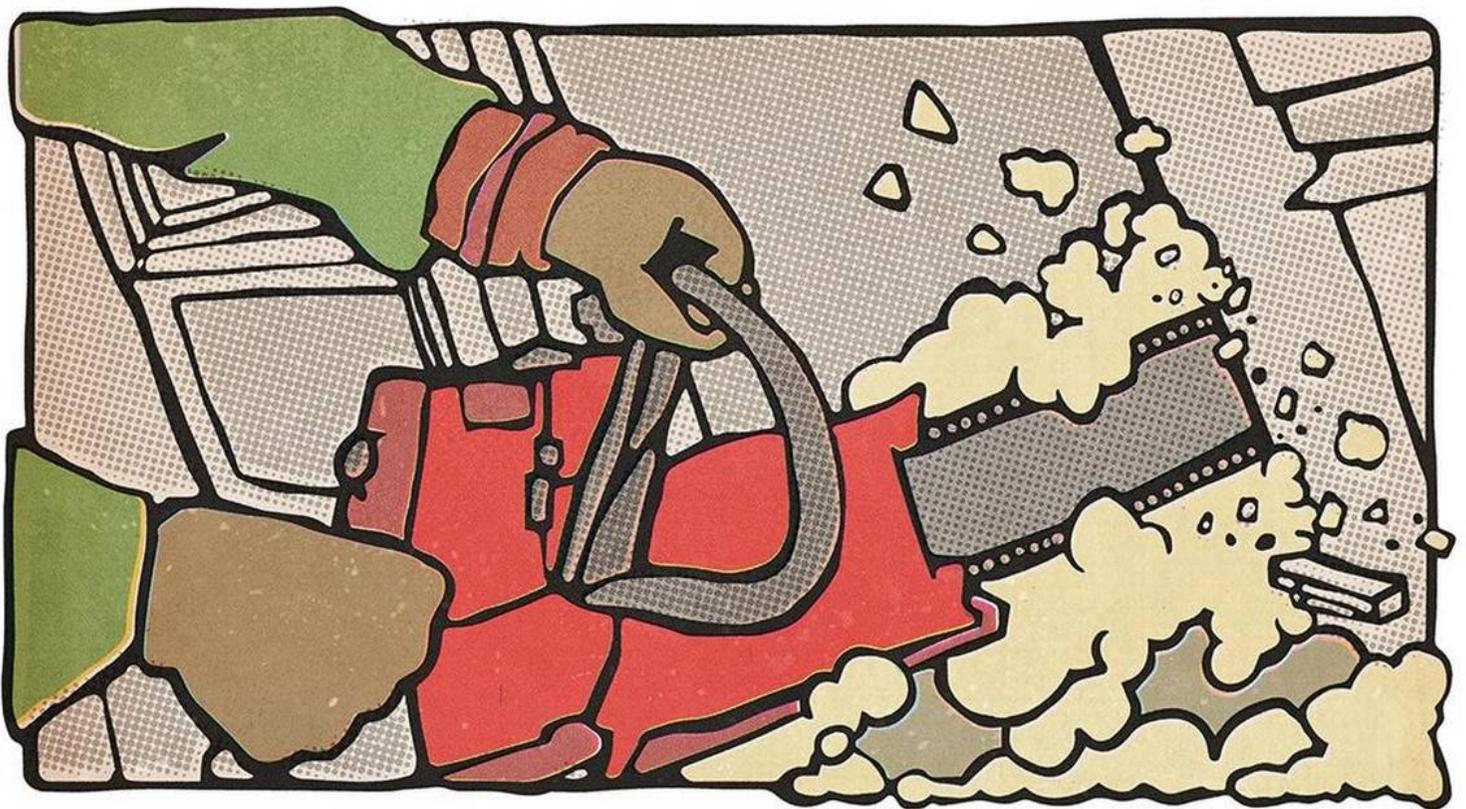
I shut Daisy up in my bedroom where there was no broken glass for her to step on.

After Les helped me shut off the gas to my house, he headed back out to the street, and I followed. He was a take-charge guy, and I needed that. I wanted someone who would tell me what to do.

We walked toward a group of about a dozen people in the street who had made their ways home from work. They were arguing. I only recognized a couple of them.

“A house down the block collapsed, and there are people inside. We’ve got to get in there and try to get them out,” said a 40-something man in a green workman’s coverall.

“Shouldn’t we wait until the fire department gets here?” a gray-haired woman asked.



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“Don’t be an idiot,” snapped a man in a Seahawks cap. “Everybody needs the fire department right now. How long are you willing to wait?”

“I don’t like your attitude,” said a young woman sitting astride a blue mountain bike.

“Who’s got tools we could use?” Les asked, bypassing the tension. “Claw hammers, pry bars, chain saws? Anybody got a truck with a winch?”

“We’ve got all that stuff. We knew this was coming, and some of us did something about it,” said the guy in the Seahawks cap. “I guess a lot of you were too damn busy with peace marches and all that stuff, and now you want...”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” another woman almost shrieked. “What about the kids in the schools? I’ve got a son at Fairhaven, and I’m going down there right now to make sure he’s alright.”

“I’ll go with you,” said the woman with the bike.

“Hold on a minute,” the cap man said. “A lot of people are going to go running to the schools.

Right now we have to take care of this neighborhood. That’s priority one.”

“Obviously you don’t have a child in school,” the Fairhaven mom said, as she and the bike woman started down the street.

She pulled out her car keys.

“I don’t think you’re going to drive there,” Seahawk man said. “The bridge over Padden Creek is likely down.”

“What bridge?” she said.

“He’s right,” bike woman said. “We better walk.”

“OK, good luck,” Les called after them. “Send somebody back here for more help if you need it.”

“Fine,” said the Seahawk man. “Now let’s go.”

I followed the group as they headed to an older home on Wilson Avenue, a modest craftsman rented to students. Its foundation had crumbled, and the peeling gray-painted wooden frame structure had lurched forward and collapsed in the front yard. One side of the mossy gray roof was leaning on the grass. Two other men were already there, in a pickup with a winch on its front bumper and chainsaws in back.

From inside the mess, I heard a man and woman calling for help. Another guy was already hoarse from screaming.

“My leg...my leg...”

Seahawk man shouted to them.

“OK, OK. We’re gonna get you out. How bad are you hurt?”

“Me and Sally are OK, but we’re, like, totally trapped. The walls just closed in around us.”

“Please get us out of here!” a young woman shouted, just short of panic.

“My leg is just squashed,” another anguished male voice sobbed. “It’s pinned down. It hurts! I’m bleeding! Get me to a hospital! Please hurry!”

“OK,” Seahawk man said. “We’re coming for all of you. We’ve got four guys here, and more on the way.”

“Where do we start?” said the man in the coverall. “I’ve never done anything like this before. I’m an exterminator.”

“I drive truck,” Seahawk man said. “All we can do is fire up a chain saw and wing it.”

“Hold on a minute, Joe.” A man in a blue nylon windbreaker got out from behind the wheel of the pickup. “Let’s try the winch. We can fasten the cable to one of these beams and rip this place open fast.”

“Yeah, OK,” Joe the Seahawk man said. “No... wait. We should cut into it a little to find out what we’re up against. If we just start ripping, we might kill somebody.”

“Maybe we should get the jacks from a couple of cars,” I said, hesitantly.

Everybody looked at me.

“Yeah, they might come in handy,” the exterminator said.

“Oh, God! Oh God!” More sobs from the wreckage.

“We’ve got to get going,” Les said.

Joe turned back to the pickup truck.

“OK, Carlos, you’re up. Chainsaw time.”

Carlos got out of the pickup truck and fired up his chainsaw. He started cutting at a section of twisted wooden beam at a corner of the house that seemed to be close to the injured guy. That seemed to make him scream more, but the roar of the saw drowned him out, mostly.

The beam collapsed before the blade was even half way through. It looked rotten.

Once Carlos got through that beam, the whole mess shifted a little. As the saw throttled down, we could hear the screams again, but it sounded like he was losing strength, shouts and screams becoming low moans. Carlos started cutting into a second section of wood, higher up.

Once he was through it, Joe and Les set to work with pry bars and hammers.

It was an old house with lathe-and-plaster walls. Ripping through that stuff was slow work. I helped pull some of the debris out of the way as they worked, needing to do something. After 10 or 15 minutes they had a hole big enough for Les to poke his head in and shine a flashlight.

“I can see him. I can see where his leg is pinned,” Les said. “Hey, man! We’ve almost got you!”

There was no reply.

Episode 6 - Day 1

The rescue

The silence from the young man we had been trying to rescue sent a shudder through us all.

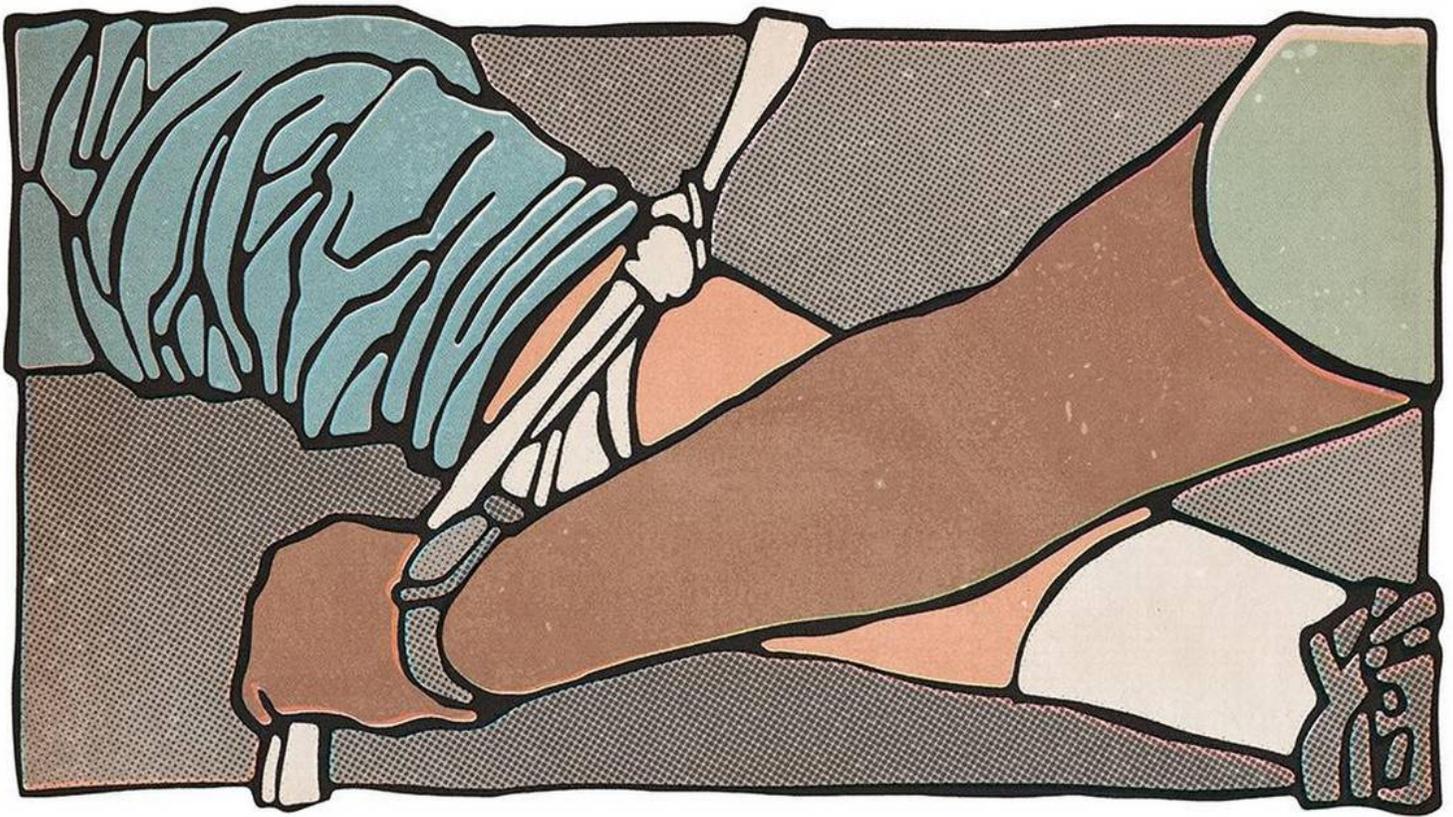
Joe and Les scrambled to widen the hole in the fallen house, prying and banging and flinging pieces of debris behind them.

“Don’t give up, man!” Les shouted. “We’ve almost got you.”

He was shouting to himself as much as anyone.

“Carlos!” Joe barked. “Cut that beam right there.”

Carlos stepped in awkwardly over the tangle of wood and plaster, but he got where he needed to be and revved up, ripping through the old cedar beam atop the young man’s leg.



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Then Joe and Les pulled him out of the debris. White plaster dust and bits of chainsaw-chewed wood clung to his pallid face. His mouth hung open, and his ghastly right leg and blood-soaked jeans dangled as the two men lifted him up. He didn't move.

"Oh my God. He's dead," muttered someone in the knot of a dozen people behind us.

Joe felt his neck for a pulse.

"Not yet," he said. "Almost."

Joe got a piece of rope and put a tourniquet on the young man's leg above the mangled knee and calf.

"Probably too late to do any good," he said softly. "Just lay him down gently and cover him up. Pray, if you want to."

Carlos crossed himself.

"So young," he said softly.

Two women materialized from among the bystanders and took charge of the dying young man.

“If we could get him to the hospital, he might have a chance,” one of the women said. “But that’s not going to happen. All we can do is make him comfortable.”

They laid him on the ground and covered him with a blanket. The second woman knelt beside him and took his hand.

“He’s so cold...” she said.

Then the two people still inside the wreckage started yelling again.

“What’s happening? Is there anybody there? Get us out of here!”

“No worries,” Carlos shouted. “Here we come.”

Joe, Les and Carlos got back at it. I stood close by, helping to clear away debris but mostly trying to stay out of their way.

After a few more minutes, they were able to pull a young man and woman out of the tiny chamber that had formed in the collapsing house – a chamber that had saved them.

They emerged gasping, shaky, collapsing to the ground without even trying to stand. They were bruised, scraped and lucky.

“Thank you, thank you,” the woman said between gasps for breath. The three rescuers were gasping too.

People who had been standing around with their mouths open stepped in to help. The older woman who had wanted to wait for the fire department showed up with wet towels, and she helped the two wipe the mess off their faces.

“I wet them in my rain barrel,” she said, sounding a bit apologetic. “Does anybody have water that’s fit to drink?”

A guy came up with a bottle of store-bought water in each hand.

The two were gulping their water when the young woman noticed their housemate prone on the ground.

“Alex! What happened to him? Is he all right?”

It had started to sprinkle a bit. Droplets of water were collecting on Alex's upturned, ghostly-white face.

The woman who had been holding his hand looked up at us. Her eyes were red.

"He's dead," she said. "He was my next door neighbor. I said hi to him sometimes, but I didn't know his name until now."

She set his hand down gently on his chest. In the movies, somebody would have pulled the blanket over his face at that moment, but nobody made a move to do it.

"We've got to get word to his parents," the young woman said, in a voice that seemed oddly calm. "They live in Aberdeen..."

Joe sighed and said, "There's no way of..." but he didn't bother to complete the thought.

I wondered if Alex's parents were still alive. Maybe not, if they lived anywhere near the river in that hard-luck coastal town. I thought of the tsunami surging up those muddy banks, beyond anything anyone had imagined.

I felt cold and numb, trying to fight off paralysis. All my physical and mental strength had been used up in just a few hours, but I knew the crisis was just beginning. What would we find in the other collapsed homes around us? Maybe nobody was home at mid-afternoon. Maybe our other neighbors were safe. Or maybe they were hurt, dying or dead somewhere else - at the office, at the store, at school.

The faces around me reflected the same shock.

To the north, in the general direction of downtown, a column of black smoke churned skyward.

At any other time, it would have captured everyone's attention.

"What in the hell do we do with his body?" Carlos asked.

As that question hung unanswered in the air, we could hear people yelling, just a few blocks away, in Fairhaven.

"Sounds a little tense," Carlos said.

"Let's go check it out," Joe replied.

Episode 7 - Day 1

High Noon

Joe opened the metal toolbox on the back of the pickup truck and pulled out a pump shotgun, ready to go find out what the yelling in Fairhaven was about.

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked.

“Getting prepared for whatever happens,” Joe said.

“Hold on a minute, Joe,” Carlos said. “Let’s think this through. If we bring guns, we might be the ones who wind up setting off a gunfight. People are pretty jumpy.”

“There aren’t enough cops to go around right now, and we’ve got no way to call them if there were,” Joe said. “The bad guys know that too. We’re going to have to provide the law and order ourselves. Sounds to me like there’s a ruckus at the supermarket, and it’s up to us to maintain law and order.”

“I hear ya, but we’ve already got one dead body on our hands. One too many.” Carlos said. “Let’s leave the artillery in the truck for now. We can get a group of people together and handle whatever’s going down. It’s not World War III.”



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“Not yet,” Joe said. But he put the gun back in the truck box.

Then Joe turned to the gaggle of about two dozen people who had gathered to watch the rescue at the collapsed old house.

“OK, people. Here’s the deal,” he said.

“Whenever there’s a disaster, people run to the store to stock up, which they should have done beforehand, but that’s the way people are. With power out, the store’s gonna have a hard time selling things. People are likely to go crazy. We need to go down there with a group of people to keep everybody in line.”

“Hold on a minute,” I said. “Do you really think people are going to run down to Fairhaven to loot the supermarket?”

“Maybe,” Joe said.

“This is crazy talk!” the older woman said.

“Just a few minutes ago you were saying we should all stay here and take care of our neighbors. Now we’re supposed to form a posse to go looking for trouble?”

“She has a point,” Carlos said.

“Look,” Joe said, addressing the crowd again. “If we stand here scratching our butts for a few more minutes, that store could be stripped bare. I’m going over there to make sure that doesn’t happen. Who’s with me?”

He stared at Carlos.

“I’m coming, if you promise not to get crazy,” Carlos said.

Who else?” Joe asked.

Silence. It seemed absurd, but I couldn’t help thinking about an old Gary Cooper movie, “High Noon,” where nobody wanted to step up and help the town marshal.

“I’m in,” I said.

Joe gave me a hard stare.

“You might be a little old for this kind of thing,” he said.

“What kind of thing are we talking about?” I said. “We’re just going to walk over there and see if anybody needs help, right?”

“Right,” Carlos said, before Joe could answer.

Other men and women stepped up to join us.

“OK,” Carlos said. “Let’s go with you and you…” he pointed people out seemingly at random until there were 12 of us.

One guy had a pistol in a holster on his belt.

“Charlie, let me lock that cannon in the truck box for you while we take care of this,” Carlos said.

Charlie didn’t look pleased about it, but he handed Carlos the gun and holster for safekeeping.

“OK then,” Joe said. “We head north, then split up into two groups. Carlos leads one group west on McKenzie. I’ll lead the second group west on Larrabee. We’re gonna take it real slow, sneak up from two sides, until we get close enough to figure out what the hell’s going on.”

“Who elected you the boss?” somebody growled.

“OK, pal.” Joe said. “Take over.”

No reply.

“Radio check,” Carlos said, pulling a palm-sized two-way radio out of his coat pocket. Joe had one too. They worked.

Things started happening fast. We walked rapidly north three blocks. I was in the group with Carlos.

“You have a military background?” I asked Carlos.

“U.S. Army. First Cav. I helped liberate Kuwait, sort of. I was an MP. Never thought I’d have to liberate Fairhaven... Hey man, what’s your name?”

I told him.

“Carlos Martinez,” he said, shaking my hand.

“Okay,” Carlos said. “We’re gonna walk up nice and slow. We’re not charging in like the cavalry. We don’t want to freak anybody out.”

As we got near the store parking lot, a Bellingham Police SUV rolled into the parking lot with lights flashing.

Episode 8 - Day 1

Liquor and pickles

The police SUV pulled into the parking lot and stopped abruptly. A police sergeant stepped out and gave the situation a quick scan.

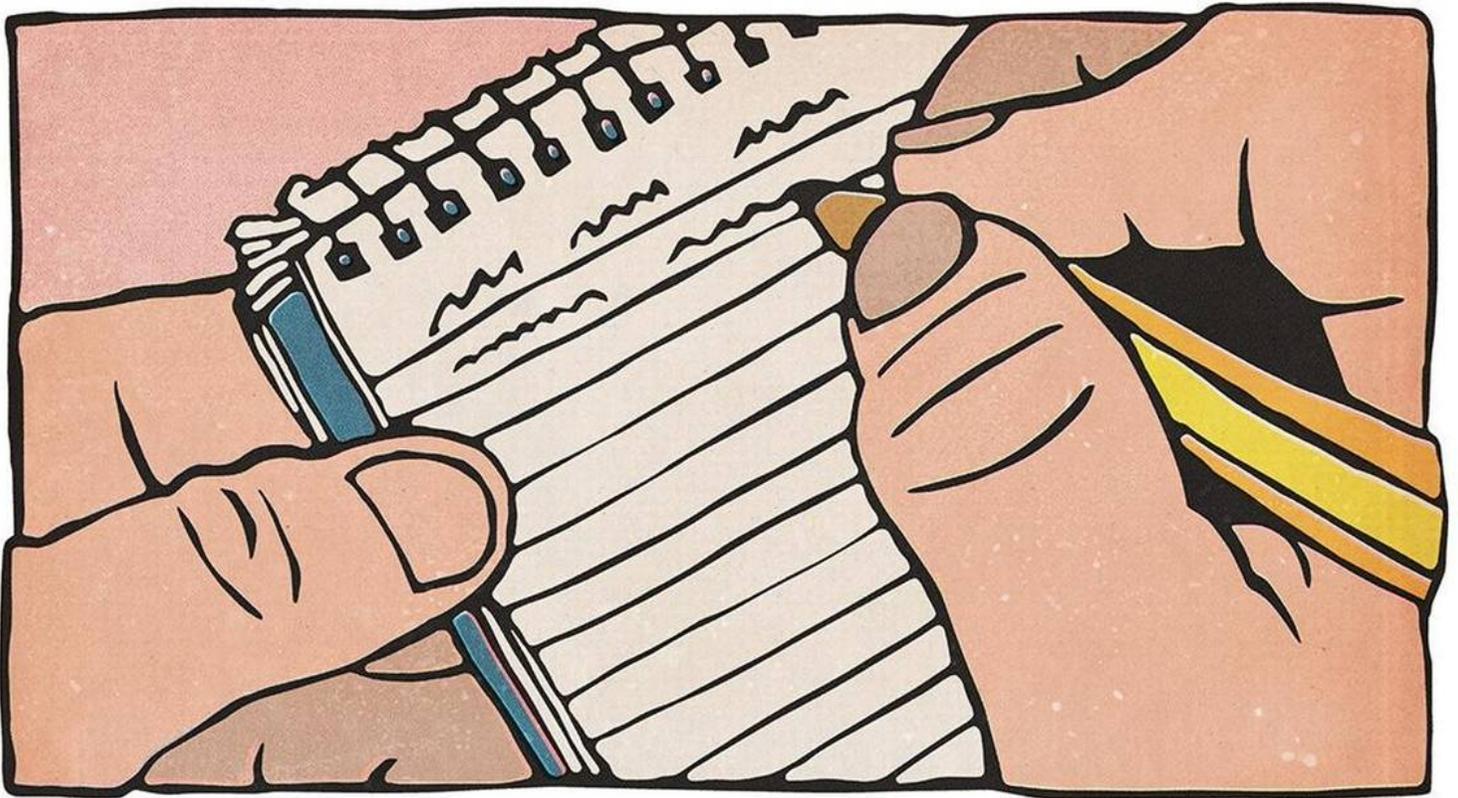
About two dozen people had gathered at the door of the store. Now they were all watching the sergeant.

Carlos smiled.

“Freddie. Good to see ya, woman.”

Sgt. Freddie didn't smile back.

“What are you and your friends up to here, Mr. Martinez?”



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Just then, Joe and his crew came around the other side of the store, and Sgt. Freddie turned slowly to look them over.

“It's OK, Joe,” Carlos said. “We're in good hands. Freddie and my kid sister played basketball together at Bellingham High back in the day. She still gave me a speeding ticket my first day back in town after I got out of the army.”

“Look, ma'am, uh, sergeant,” Joe said. “We heard some people yelling and we figured there might be some trouble over here, looting and whatnot. We have some people from the neighborhood ready to keep the peace. We want to guard the building and pass out the stuff inside to people who need it.”

“I can't authorize that,” the sergeant said.

“But maybe you could just accept it,” I blurted, startling myself. “If you don’t let us get involved, what’s going to happen? It’s going gonna to be dark in a few more hours.”

“Couldn’t you deputize us or something?” Charlie asked.

Sgt. Freddie rolled her eyes. She was a no-nonsense veteran cop, but the strain was still showing. I wondered if she had a family of her own to worry about.

“First of all, everybody needs to chill a little,” Sgt. Freddie said. “We’re all scared, but things won’t get out of control unless people get hysterical.

And you’re right. We do need citizens to assist law enforcement. We’re spread way too thin right now.”

“Tell us what you want us to do,” I said.

She glared at me for a few seconds.

“I just remembered why you look familiar. Go into the store and take statements from everyone inside,” the sergeant said. “Now let’s see if we can get things organized so people can get what they need from the store, for as long as inventory holds out.”

I went inside. The concrete wall on the south side of the supermarket had sagged in the quake, but it didn’t look like it was going to collapse any time soon – unless there was an aftershock.

All around the darkened store, I could see people still sitting on the floor – employees in their green shirts or aprons, and customers with their shopping carts and handbaskets. The floors were littered with cans of vegetables, tubes of toothpaste, cantaloupes, apples, oranges, rolls of paper towels – everything that had been on a shelf was on the floor. Some people looked stunned. Others were sobbing or trying not to. I could smell liquor and pickles – there was a lot of broken glass.

I had no pen or notebook. I walked over to the office supply section and helped myself to a pack of ballpoints and a steno pad.

I went over to a big, curly-haired woman who’d been bagging my groceries for maybe 20 years.

On a normal day she would be laughing and yacking it up with each customer. When I was in a hurry, I tried to avoid her line.

“Hi,” I said. “The police sergeant asked me to help her by getting statements from everybody. Can you tell me what happened?”

It came pouring out.

“Omigod, the whole place shook. Everything was rattling around, everything fell off the shelves. The windows broke, the lights went out, everybody was freaking, screaming. I thought it would never stop. Once it did stop, so many people were hurt, falling on broken glass. We have first-aid kits, but not enough of them. We were grabbing gauze and bandages off the shelves, bandaging people up.”

I realized there were still hurt people inside the store who needed first aid. I went out to enlist some of my neighbors.

Joe, Carlos and the store manager were talking things over with the people outside the store. Sgt. Freddie was there too.

“We haven’t got any power,” the manager said. “I’m afraid we aren’t likely to get power back on any time soon. We can’t make sales without electricity, but I can’t see much point in locking up while the milk and frozen food spoils.”

“Can you sell stuff for cash?” Charlie asked.

“I suppose so, but then what do I do with the cash? And how is that fair to people who don’t happen to be carrying cash today?” the manager asked.

“She’s right,” Carlos said. “Let’s go with IOUs. Get people lined up. We’ll take names and write down purchases, and settle up later. Honor system.”

“Making the best of a bad situation,” Joe added.

“I don’t know what else to do,” the manager said.

The people in the crowd seemed relieved.

“OK,” the manager said to the assembled people. “The store is a mess. Me and my people are going to go through and clean up the broken glass so nobody else gets hurt. Then we’ll escort small groups of people through the store. Please don’t expect to stock up for the week. We’ll hand out frozen foods, meat and dairy first.”

“Who’s got first-aid training?” I shouted.

Several hands went up.

“OK, can we let these people into the store right now?” I asked. “We’ve got some injuries in there.”

“Absolutely,” the manager said. “We’ve got some first aid merchandise in the store. Go ahead and take it.”

Word seemed to travel fast. A long line formed around the store within a few minutes.

Episode 9 - Day 1

View of destruction

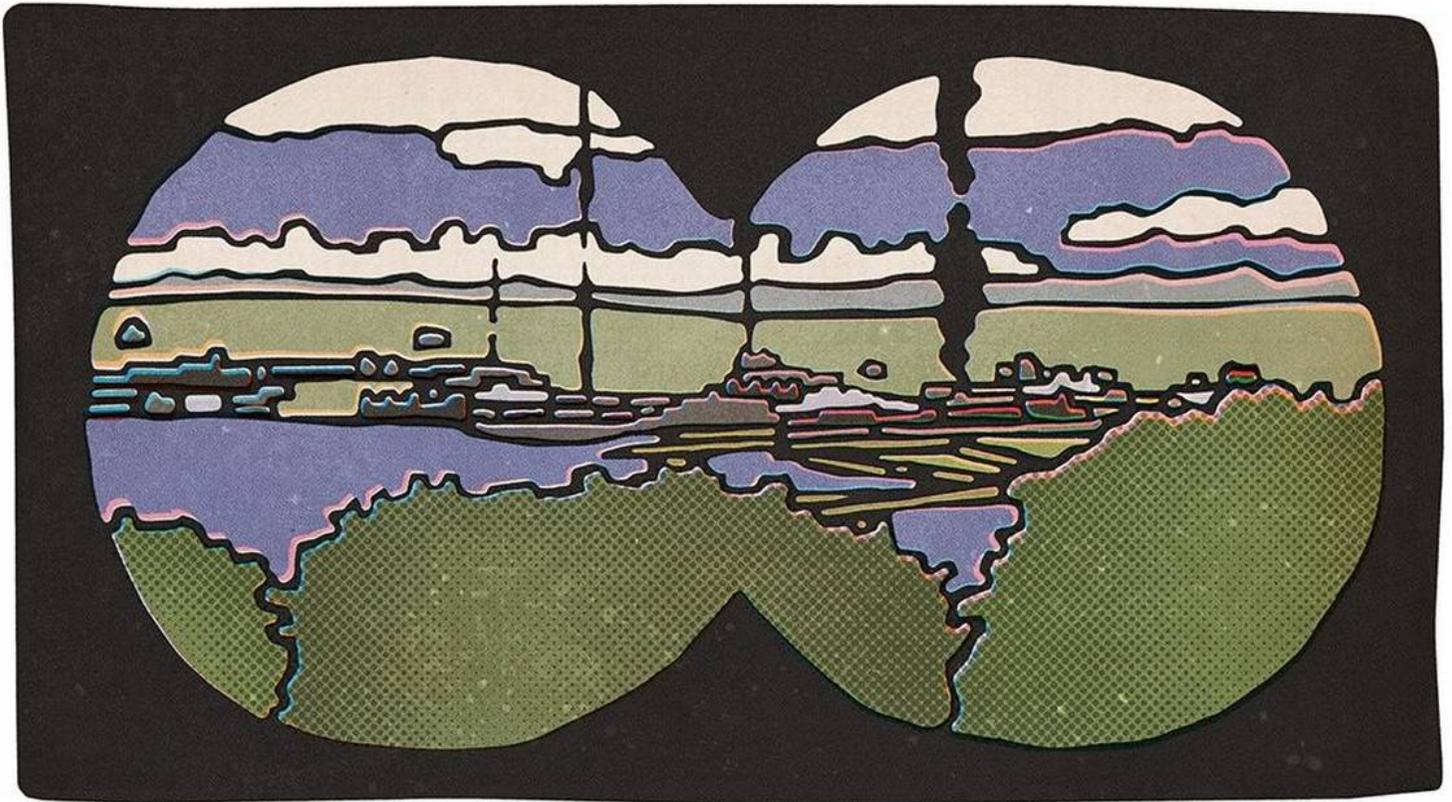
I said so long to Joe and Carlos and went for a walk, to get a better idea what we were up against. I started walking north and east, up the hill, looking for a vantage point over the city, but everywhere my view was blocked by houses and trees. People were out in the streets, picking through rubble or just standing in shock. A few houses had twisted and tumbled. Chimneys were piles of brick.

I got to Highland Drive and followed it until I reached the Western Washington University campus. To my relief, I could see that the retrofitted older buildings as well as the newer structures had not collapsed, although trees were down and streets and sidewalks were twisted.

In another couple of minutes, I stood in the plaza in front of the Performing Arts Center. From this spot I had a sweeping view to the north and west, out over Bellingham Bay and downtown.

I realized I still had my birder’s binoculars in their case on my belt. I used them for a closer look.

The big column of smoke that billowed up in the minutes after the quake had mostly died down, but from the heights I could see orange tongues of flame flickering. It looked like a gas main had ruptured and burst into flames somewhere near the bay, setting buildings ablaze nearby. But by now the buildings were embers, and there was little or no gas flowing through the main – just enough to feed those flickering flames.



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Farther away, inside distant Squalicum Harbor, a new column of black smoke churned up. A tsunami had tossed sailboats and fishing vessels onto floats and breakwaters, and the floating boathouses were torn and twisted. One of those boathouses was on fire. No sign of the fireboat.

I wondered if it had been disabled by the wave.

I could see that logs, trash and other debris had washed all the way onto the railroad tracks at the north end of the bay.

Sandy Point and the Lummi Peninsula had likely gotten the worst of the tsunami, too far away for me to see. But the people out there should have had a few minutes' warning after the quake hit. I hoped they had a chance to get out of harm's way.

To the south, a couple of smaller sailboats were aground on what remained of Boulevard Park.

The prolonged shaking had liquefied the park landfill, originally built as a site for long-gone industries, and much of the park was covered with shallow sea water. The base of the pedestrian stairway that descended to the park over the railroad tracks had crumbled, and the wooden

structure had twisted and sagged atop the wreckage of a freight train that was covered with rocks and a shamble of wooden beams. I could see locomotives lying on their sides, and a tangle of boxcars and flatcars.

Could have been worse, I thought. Could have been oil cars.

But then I saw that most of the debris atop the train was the remains of the apartment and condo buildings built on the edge of the bluff over the park, and the tracks. Had the people inside those buildings been able to flee before their homes crumbled over the cliff?

With my binoculars, I could see rescuers working amid the mess, trying to get people out.

Exhausted as I was, I thought of heading down the hill to help. Then I saw still another column of smoke, coming from my own neighborhood. I decided to head back home. Even though my house was still standing, I didn't feel as though it was much of a refuge from the seismic maelstrom around us. But I had nowhere else to go, and I needed to get back to my dog.

Episode 10 - Day 1

A silent playground

As I wandered back south, not paying attention to where I was, I found my path blocked by a crowd of parents and children. I was at 15th and Douglas, Lowell Elementary School.

Before the quake, school officials had asked parents not to rush to their children's schools after any disaster. The idea was to make it easier for trained school staff and emergency responders to handle the initial crisis.

I figured parents would fall into two groups: those who never got the message, and those who would ignore it. I'm a person who tends to respect those in authority, but if my kids had been in school at the time, I would have gone to them.

Now there were surprisingly few parents milling around. Some parents probably couldn't get to the school, no matter how much they wanted to.

The 103-year-old red brick building had held up surprisingly well, thanks to its 2008 seismic upgrades. That cost millions, but it was money well-spent. Before that upgrade, a firefighter friend of mine had told me he dreaded the thought of having to dig through the rubble there someday.

Teachers had the kids in an orderly group on the asphalt playground. Some of them were already clutching parents, some standing or sitting alone. There was none of the poking and pushing and joshing around that would have been normal for a group of kids. They had been stunned into silence.



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Teachers with clipboards were checking off names as they released students to parents or their stand-ins. I didn't see anyone badly hurt, but I heard crying – the soft kind of crying from kids who had been crying awhile. I saw paramedics for the first time – two of them, bandaging a few knees and elbows but mostly just helping people feel as though everything was going to be OK. I saw no ambulance. They must have walked over from the fire station.

Then I saw Judy, a former neighbor who had moved north to a bigger house as her family outgrew their home near me. She was clutching her six-year-old son in one arm and her nine-year-old daughter in the other, sitting on the wet ground, slumped against the chain link fence, her eyes clamped shut, the tears still flowing.

“Judy? Can I help in any way? Anything....”

It startled her. But she recognized me. She had been in the library as a parent volunteer when the quake hit.

“Oh Bill, I don’t know. What are we supposed to do now? It was horrible, everything shaking, books dumping off the shelves, computers falling on the floor, file cabinets tipping over, kids screaming. I just stood there. Then Mrs. Johnson started yelling, ‘duck and cover, duck and cover’ and we did. I pulled one little girl over and held her underneath me. I thought it would never stop.”

“Can you leave now? I can at least walk you home.”

“Thanks, but we just live a couple of blocks away. I guess we better get home and see what’s ... “

A teacher with a clipboard interrupted.

“Judy? I see you’re listed as the emergency contact person for Mike and Joey Ruiz. We have no way of reaching their parents right now. Their grandma usually picks them up at school, but she hasn’t shown up yet today.”

“They both work at BP,” Judy said. “God knows when they’ll get back here. I know where their grandma lives. I can take them there.”

“Can you keep them for awhile if Grandma’s not home?”

“Sure.”

“Great. If grandma shows up later, we’ll send her to your house.”

Judy and her husband lived just a few blocks south of the school, on my way home. Before we started walking, I pulled some tissue out of my pocket, and Judy and I wiped tear-stained cheeks and runny noses. The children seemed to find this reassuring.

In a few minutes we were at grandma’s house, but she wasn’t home and her car was gone.

Judy’s own home had weathered the quake, but a couple of homes in the immediate area were twisted out of shape and no longer inhabitable. People were out in the street in small groups, talking, arguing, crying.

“Let’s go inside and have a snack,” she told the kids.

I said goodbye and headed home.

Episode 11 - Day 1

A warm meal

As I worked my way back to my south side neighborhood, the stress and fatigue hit hard. If I had focused on the fact that there would be no safe, warm refuge awaiting me at the end of my walk, I might have panicked. But I was too tired to panic.

I walked as fast as I could, but I had to stop to rest my old legs every time I passed a place to sit. I made it back to Larrabee Street somehow, but the rest of the daylight hours were a blur.

A house in the next block was on fire. I watched the flames roaring out of upstairs windows, then out through holes in the roof. Then the whole place fell in with a roar. The paint was blistering on the house next door. The wood started to smoke. Then it burst into flames. Two men with big red fire extinguishers braved the heat and sprayed down the wall. That slowed down the fire just long enough to save the second house. A pumper truck rumbled up, and the crew wet down the second house while also hosing down the flaming rubble of the first.

They emptied the truck in a few minutes, but it was enough. More people showed up with fire extinguishers to stand guard, but the threat of fire was over – for the moment. Before the truck drove away, I saw the firefighters loading a big bundle onto the truck – something wrapped in a blue plastic tarp. It was the body of the young man who had died in the rubble of that rental house. I felt my stomach seize up, and I walked home in a stupor.

Back at my house, I could hear Daisy whining and whimpering inside my bedroom. I swept up broken glass from the kitchen and living room as fast as I could, with my arms and legs feeling like bags of wet sand, and then turned Daisy loose. She was frantic with joy. She had left a puddle on the bedroom floor. Could have been worse. I took her out into the back yard, then went back in to mop up the floor. I could see my breath inside the house – not surprising, with the windows mostly broken.

I had some rolls of black mulching plastic in the basement. I got a hammer and nails and went from window to window, trying to seal out the chilly breeze. I had a few sheets of clear plastic for dust covers on some of my basement junk, and I wanted to tack up some of those too, to let the daylight in.



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Wind gusts were fitful and they made for a struggle with the plastic sheets. I was cursing between my teeth when some guy I didn't even recognize grabbed a flapping edge of the plastic to hold it down while I nailed. With two of us on the job, we got her done in just a few minutes.

He waved and walked off before I could introduce myself.

I filled Daisy's food and water bowls, sharing some of my small stock of bottled water with her.

As I stood in a daze, watching her lapping and gulping, I realized I was weak from hunger as well as fatigue, and I was beginning to shiver from the cold. I wanted and needed warm food, but I could not summon the energy to dig my old camping stove out of the basement. I put on a couple of extra sweaters, and pulled off my wet, muddy jeans. I replaced them with long underwear, a pair of flannel pajamas and nylon rain pants over those, trying to get warm.

It was getting dark inside the house. I had a kerosene lamp, an electric lantern and a good flashlight with extra batteries. I wondered if the power would be back on before all my batteries ran out.

I got out a bag of granola and found some milk in my darkened refrigerator. I was just digging into a bowlful when I heard a knock on the door.

It was the young couple who had been rescued from the collapsed house. Nobody had paid much attention to them after their rescue. They had no friends in the neighborhood, and they had wandered in a daze for hours. Now, as darkness began to fall, they needed help, and they chose my door at random. Daisy surprised me by not barking.

They stood there, shoulder to shoulder, wrapped in the same blanket. The woman spoke first.

“Our house is smashed and we...”

“I know,” I said. “I was there. Come in.”

They had been through a lot, but they were young, and they seemed to have a lot more energy left than I did. I could see their eyes fixated on the box of granola.

“I can barely move,” I said. “If you guys can get down into the basement, you could bring up my camp stove. I’ve got some hamburger in the fridge that we might as well eat before it rots. I’ve got some spaghetti and sauce too.”

I handed them a flashlight and they were down in the basement, fast. I could hear them banging around amid the all the stuff that must have fallen down or tipped over. Then they were back, with the stove and two bottles of propane. And the young man was holding a bottle of Rioja.’

“Your other bottles fell off the shelf and smashed on the floor, but this one landed on top of a life jacket,” he said.

“Do you guys feel up to doing the cooking?” I asked weakly.

In no time they found a pot and a pan. Bottled water was heating up in the pot, and the meat was browning in the pan. The spices from the spice rack were all on the kitchen floor, unbroken. The woman found the oregano and garlic powder, then put the rest of the little jars back in their places.

I found the corkscrew and tried to open the wine, but my hands were shaking. She took over and popped the wine open. My glassware had been reduced to shards, but she found three undamaged coffee mugs and portioned out the red Spanish warmth. An old memory of the great castle of Segovia popped into my mind.

It takes a long time to boil water and cook pasta on a little camp stove, and it occurred to me that this might not be the best use of our meager stock of stove fuel. But I really wanted a plate of hot spaghetti at that moment.

A few more minutes and we were all wolfing it down. Then there was another jolt, another shake, and the spice bottles fell back to the floor.

We gripped our mugs and held onto our plates to keep them on the table.

After what we had experienced, this little event didn't faze us. This time, I got up and stacked the spice bottles on the floor next to the wall.

Clinking our mugs together seemed like the natural thing to do, even if we had only one thing worth celebrating.

"We're alive," I said.

Episode 12 - Day 1

Food and water

We were alive – but for how long? The hot pasta had warmed our insides, but I could see my breath as I sat at the kitchen table with my new acquaintances, draining my mug and wishing there was another bottle of wine.

Their names were Jake and Sally. They were from Bothell. They had been together for two years. They were seniors, majoring in environmental science at Huxley. They had been pulled from the wreckage of their rental home. They had seen their roommate bleed to death on the ground. Just yesterday, their lives revolved around major requirements, GRE, lunches at Viking Union, afternoons in the lab and evenings in the library, relieved by the occasional Saturday night beer blowout. That life had vanished with no warning. They had no way of knowing when or if it would resume, or what would happen to the plan they had sketched out for the rest of their lives.

"Now what?" Jake said.

"You can stay here as long as you need to," I said. "It's just me and Daisy."

At the sound of her name, Daisy stopped licking the paper plates we had set down for her on the floor, but only for a second.

“I have a spare room with a bed. I’ve got extra sleeping bags. I don’t think we’ll freeze to death. I’m more worried about food and water.”



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Sally’s eyes widened.

“If we can hold out a day or two, we’ll be OK, won’t we?,” she asked. “They’ll get the power back on, and the water...”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” I said. “I do have some food in the pantry, but it probably won’t get us through more than a few days, even if we eat light. The supermarket’s probably cleaned out by now.”

I made a quick inventory: Three cans of chicken rice soup, two small cans of baked beans, a half-box of granola, a canister of oatmeal, most of a five-pound bag of flour, a couple more pounds of pasta and jars of sauce. A box of graham crackers. Half a bag of tortilla chips. Stuff in the freezer that was already thawing: a couple of pints of chocolate ice cream, one more pound of hamburger, a bag of green beans, some toaster waffles. Assorted condiments.

“I feel weird about eating your food,” Sally said.

“It’s not charity,” I said. “I’m thinking maybe you two could help me and Daisy get through this. Is there any food in your house that you could bring here?”

“Yeah,” Jake said, without much enthusiasm. “Let’s go over there and see what we can find.”

“I can’t go back there right now,” Sally said.

“I’m exhausted,” I said.

“No problem,” Jake said.

I handed him a couple of grocery bags as he headed out the door. That was too optimistic.

He was back in just a few minutes, scared and shuddering.

“There were like, about 10 sketchy people there, digging around,” he said. “By the time I got there, the food was already gone. They were, like, looting the pots and pans. I saw a guy walking away with the toaster. And our bikes are gone.”

He took a deep breath and sat down on the sofa. Tears were dripping down his cheeks. He bit his lip and sniffled. Sally sat down next to him and started crying too as they embraced.

“I’m going down to Haggen’s to see if there’s anything left,” I said, picking up the shopping bags Jake had dropped.

I felt a little better after my meal. The legs were still shaking, but I didn’t have far to go.

When I got to Haggen’s there was a line out the door. The store manager and a couple of employees were handing out plastic handbaskets to the people waiting.

Joe, Charlie and Carlos were there, informally supervising.

I got in line. I recognized some of the anxious faces of the people waiting for food, but there was no conviviality. Some people whispered. Most were silent. We watched with envy as people ambled out another door with bags full of supplies.

After a half an hour, a flustered woman wearing a pink floral terrycloth bathrobe came out of the store with only a thawing pepperoni pizza.

“How am I supposed to get by with this?” she yelled to no one in particular.

“You don’t want it?” said a guy behind her, who had emerged with nothing. He grabbed her pizza and stalked off with it. She shrieked at him.

The line broke down and people started surging toward the door.

“Hold on everybody!” Carlos shouted. “Everybody chill. No need to panic. We’re going to let you all in. Don’t take more than you need, and don’t freak if you can’t find any food. If you’ve got nothing to eat at home, talk to me and Joe here, tell us where you live, and we’ll do our best to help you.”

Inside, the manager and crew had swept broken glass into piles, which was a good thing.

People were crawling around in the dim glare of the emergency lights in search of whatever they could get, which wasn’t much at this point. Plastic bottles of mustard and ketchup. Tubes of toothpaste. Shampoo and conditioner. Tampons and pads – although there weren’t many of those left. Toilet paper was nowhere to be found.

I had hoped to find a spare bottle of fuel for the stove, but those were probably the first thing to go.

I headed for the baking supplies. The flour and mixes were gone, but I grabbed a couple packs of colorful birthday cake candles, thinking they might come in handy as fire-starters. Then I found three foil packets of yeast. I put them in my pocket, remembering that I had some flour in the cupboard. Then I scored a plastic tube of orange decorator frosting. Empty calories – but calories.

Remembering my guests, I picked up a couple of toothbrushes, too: Muppet-themed. Then I found a quart bottle of bleach. You can use bleach to sterilize water.

Joe and the store manager were handing out first aid supplies to people who needed them. Carlos was bandaging up cuts and scrapes. Nobody wanted to bother taking my IOU at this point.

Joe gave me a look and a nod. I walked over and clapped him on the back.

“What a shitshow,” he said.

Episode 13 - Day 1

Third-World problems

I had trudged about halfway home in the misty twilight gloom when the ground started moving again. The second aftershock was worse.

As soon as the rolling and rumbling started underfoot, I crouched down, not waiting to fall. I could hear screams and shouts. By the time the shaking stopped, everyone was out on the streets again.

It was another aftershock. Predictable, inevitable. No less terrifying. It wasn't as bad as the first big one, but it was bigger than the aftershock we had just a half-hour earlier. If it had happened all by itself, it would have been a big deal. I hoped everything that was going to fall down had done so in the morning. But I knew that was too optimistic.

I heard a woman's voice screaming, about a half a block away.

"I can't take any more of this! I just can't!"

When I got back to my house, Sally and Jake were sitting in the front yard, huddling inside the blanket they were using when they reached my front door. Daisy was still inside, barking and wailing.



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I went in to reassure her. That was a lot easier than reassuring Jake and Sally. They needed something to do, and so did I. I got the garden shovels out from the shed behind the house.

“Let’s dig a latrine,” I said.

“A what?” Sally asked.

“A potty pit.”

“Yeah,” Jake said. “We have to stop going behind the bushes at some point.”

“Time to earn your spaghetti dinner,” I said, in a misplaced attempt at humor, as I handed them the shovels. “I’ve got a plastic tarp we can rig up for privacy.”

We picked out the most private, but none too private, corner of my small back yard, where a big holly tree and the slat fence provided a partial screen. Jake and Sally got down through the top foot and a half of soggy soil and clay pretty quick, but under that the ground was pretty hard.

The three of us stood staring stupidly at the pathetically shallow hole.

“Let’s dig a trench,” Sally said. “We can start using it at one end, and then fill it back up again as we go.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said. “Let me have a turn with that shovel.”

In a few minutes we had a shallow trench from one end of the yard to the other. We strung up some pieces of rope on the fence, and on some bean poles from my garden, and hung the tarp.

It looked pathetic, but it would work as long as the wind didn’t come up.

Then I remembered something I had seen in an impromptu redneck campsite in a national forest at the end of a dirt road – beer cans in the bushes and bullets in the tree stumps. The spot I remembered had also been equipped with a patio chair with a hole cut in the seat. I had a couple of old patio chairs in the basement. We had them ready to go in no time.

At that point, all three of us were beyond exhausted.

“Let’s go inside and see if we can sleep,” I said.

“I’m not ready to go back inside,” Sally said. “When everything started shaking again, I freaked. I just can’t…”

“I get it. I have a tent. It’s going to be cold, but with the sleeping bags, you should be OK.”

“That would be great,” Jake said.

In a few more minutes, the tent was up, and Jake and Sally were huffing and puffing on two inflatable air mattresses. I was glad to see they still held air. I hadn't used them in years.

The sight of that old green tent triggered memories of vanished happy times, camping in the Olympics with my wife and kids. I shook that off as fast as I could.

I went inside and lit the stove. I got the melting chocolate ice cream out of the freezer and scooped and poured it into a pot, while wondering how I was going to clean the other marinara-encrusted pot we had used for dinner. It didn't take long to turn the ice cream into hot chocolate. I got out the graham crackers and squeezed some orange frosting onto them from the tube I had sort of looted from Haggen's.

I tossed Daisy an unfrosted cracker, then took the steaming pot and the crackers out to the yard.

"Bedtime snack," I said. We sat together for a few minutes, sipping the steaming chocolate from our mugs as we ate.

I went back inside and brought them a jug of water, the toothbrushes, and a small travel-size tube of toothpaste from my last visit to the dentist.

"We lucked out when we knocked on your door," Sally said. "Thanks."

"I'm glad for some company," I said. "And for your help. This is going to be the worst camping trip of our lives."

"How much more water do you have?" Jake asked.

"One more jug after this one's gone," I said. "But the creek's just a few blocks away. I have a filter straw and a bottle of bleach. We're not going to die of thirst. We can get down there and haul water tomorrow, and maybe wash out our pots, too."

"All of a sudden we have Third-World problems," Sally said.

Episode 14 - Days 1 and 2

Threat of fire

As I walked back into the house longing for sleep, I could see the glow of backyard campfires scattered around the neighborhood, and hear the distant sound of a strumming guitar and a harmonica. And a bongo drum. Bellingham strong. We were trying to make the best of it, most of us.

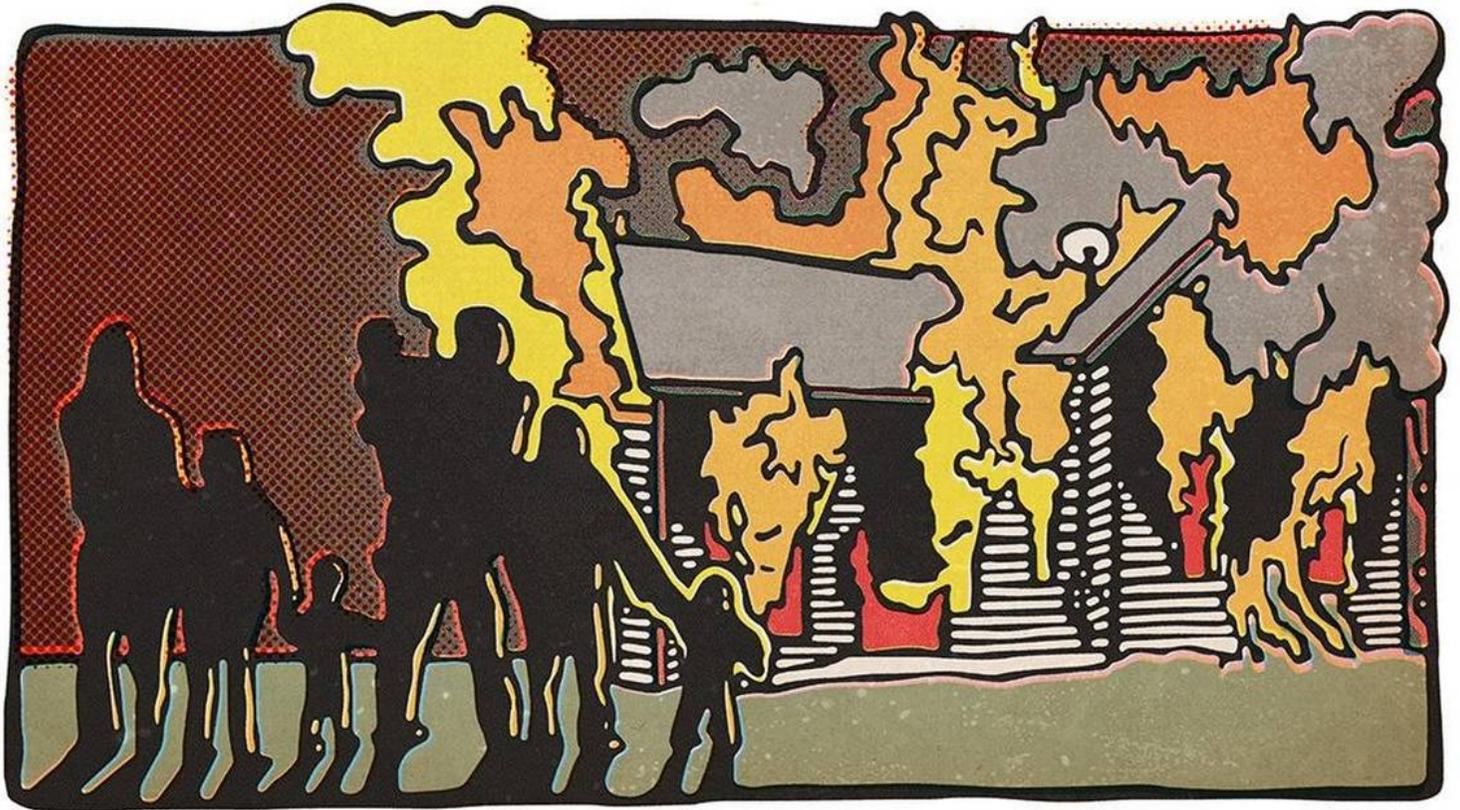
I had another sleeping bag, but I figured my accumulation of old blankets and quilts would do just as well. Daisy was pacing, wondering why I was attending to none of our evening rituals. She followed me into the bedroom and I slapped the bed, encouraging her to hop on up.

She stared for a minute, wondering if it was a trick of some kind, but then she accepted the invitation.

Daisy had been my wife's idea, after the kids moved out, just before we found out about the cancer. I had never been a dog person. After my wife died, I learned to appreciate Daisy's company, although I had never let her sleep with me before. On this night it seemed like a good idea. She seemed to agree.

The bed felt cold, but between the two of us we warmed it up and I fell into oblivion, followed by a dream. My wife and children were trapped in a fallen house. I could hear them pounding on the walls, but I couldn't get them out. I tried to yell for help, but I couldn't. They kept pounding, pounding. Emerging into half-consciousness, I realized somebody was pounding at my door, yelling about a fire. Daisy was out of bed and barking.

I lurched up, afraid it was my house ablaze. It wasn't.



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“Bill!” I heard Les shouting. “The Johnsons’ house is on fire. We need help! We could lose the whole neighborhood!”

I staggered out from under my warm quilt, put on a coat and headed out the door. Daisy tried to follow but I slammed the door on her. Sally and Jake were crawling out of the tent. The house just a half-block away was already a giant bonfire, lighting up the faces of those who stood watching. Others scurried around trying to keep the fire from spreading to the houses next door.

Two men were on the roof of the closest house, brushing off embers as they fell.

No firetrucks were in sight. I heard sirens in the distance, but they were likely headed elsewhere: Other fires lit the sky to the north, the west, the east. My terror at that moment was the worst yet. I would have run, if there had been anywhere to run to.

Then a big black pickup truck rumbled up. It was loaded with blue water barrels. They must have pumped it out of the creek somehow. People with plastic buckets ran up to get them filled.

The first guy threw his bucket of water right at the burning house.

“Don’t be an idiot!” I recognized Joe’s shout.

Pretty soon, the bucket brigade got more or less organized, and men and women were doing their best to wet down the smoking walls of the houses next to the inferno. We had to wet down those people too, their wet clothes shielding them from the heat.

After about a half hour, the burning house collapsed and began to burn itself out, just as we used up the last of the water. I slumped down and took a seat on the running board of the truck.

A red plastic cup half full of hot mint tea materialized under my nose. Two ladies almost old enough to be my mom were dragging a big picnic jugful of the stuff, dispensing it at random.

“Sorry it’s not coffee,” one of them said. “All we had was beans, and we had no way to grind ‘em. We put a lot of honey in it.”

“God bless you both.”

“Look at that poor family,” the other woman said.

Until then I hadn’t noticed the man, woman and boy huddling together at the edge of all the commotion. The Johnsons. I remembered seeing the little boy, a second grader maybe, headed past my house to the school bus stop. Other neighbors gathered around them.

With Sally and Jake camping out, I still had a spare bedroom. But how many more mouths could I feed? I was a little ashamed to be thinking about that while homeless neighbors stood outside in the cold and dark. I was relieved to see them walk off with another young couple from down the street.

I saw Joe trudging off into the dark.

“Joe! Want a cup of tea?”

“What I want is sleep,” he said as he walked over.

“It’s not caffeinated,” one of the tea ladies said as she handed him a cup.

His hands were shaking as he took it and gulped it. “Thanks. That was good.”

“Any idea what happened?” I asked.

“Yeah. They fired up their wood stove, but the chimney was cracked from the quake. Set the house on fire. They’re lucky to be alive.”

I wondered if they felt lucky. I was alive, and I didn’t feel lucky.

Episode 15 - Day 2

On our own

The overcast sky was beginning to glow a bit in the east as I trudged back home. When I got there, Jake and Sally were sitting on the stoop, wrapped in their blanket again.

I wanted to go back to sleep, but I doubted I could.

“You guys hungry?”

They didn’t need to answer. They just followed me inside. I set out some food for Daisy, thankful that I had just bought a big bag of it.

The freezer was a freezer no more. I took out the box of toaster waffles. They had been in there for months, since my grandkids’ last visit the previous fall. They were a sad sight, fragile in their thawed state. I fired up the camp stove and set them down carefully on the little grill. They

smelled good and they got crispy pretty fast, and a little black around the edges. There were six of them – two apiece. I set them on paper plates and got out a tub of margarine and a bottle of syrup.

“If we had coffee, this would be the best breakfast ever,” Jake said.



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I had beans, but no way to grind them. Or did I? I thought of the small mortar and pestle I had used to grind whole spices during a short-lived attempt to master Indian cooking. I rummaged around in my overstuffed kitchen junk drawer and there it was.

It took us a few minutes, but we managed to pulverize enough coffee to fill a filter cone and brew three small mugs. I had to open the last jug of water to make it.

“You know what would be good? A fire pit,” Jake said.

“Yes! We could scrounge wood from the park,” Sally added.

“Or from wrecked houses. That old lumber burns pretty well,” I said. “But first, let’s get some water. We can set up a fire pit, heat up some water, wash ourselves and our dishes.”

I had a small hiker's water pack, a couple of quart water bottles, and two filthy white plastic buckets I used in the garden. I figured if we took turns, we could get two five-gallon buckets from the creek to the house, but it was going to be awkward.

Then, as we headed out the door, I spotted Charlie, one of the wannabe vigilantes I had met the day before. He was wheeling his own two plastic buckets up the street in a Haggen's shopping cart, moving slowly to keep the sloshing to a minimum.

I waved at him.

"Could I borrow that cart when you're done with it?"

"You got it," he said with a grin. "It's not mine."

I followed him to his house to help him unload his water.

"You guys have everything you need?" he asked, as I wheeled the cart away.

"We're getting by," I said. "But we're going to be out of food in a couple days."

"Some people are already up against it," he said. "Come on over here around dinner time. Ralph's got a freezer full of venison that's got to be eaten. We're going to build a fire and start cooking."

"You know, there's lots of venison walking around town."

"There's going to be a lot less of it a week from now," he said.

Sally and Jake joined me in the walk to the creek, just south of the parkway. We couldn't get the shopping cart all the way down to the water, but it would be a pretty short haul from the creek to the gravel path that led to Fairhaven Park.

Half the neighborhood seemed to be at the creek, filling containers. We weren't the only ones with a shopping cart. Some had toy wagons. Kids were splashing in the water, cold as it was. I thought of leaking sewer lines and wondered if they would get sick, and whether they could get medical attention if that happened.

I felt a tap on my arm. It was Susan, the woman I met in the park so long ago. Yesterday.

Her daughter Melissa was at her side.

"You doing okay?" she asked.

“Yeah, thanks to my new friends here.”

Jake and Sally were getting the water buckets settled into our shopping cart.

“How about you?”

“We’re OK,” Susan said. “We moved the VanBurens in with us this morning. They’re in their 80s and they need help. It gives Melissa something to do. Kids are lost without their electronics, you know?”

“They said they would teach me how to play card games,” Melissa said.

At that moment, two guys in orange vests and hard hats came down to the water hole.

“Listen up, people!” one of them shouted. We all did.

“We’ve got a backhoe up there and a truckload of gravel, and we’re going to put in a quick-and-dirty road so people can get pickup trucks in to haul out barrels of water and get it where it needs to go. We’d like you to finish up filling your buckets and then clear the area so we can get to work.”

We did as we were told.

I stepped up to the second hard hat man. His eyes were red-rimmed and weary.

“Any idea what kind of shape the freeway is in?”

“The overpasses are either down or not safe,” he said. “But you can detour around those. The problem is the bridges. We’ve got the Skagit on the south and the Nooksack on the north. We spent half the night rigging up a span over the Nooksack, good enough to get some supplies in here if there were any supplies coming south, which there aren’t yet. Canada’s got its own problems. The Skagit’s not going to be so easy. Maybe the military can do something, once they get around to it.”

“Wow. With all there is to do, why are you even here?”

“Well, people need water. Not everybody can lug a bucket up and down the street. And we want the fire trucks to be able to draw water here too. Anyhow, we’re almost out of diesel, and we figured we could get this chore done with what little we have.”

“When do you expect to get more fuel?”

“We don’t expect to. We have some satellite phone contact with FEMA, but nobody there can give us an answer about when any help gets to us. We’re on our own for awhile.”

Episode 16 - Day 1

Another hospital run

The next morning, I was awakened by pounding at my door again. This time it was Susan, the woman I had met in Fairhaven Park when the quake hit.

“Fred VanBuren needs to go to the hospital. I don’t know what to do!”

The day before, Susan and her daughter Melissa had taken in the elderly man and his wife Audrey. Now Fred, in his mid-80s, had been awakened by chest pains.

I went to get Carlos, who had been an MP in the Army and had some emergency medical skills.

When we got to Susan’s house, Fred was sitting in a big green easy chair in the dimly-lit room, with his anxious wife on one side of him and young Melissa on the other.

“I’ll probably be OK,” he said, but he didn’t look well.



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Carlos took his pulse. Then he called out on his walkie-talkie.

“We gotta make another hospital run, Ernie.” He gave Ernie the address.

In a minute or two, Ernie was on scene. He was the exterminator guy I met in the hours right after the quake. He'd put the camper top back on the bed of his big rig, and had some padding in place inside. We got Fred and Audrey comfortable in there, and Carlos climbed in to join them.

I climbed into the cab with Ernie and off we went.

“This is my third hospital run already,” Ernie said.

“How's your fuel supply?”

“Not a problem yet. I had 'er topped off the day before the quake hit. I always try to keep a full tank. You never know.”

“It must be chaos at the hospital.”

“Yeah, but it's controlled chaos,” Ernie said. “They really seem to have their shit together. It actually surprised me ... It was bad at first, though. When people saw that the hospital was the only place in town where the lights were still on, they moved toward the light like moths, even if they didn't have anything wrong with them. But that's mostly over with now.”

Here and there, streets had been shaken apart, but Ernie had already figured out a detour. We probably got to the hospital a little faster than normal, because there were no red lights and hardly any traffic.

As we pulled onto Ellis Street headed toward the main entrance, we found ourselves stopped in a line of vehicles.

Emergency room nurses were going up and down the line to find out what was what. We also saw two Bellingham police officers who had arrived on motorcycles.

A young woman in green scrubs climbed into the back of the pickup to examine Fred, after Carlos got out to make room for her.

I could hear her on a two-way radio, calling for assistance. In a few more minutes, another scrub-clad woman jogged up with a gurney, and Fred was strapped in and headed into the hospital. He managed a feeble wave as the woman wheeled him away.

Carlos and I hopped out to help, but she waved us off.

“I’m going to have to ask the rest of you to go to the St. Luke’s education center to wait. We’re using all hospital waiting areas to treat patients. We’ll report to you with information on your patient’s condition as soon as we can. And if you don’t absolutely need to be in the waiting area, please leave.”

We drove Audrey the short distance to the education center. She was shaken, but holding herself together.

“I can wait here with her,” I told Ernie and Carlos.

“We’ll come by to check on you this afternoon,” Carlos said.

Inside, I found Audrey one of the few empty chairs and I settled myself on the floor next to her in the gathering of anxious people. In one corner, a group of people were holding hands in a circle, praying. There was a lot of silent crying, a little sobbing.

A man with a Red Cross armband offered us bowls of chicken soup from the center kitchen. I took one. Audrey didn’t.

She sat quietly for a long time. Then she started talking.

“It’s been 65 years,” she said. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this. I know he hasn’t been well, but he never complains. The way he looked today, I fear the worst. Just yesterday he was playing gin rummy with little Melissa. She figured out he was letting her win, and she got mad at him until he won a couple of hands. I’m going to miss him so...”

“Well, you never know, maybe...” I said, feeling lame.

“You don’t have to bullshit me, sweetheart.”

That shut me up for a minute.

“You should probably have some soup,” I said.

She did. Not long after that, a volunteer chaplain stood before us.

“Are you Mrs. VanBuren?” she asked.

It was over. We sat in silence until Ernie came back to get us.

Episode 17 - Day 1

Can we stay here?

In some ways, the strangest thing of all was the lack of information. We were all used to being saturated in it. Now we were almost in the dark, on our own, cut off. A lot of people had lived like that for hundreds of years, but for us, it made everything that much more terrifying.

What little information we were able to get was the opposite of reassuring.

In the first two days after the quake, the main source of information was satellite radio, which a few people had in their cars. People gathered around those cars listening to news reports from CNN and other news networks. The news was all about the devastation in Seattle and Portland, with secondary focus on coastal towns devastated by the tsunami, from Vancouver Island to northern California. The information seemed sketchy, with wild estimates of casualties and pointless discussion of how this quake would rank among the great disasters in human history.

Local media were getting reports online, but few had power for their cell phones. Nobody wanted to waste the power on social media other than to check in safe. The early texts from The Herald were helpful, but not satisfying. The news was all scary.

The key to sanity was to stay busy, and we didn't lack for things to do. Once we got the water back to the house, we set to work on a firepit.

Jake dug a shallow hole and rimmed it with bricks pried up from my backyard walkway. Sally went out with the shopping cart and came back with scraps of lumber and dead tree branches. I cut the branches into shorter lengths with my pruning saw, filled the pit and set an oven rack on top for a grill.



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I had a half-bottle of charcoal lighter fluid, and we got a blaze going without too much trouble. I set my largest pot over the fire and filled it with creek water. It took awhile, but once the water was steaming, we took turns sponge-bathing behind the plastic tarp.

Afterwards, we were all shivering. We bundled up and sat on folding chairs from the house, waiting for a smaller pot of water to heat up for coffee.

“Let’s cook out here as much as we can,” I said. “We can save the stove fuel for indoors on rainy days.”

“Is it too early for lunch?” Jake asked. “Let’s make some more spaghetti.”

“Maybe we should just have graham crackers for lunch,” Sally said. “We need to stretch what we have.”

“True. But we might as well eat the rest of the hamburger before it spoils,” I said. “Let’s brown it in the pot, put in a can of soup and some pasta, and thawed-out green beans, and call it lunch.”

“That sounds awesome,” Jake said.

As the meat sizzled in the pot, I became aware of a woman in the alley, watching us over the fence. A girl about 12 years old was standing next to her, dirty face streaked with tears.

“That smells good,” the woman said.

We all looked at her. Nobody smiled.

“I saw her and that kid at our house yesterday,” Jake whispered.

Now the woman was crying too, red-eyed and sniffing.

“We haven’t had anything to eat since yesterday,” she said. “We’re living in our truck. We…”

“Did you finish up what you took from my house yesterday?” Jake snapped.

Sally glared at him.

“We have to give them something,” she said softly.

I knew she was right, but part of me didn’t care about what was right. It’s easy to donate to the Food Bank when you have a pantry full of food and a credit card in your wallet, but now, every bite these two strangers might eat was a bite I might not get. Wasn’t I already sharing my food with Jake and Sally?

“We haven’t got much, but we can spare a little,” I said.

I opened the alley gate and invited them in. They sat quietly, waiting to be fed. Once the meal was ready, I ladled five meager portions of chicken soup-pasta-hamburger stew into bowls, and gave everybody half a graham cracker.

“So you said you’re living in your truck?” I asked. “Did your house get wrecked?”

“We had no house,” the woman said. “We were living in a motel on Samish Way but the manager threw us out a week ago.”

She said this as if it were the kind of thing that happens to lots of people.

“When Daddy gets out of jail, he’s going to fix the truck and we’re going to go back to Minnesota,” the girl said.

Nobody reacted.

We finished our bowls in a couple of minutes and sat in silence. I was hoping the woman and her child would thank us and leave, but I doubted they would.

“Can we stay here, just for tonight?” she asked.

Sally and Jake were both looking at me. Sally’s face said yes. Jake’s said hell no.

“The thing is, we don’t have much food,” I said.

“I bet if we ask around, we can get people to share a little with us,” Sally said to me. “Some people probably have extra.. How can I say no when I’m sitting here in your yard, eating your food?”

Jake just rolled his eyes.

“OK,” I said. “I have a spare bedroom. Stay as long as you need to. I have no idea what we’ll be eating in a day or two.”

“Thank you so much!” she said, weeping. “Can I go back to the truck and get a few things?”

“Whatever.”

Jake looked at me, then at Sally, then back at me as mother and daughter walked off.

“So they get the bedroom while we stay in the tent?” he asked.

“What’s wrong with the tent?” Sally asked. “I’m not ready to sleep indoors yet.”

“There’s still the sofa if you want it,” I told Jake.

In a few minutes, the mother and daughter returned carrying plastic shopping bags stuffed with odds and ends of clothing and a dirty gray teddy bear. They also had two ratty green blankets and two small cans of pork and beans.

“We didn’t have a can opener,” she said as she handed the cans to me.

“My favorite brand,” Jake said with a glare.

Sally had already put another pot of water on the fire.

“Maybe you two would like to wash up a little,” she said.

“That would be great,” said the woman.

“Then maybe you could help me find some more firewood. I’m Sally,” she said, extending a hand.

“I’m Darlene and this is April,” the woman said, taking Sally’s hand awkwardly.

“Hi April,” Sally said with a big fake smile. “Is your birthday this month?”

“No,” April said.

It had been one of those no-win situations. If I had sent Darlene and April on their way, I would have hated myself. But I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was also likely to regret letting them move in.

Episode 18 - Day 3

Thinking about food

The afternoon passed quietly. We mostly sat around the fire.

“Help yourself to books and magazines,” I said. I went back into the house to get a book myself – “Undaunted Courage,” by Stephen Ambrose. It’s the story of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Before the quake, I was about halfway through it. It had fascinated me, this tale of a small band of Americans rowing and poling and dragging their boats up the Missouri River into the unknown, enduring hardships unimaginable to modern people, living mostly on what they could kill.

But now, it seemed less compelling.

I wondered if I should go door to door begging for food. I figured that could wait a day.

I boiled a pot of creek water for drinking later.

We said next to nothing. April stayed glued to her mom, arms around her neck as they huddled under one of their old blankets. Sally stared at the fire. Jake kept getting up and pacing around.



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So did Daisy.

I got Daisy's ball and asked April if she would like to play catch with the dog.

She shook her head. Sally and I took turns throwing the ball until Daisy got tired and curled up near the fire.

"I'm going to go get more wood," Jake said.

"We better burn this stuff a lot more slowly," he said as he returned and dropped an armload of scavenged lumber scraps next to the fire. "It's already getting harder to find. Not much left of our old house."

I could hear the distant sound of chainsaws. I wondered if we would get to the point of burning the fence or the furniture. It was a great comfort to have a fire, but Jake was right. Keeping it blazing all day was an extravagance we couldn't afford. We could purify water with bleach if we had to, instead of boiling it. And we had my little filter straw. We could get by with a small fire in the morning to warm ourselves up and make some food, if we had it, with another fire at night. I hoped the overcast, drizzly weather might give way to a day or two of spring sunshine.

Mostly I thought about food.

As the dinner hour approached, I remembered Charlie's invite to the venison roast, and I shared that option with my little commune. The alternative would be to stay at home and dig into our little cache of pasta or oatmeal.

"I'm up for venison," Jake said. Sally looked skeptical, but food was food. Darlene and April followed the three of us as we headed over to Charlie's place. I grabbed a bottle of ketchup and a bottle of barbecue sauce on the way out.

There were already a dozen people in Charlie's little backyard, gathered around a big blaze.

Charlie had a couple of cords of dry alder stacked along his back fence, and he wasn't scrimping on it. He and his pals were tending a big iron pot suspended over the fire, and sections of deer roasted on spits around the edges of the fire.

Ralph, the deerslayer, had a big carving knife. As the big meat chunks sizzled, he turned them around and sliced off cooked servings, slapping them down on paper plates as people stepped up. Charlie ladled on beans from the pot.

"I've had a ten-pound bag of pinto beans simmering since dawn," Charlie said proudly.

The beans tasted like he had added about ten pounds of jalapenos.

"I grew up in Clovis, New Mexico," he said. "That's how my mom used to make her beans. Hope they're not too hot for ya."

I winced, smiled, and complimented his cooking. He seemed so cheerful, in the middle of a disaster zone. I envied that.

I handed him the ketchup and barbecue sauce. He grinned again, grabbed himself a plate of meat and sloshed some ketchup on it.

We stood around eating the venison with our fingers and shoveling beans into our faces as fast as we could manage, using little white plastic teaspoons.

"Be sure and save your spoons," Charlie shouted.

I saw Darlene and April off by themselves, sitting on the ground with their plates on their laps, huddled together. Jake and Sally were in another corner of the yard, having a spirited conversation in hushed voices. It looked like they were arguing.

Charlie, Ralph, Carlos and their pals were having a jolly time, or trying to. They had cans of Bud and one bottle of bourbon that they passed around. Joe was there too, but I didn't see him drinking.

He saw me standing alone and stepped up next to me.

"Fun, huh?" he said with a grimace. "Save your spoons! Save your firewood, ya dumbass."

"Could be worse," was all I could think to say.

"It will be," he said.

At that moment, a man came hobbling up to the back fence yelling. He had a homemade splint on his left foot, and he was leaning on a big stick.

"There's people inside my house!" he shouted. "I'm being robbed!"

Episode 19 - Day 3

Shared cobbler

The man with the bad foot had been at Charlie's for a plate of venison, but he had left a few minutes earlier. When he got home, his door was ajar and he could see a flashlight beam moving around inside.

Joe groaned when he heard that. He went over to talk to Charlie, Ralph and the gang.

They got together with the hobbling man, whose name was Gene, and they headed down the street.

I followed them. So did Sally.

We got to the house just as the intruders were leaving. A man and woman in their 30s. They were carrying two shopping bags full of stuff right out the front door. I didn't recognize them.

The woman saw us first and dropped her bag.



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“Oh God! We’re sorry!”

The man started, then managed a sheepish grin.

“You caught us fair and square. We’ll just leave now, OK?” he said, setting his own bag gently on the ground.

“Just hold it right there,” Joe said.

Sally walked right over and looked into the bags.

“They were looking for food,” she said. “They’re hungry.”

Gene hobbled over to retrieve the bags. He reached inside one of them and pulled out a big can of beef stew and a box of rice noodles.

“Take these and get out of here,” he said.

They disappeared.

“I bet they aren’t the only ones hungry. Maybe we need to get things more organized,” Sally said. “How many people live in this neighborhood? How much food do we have? Who’s hungry? Who has a little food to spare? How long can we hold out with what we have?”

“Makes sense to me,” Gene said.

“OK then,” Joe said to Sally. “Do you wanna take it on? First thing tomorrow, you can go door-to-door and take inventory.”

His tone was mocking, but her answer wasn’t.

“You got it,” she said.

I looked at Gene. He seemed a bit spooked.

“I can spend the night here,” I said. “I can bring my dog. She’ll start barking if anybody tries to break in.”

“That would be great!” Gene said.

“OK,” Joe said. “I’m going to try to get some men to walk the alleys during the night. Maybe even a woman or two,” he said, trying to get a rise out of Sally.

“Try not to creep everyone else out,” she said.

I went back to my house to get Daisy and a toothbrush.

Gene lived in a very small old house that was probably built by a millworker a hundred years ago. When Daisy and I got back there, he was sitting in his tiny kitchen warming himself by a kerosene heater. He had water steaming over a tiny backpacker’s stove.

Gene was a hardcore outdoorsman – kayaking, mountaineering. His walls were decorated with pictures of himself atop peaks in the Andes and Himalayas. I didn’t ask how he made a living.

Maybe he was one of those people who didn’t need to.

He had been inside his storage shed when the quake hit. A kayak fell from its brackets and landed on his foot. He figured he had a broken bone in his foot, but he’d had those before.

Once the water was boiling, he ripped open a foil pouch and stirred in some freeze-dried apple cobbler.

“Time for dessert,” he said. “Might help get the taste of those beans out of your mouth.”

Gene had a big green plastic tub full of freeze-dried backpacker food and energy bars, enough to last him for weeks.

“I guess I’m going to need to share some of this,” he said, with a note of regret.

“You’re a good man to know,” I said, through a mouth full of cobbler.

Episode 20 - Day 3

Taking stock

Daisy and I spent a less-than-restful night on an air mattress in Gene’s little house. Daisy got up and barked a couple of times, but I didn’t see anything suspicious. I didn’t fall into a deep sleep until an hour or so before dawn.

When Gene nudged me awake for some reconstituted eggs, it was about 9 a.m. He gave Daisy some too.

“Sorry there’s no coffee,” he said. “I ran out the day before the quake and I never got to the store.”

“I’ll bring you some,” I said.

When Daisy and I got back to the house, Sally and Darlene were in the kitchen with April.

Darlene was stirring a pot of oatmeal. April was hard at work pulverizing coffee beans in the mortar. For the first time, I saw her smiling.



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Jake was asleep and snoring on the sofa.

“So you guys decided to come indoors, then?” I said.

“I stayed in the tent,” Sally said softly.

A knock at the back door. It was Joe and Carlos.

“Everything OK over here?” Joe asked.

“Come on in, you two. We’re putting some coffee on.”

“We’ve been out all night,” Carlos said as he eased into one of the wooden folding chairs I had pulled up to the kitchen table.

“Any trouble?”

“Not really,” Joe said. “But it wasn’t what you would call calm and quiet either. A few people sneaking around in the dark. They moved along when they saw us coming. But there’s a house a couple of blocks south of here that got broken into. I’m not sure when.”

“The door was busted in, nobody was there. Whoever did it cleared out all the food,” Carlos added. “Maybe it was the owners. I had to break down my door to get into my place...,” he trailed off.

Sally handed him a paper cup of coffee. He slurped at it.

“Who wants oatmeal?” Darlene asked.

“I hate that stuff,” Carlos said. “I’ll take a little. How are you fixed for food, Bill?”

“Not so good. There’s five of us here. We can stretch it out another day or two.”

Jake came in, eyelids still heavy.

“I’ll make more oatmeal,” Darlene said.

Sally appeared not to notice him. I handed him some coffee.

Sally shoveled down her own small scoop of oatmeal and got up from the table, looking at me.

“Let’s get to work,” she said.

I found a legal pad and a couple of pens and we set out across the neighborhood, going door-to-door to find out who needed what, and who had something to share. I dropped off a commuter mug of coffee at Gene’s on the way.

We decided to limit ourselves to the western chunk of Happy Valley, west of 21st Street – about what we thought we could canvass in a day.

Things weren’t as bad as I thought they might be, but they were none too good. Families were banding together, moving in with each other in some cases, sharing cooking fires and camp stoves and hauling water.

The water situation had gotten a bit better: People were filling rain barrels in the creek and hauling them out on pickup trucks, a job made easier by the dirt road improvised a couple of days ago. The rain barrels were set up around the neighborhood for people to share. There were several at the firehouse. The EMTs had a walk-in clinic too.

Food was a lot more spotty. Some people had pantries stocked with canned goods, pasta, rice – they were getting square meals. Other people were already down to peanut butter and crackers, handfuls of cornflakes. Parents with babies were frantic. They were improvising with dish rags and

hand towels as diapers, but some of them needed formula.

We took down their addresses and told them we would do our best to get something to them.

In some blocks, everybody seemed to know everybody else, and they were taking care of each other. In other blocks, people were holed up in their houses, wary and more than a little panicky.

Most people wanted to know what was going to happen next, when help would arrive, when the lights might come back on. We had no information to give them.

A couple of people seemed to think we were looking for people to rob. They slammed their doors in our faces. Not unreasonable, I thought. Why should they trust us?

I was also glad to see a couple of helmeted cops on bikes, roaming the neighborhood. They wanted to know what we were up to. We told them. They checked our IDs and wrote down our names.

“Thanks,” I said. “Can you tell us anything? We’ve been on our own for three days, putting out our own fires, chasing bad guys. When is it going to get better?”

“Wish I knew,” one of the officers said. “We’re up against it same as you are. Things are messed up from Vancouver Island clear down into California. Lots of people need help, and there isn’t enough help for everybody. It could be awhile yet.”

At lunchtime, we dropped in on Gene. He was ready to reconstitute a pouch of dried beef stroganoff, but we just grabbed a couple of energy bars and headed out again. By evening, with a few blocks left to go, we had to stop. Or at least, I did. I had already walked too much.

We went looking for Joe and Les. We found them in Les’ backyard, sitting by the firepit with Les’ wife and teenage son, sipping on cans of Miller. Les reached into a paper grocery sack at his side and pulled out beers for Sally and me.

“We took some food down to the people in the apartments south of the parkway, and they gave us these,” Les said.

The two men had slept most of the day, and now they were ready to go out on patrol again.

“You two learn anything?” Joe asked.

I told him we had a list of people who needed help, and a much shorter list of people who had food to share. Several people had emergency generators, and had kept their freezers running for an extra day or two, but some had already run out of fuel. The rest would be done in a day or two. Joe rubbed his palm over his face.

“This is going to get pretty stressful in a couple more days,” he said.

Just then, we heard a loud, booming horn to the west, booming out again and again.

“What is that?” Sally asked.

“I think it’s the ferry,” I said.

Episode 21 - Day 1

Greatest need

My worn-out legs didn’t want to move, but I had to get down to Fairhaven to see that big blue Alaska ferry come in. Pretty much everybody else in south Bellingham had the same idea.

Some people walked. Others rode bikes or ATVs. Some cars and trucks full of people found their way down there too – some streets were still passable, and the tsunami debris that had covered Harris Avenue at the mouth of Padden Creek had been cleared away: Somebody must have been expecting this.

A crowd of well over a thousand people milled around near the foot of Harris Avenue. We all assumed – correctly, as it turned out – that the ferry would be stuffed full of relief supplies instead of its usual cargo of tourists and southeast Alaskans on shopping sprees.

Up to this point, every Bellingham crowd I had ever experienced had been a festive one. This crowd was anxious and fearful, on the edge of desperation. I could hear small groups of men, women and children, talking about how hungry they were, voicing the hope that a meal, maybe even a hot one, would materialize in the next few minutes.

While the big brick ferry building had suffered some tsunami damage, the dock and ramp remained in working order. But it seemed to take forever for the Columbia to ease up to the ramp and begin the unloading process as the crowd edged closer. People in orange vests formed a cordon to keep us at a distance.

When the first Alaska National Guard truck rolled off, flying U.S. and Alaskan flags on its front fenders, we whooped and yelled. We kept on whooping as that truck and several others rolled past us, followed by flatbeds carrying excavators. A few uniformed soldiers in gray-and-white arctic camo got out to help clear a path onto Harris Avenue, and the convoy turned left and rumbled up the hill without stopping.



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The cheers turned to groans and cries of protest as truck after truck passed us. The troops in the cabs gave us smiles and waves, but nothing else.

Finally, one truck stopped and a lieutenant with a bullhorn got up on the tailgate.

“Thank you for your patience,” he said. Only a few people boomed.

“We will be distributing some supplies here in Bellingham in the next few minutes. This initial convoy is headed toward Seattle, where the need is greatest.”

That triggered a louder burst of boos that he ignored.

“The ports in Seattle and Tacoma were knocked out by the earthquake and tsunami,” he continued. “In the next few days, Bellingham will become a staging area for relief supplies to the region. Barges and military vessels will be offloading here and at the Bellingham shipping terminal. Truck traffic through the city may be heavy at times. We will, of course, also provide what we can to the residents of Bellingham and the surrounding area. We will be distributing emergency rations and bottled water to you once the main convoy has offloaded.”

It took awhile, but finally, four civilian cargo trucks and a news rig from a Juneau television station rolled off the ferry and into the parking lot, along with one military truck.

I went to chat up the news guys. They said they were doing a story on the Alaska relief corps, which included a few guys my age who remembered Alaska’s 1964 megaquake and were especially anxious to pitch in and do what they could.

I recognized a guy getting out of one of the cargo trucks. He was a purse seiner named Bob who split his time between Bellingham and southeast Alaska. I had interviewed him a time or two, back in the day, doing stories about the salmon harvest and moorage rates at the harbor.

I took a couple of steps toward him, and he recognized me.

“Big story, huh?” he said with a grin.

“Too big,” I said. “What’s going on?”

“Well, we figured Bellingham was going to need all the help it could get, so the fishermen got together and filled up these trucks, and here we are.”

“God bless you,” I said. “This is the first help we’ve gotten from anybody, as far as I know.”

“As soon as we’re done here, we’re going to head over to Squilicum to see if anything’s left of our boats,” Bob said. “Based on what I’ve heard, we’re not optimistic.”

A half-dozen soldiers materialized to supervise the distribution. They joined the fishermen handing out cases of bottled water, freeze-dried meals, canned goods, instant rice. There were a few cases of disposable diapers and toilet paper, a couple of portable generators, and some fuel.

Bob’s cheery demeanor faded as he looked at the crowd.

“Four truckloads isn’t gonna be enough,” he said.

Episode 22 - Days 3-5

Power, communications

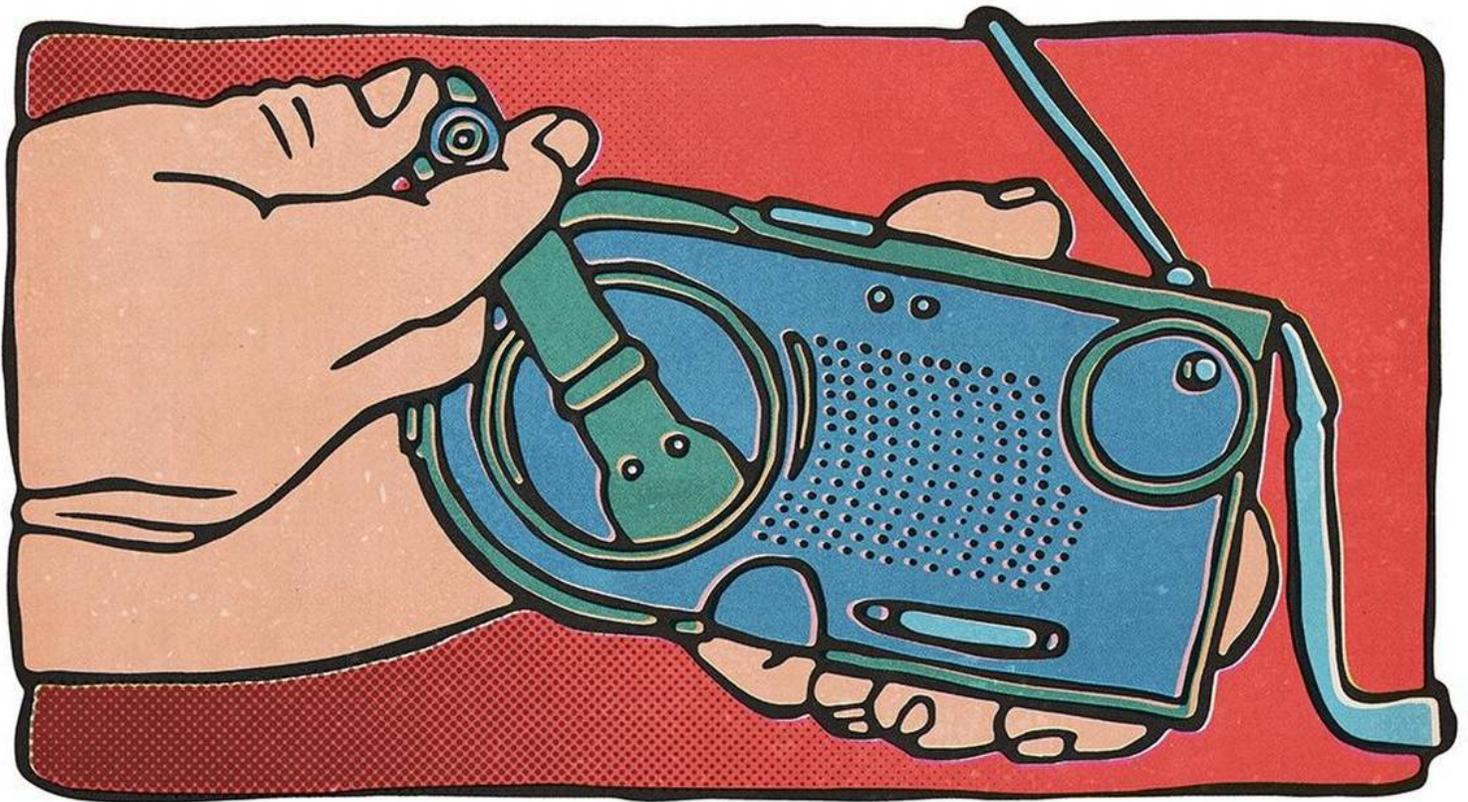
After a day or two, I had stopped reaching for the light switch every time I stepped into a darkened room. After another day or two, I learned to do as much as I could during daylight, and to sit or lie quietly after nightfall, without reading or doing much of anything. I had a good supply of batteries for my flashlights and electric lantern, but I had no idea how long that supply would last, or how long it would need to last.

I had a small, cheap rechargeable flashlight with a solar panel and a hand-crank generator too. Its beam wasn't exactly military grade, but I could do a little reading with it every night to help me get to sleep. Psalms, mostly. But my dog Daisy didn't seem to approve of reading. She would pester me until I turned the light off.

After a few days I had regretted inviting that dog to sleep with me, as I had done on the first chilly night after the quake. I had no way to wash the sheets, and pretty soon it smelled like I was sleeping in a dog bed, which of course I was. But after days with no hot shower, I wasn't exactly a sprig of lavender myself.

"When do you think the power will come back on?" That question came up every time two or three of us were together. It was just another example of life in a city suddenly bereft of the communications we had taken for granted. We couldn't just check into the Puget Sound Energy website to get an estimated time for power restoration.

We did get a bit of internet access at times, giving us information about the extent of the disaster in the big cities. Relief agencies had set up satellite wi-fi hubs in three or four places around town. We couldn't all use them at once, but those who did use them were able to relay word to the rest of us. The Bellingham Herald, the city of Bellingham and FEMA had sites we often turned to, but nobody was prepared to commit to a date for getting our lights back on.



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We got information in old-fashioned ways too: There were a couple of leaflet drops from Homeland Security helicopters. Here too, we weren't getting any promises. But those leaflets did do a pretty good job of explaining the enormity of the disaster: This wasn't like a November windstorm, where the big problem is reconnecting a few hundred, a few thousand homes back to the power system. The whole system had been disrupted. Some generating stations had been knocked offline. The natural gas supply to plants that relied on that fuel had been cut off. Transmission lines that carried the power from the generators to cities had been damaged or destroyed. The laborious task of rebuilding the poles and lines that served our neighborhoods could not even begin until that was done.

The leaflet promised us nothing except weeks of darkness.

At one neighborhood gathering, a guy who was retired from BPA told us not to get our hopes up.

"This is even worse than you think," he said. "Hell, the power companies don't have enough inventory on hand to replace a few dozen poles and insulators after a bad ice storm. They have to get other companies to ship that stuff to them in an emergency. But right now, every utility from

Vancouver Island to northern California is having an emergency. Even if they could get an army of linemen in here tomorrow, they would have nothing to work with. Get used to the dark, folks.”

Back in the neighborhoods, people were wondering whether to siphon gas out of their cars to keep their home generators running, or keep the gas in the car just in case. Neighbors were pooling their fuel resources, sharing their generators. That enabled them to keep their freezers chilled so they could ration their frozen food instead of having to eat it all at once.

In the first few days after the disaster, I had almost forgotten about my own car, stuck in a sinkhole at Fairhaven Park. I didn't need it, and I couldn't see any way to get it out. Les and I went over there one afternoon in hope of siphoning the gas, but somebody had beaten us to it.

Our neighborhood patrol shooed off would-be gas thieves every night, but the patrol couldn't be everywhere, and a lot of fuel got stolen. A couple of people lost their generators the same way. After that, people took turns keeping watch on the generators still operating. We needed them to charge our phones.

We would run down our batteries in never-ending attempts to find service. We weren't looking to surf social media. We just wanted to get messages out to friends and family. But we were overwhelming the limited amount of capacity that had survived the quake. I did manage to get a four-letter text out to my daughter eventually: IMOK.

Episode 23 - Day 1

Wild foods

We sat around a small backyard fire, watching small blobs of yeasty white dough browning in a skillet set atop an oven rack that we were using as a grill atop the brick firepit.

“They always smell so good,” said April, Darlene's 12-year-old daughter.

It had been 10 days since the quake. April had been almost pathologically quiet when she and her mom moved out of their broken-down truck and into our lives two days after the quake. She was getting a little more responsive every day. She enjoyed kneading the dough I made with my dwindling bag of flour and the yeast I had scavenged from Haggan's on the day of the quake.

After making each little batch of flatbread, we saved some dough as a starter for the next batch. It was easily the best thing we had to eat. But this was the last of it.

Post-quake life with me and my two other refugees, college students Jake and Sally, had been an upgrade for Darlene and April. They had been homeless, living in a broken-down truck, waiting for April's dad to get out of jail. I never asked her what he was in for.

Whenever Darlene was outside, she always seemed a little tense, on her guard, looking around.



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All over the neighborhood, people had eaten fairly well at first as they rushed to finish the thawing food in their powerless freezers. The people with portable generators staved off the big defrost for a few days, but their fuel supply inevitably ran out.

People with big freezers shared some of what they couldn't eat themselves as the inevitable big thaw hit. One day, Jake and Sally went out for a walk and came back with a limp pepperoni pizza in a soggy cardboard box.

"What are we going to do with it?" I asked no one in particular.

"Wood-fired pizza coming right up," said Jake. He and Sally added a little more wood to the fire and let it burn down to coals. They carefully slipped the dismal pizza out of its plastic sheath and onto the oven rack. It sat there, a vision of despair, for many minutes. Then the crust started

smoking underneath.

The two college students donned oven mitts and lifted up the grate. Using a scissors, I managed to cut the mess into six servings, including one for our visiting neighbor Gene. He had been generous with his supply of freeze-dried backpacker delicacies in days past.

The pizza was blackened on the bottom, tepid and revolting on top. We ate it all.

Just a few days after the quake, the first relief supplies had trickled in on the ferry. That was good for morale, but you can't eat morale, and it was evident that only token amounts of food and fuel were likely to get to us for the foreseeable future.

We had put ourselves on tight rations once my own little freezer was empty: a couple of small servings of rice, enlivened with a little bit of instant soup powder from Gene's stores.

I remembered seeing an old black-and-white samurai movie, set in a starving village ravaged by bandits. A pot of rice is spilled on the floor, and an old man gets down on his hands and knees to pick up every grain. We were getting to that point.

Lake Padden was even more heavily fished than normal that spring, but nobody ever gave us a fish. I had some fishing tackle in the basement myself, but Lake Padden was a long walk, and I had never had much luck catching fish in better times.

After a few days of rice rations, I started to worry about scurvy – the Vitamin C deficiency that makes your teeth fall out. Then I remembered that you could eat dandelions, although up to that point I had never wanted to. Later on, at a neighborhood meeting, we learned that a lot of our local weeds are good for eating. Until that day, I had not realized how smart I had been to let those weeds run riot in my lawn. I eventually convinced my little refugee camp to include a bit of dandelion and chickweed in their daily diet, just in case.

Every now and then, some kind of strange or wonderful food would appear as if by magic.

One day Ralph, the neighborhood hunter, dropped by to offer us a squirrel. He even skinned and cleaned it for us. We simmered it for an hour or so and it wasn't bad.

Another day, Susan and her daughter Melissa came down the alley to offer us three fresh eggs. The three of us had been in Fairhaven Park when the quake hit, and we had bumped into each other a few times since.

“Marge has four hens,” Susan told me.

“I’m surprised nobody’s stolen them by now.”

“She’s been keeping them in the house,” Susan said. “So I guess these don’t qualify as free-range eggs.”

“I wish I could give you something back, but we’re down to bowls of rice,” I said. “Tell Marge to call me after this is over. I’ll help her clean out her house.”

Then there was a time a guy in a white van parked at the end of the street and set up shop selling rapidly-thawing salmon, halibut and blueberries. Cash only. They were packed in wholesale-sized crates, and he was digging out portions and taking fistfuls of cash according to no kind of system I could see. Nobody cared. Nobody asked him where he got his inventory.

A helmeted bicycle cop spotted the crowd and pedaled over for a closer look. He stopped, stared, contemplated.

“Even if that stuff belongs to you, you are violating many ordinances,” the cop said. “Have a nice day.”

He pedaled off.

Episode 24 - Day 21

Small fires

Three weeks after the quake, we were becoming adjusted to life without the comfort and convenience we had taken for a birthright.

We now had our little strategies for life without power, running water, central heat, and flush toilets. The results weren’t pretty or comfortable, and nobody was happy. But we got by. Most of us.

At my house, our little group of strangers had become a team. Darlene and her daughter April, who had been homeless when the quake hit, seemed especially eager to pitch in on whatever chores needed doing. April learned to help take care of Daisy – playing catch with her, brushing her down, making sure she had a little food and water.

Jake and Sally, the students from the university, had the most stamina for hauling wood and water. It was plain they were no longer a couple, but they got along.

Nobody came up with a good work-around for trash disposal.

With fuel supplies at a minimum all over the region, there wasn't enough to keep a fleet of trucks rumbling down the alley every week to make our garbage disappear.



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Even if the garbage trucks had come, what could they have done with their loads? Bellingham's trash had been leaving town for distant landfills by railroad. The railroad had been shut down by landslides for the first few weeks, and was only now getting up and running. Heavy equipment and other relief essentials were moving in by rail, and shipments of garbage weren't likely to be a priority any time soon.

The good news: We weren't producing anywhere near as much trash. No junk mail, no accumulation of bottles and cans, no boxes and plastic packaging. No t-bone steak bones or banana peels.

The bad news: There was a lot of debris from the quake that had no place to go. We piled it up on street corners and vacant lots, waiting for the day when somebody would come along and make it disappear, like trash had always disappeared before. And we did have some trash to deal with as we emptied our cupboards and ate up the emergency rations that trickled into town.

After three weeks, I had six big 30-gallon trash bags stashed in corners of the house where nobody would trip on them. But some people put their bags outside, where they got quickly ripped up by raccoons, or by the abandoned dogs and cats that roamed the alleyways. There was no animal control to call either.

It was not unusual to see rats scurrying around – but the dogs, coons and cats likely kept their population in check. And we had nowhere near the usual amount of food waste for them to scavenge.

Neighbor Joe told me he and Charlie were on patrol one night when they spotted a guy dumping his garbage down the creek bank just off Old Fairhaven Parkway.

They told him to clean it up. He flipped them off. Charlie pulled his gun. The guy cleaned up his mess and drove off.

“Charlie was way out of line, crazy dumbass,” Joe said.

But Joe, Charlie and the rest of the patrol couldn't be everywhere. Plenty of trash did get tossed and scattered around. We mobilized cleanup squads every few days. There was no way to get rid of what we collected, but we figured one big pile was better than lots of little piles. It was something to do.

Keeping the neighborhoods clean was simpler than keeping ourselves clean. We'd been stepping into hot showers every day, all of our lives. In the first few days after the quake, we burned up a lot of wood and bottled gas for hot water to sponge ourselves down, rinse our pots and pans, and wring out socks and underwear.

“If we keep this up, there won't be a stick of wood to burn anywhere in Bellingham in a week or two,” Jake said.

We learned to make do with cold water. When it was sunny, we would put a black plastic garbage bag over a bucket or two, and the water would get tepid after a few hours.

We devoted a lot of effort to firewood-scavenging. Backyard fences, wooden trellises and patio furniture were consigned to the flames, along with the wood from the homes shattered in the quake. Parks and greenways were not spared. We dragged out fallen trees and cut them up with pruning saws. When those were gone, people cut down the standing dead trees. At first, some people used chain saws. Those who didn't run out of fuel decided to save their limited supply for emergencies, and the sound of axes and handsaws replaced the roar in the woods.

We were degrading the green spaces that had made our city special, deforesting the landscape around us, just like the people in impoverished countries. But like them, we couldn't think of better options.

Also like impoverished people everywhere, we learned to make do with very small fires – just enough to warm us a little, warm up a little water, cook up a bit of something if we had it. When you have to cut wood by hand and haul it home in a bundle on your back, it becomes a precious thing. In the first few days, people gathered around big backyard bonfires, but once people realized they were facing a long haul, they got quite stingy with their wood.

A haze of wood smoke hung over the neighborhood when it wasn't breezy.

“Once this is over, I may never go camping again,” Sally said.

Episode 25 - Day 28

Hardship and uncertainty

Another week had passed. I was strolling down to the Alaska ferry terminal with Darlene and her daughter April for a grocery run.

I could see that the line was already stretching from the front door of the terminal building all the way out to Harris Avenue.

We took our places at the end of that line without complaint, and waited to see what relief workers and volunteers would put in our shopping bags.

Waiting in line for food and other essentials had become part of our routine. The convoys arriving at the terminal by sea were mostly headed south to Seattle and Tacoma, but they also dropped off a few cargo containers for the locals on their way out of town.

We no longer worried about starving to death. We learned to be grateful for canned goods, instant rice, powdered milk, crackers, instant coffee. Fresh fruits and vegetables were a precious memory. So was fresh meat. It had not taken long for the local outdoorsmen to thin out the city's once-thriving population of deer, rabbits and squirrels. The backyard deer roasts were fun while the supply held out.

On this day the line was moving quickly. After the initial post-quake chaos, the relief workers had cobbled together a distribution system that kept the line moving with some semblance of rationing, so that most people were able to get what they needed and nobody hogged too much.



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We had been given punch cards entitling us to our share of what was available.

There wasn't much chitchat as we waited. Morale was low. Each passing day of hardship and uncertainty was taking its toll.

"I miss real food and I miss hot showers," the man in line in front of me said to a woman at his side. "But it's the sitting around that's driving me crazy. I used to complain about having to drive that damn truck 50 hours a week. Now I'm going crazy with nothing to do but stand in line, rinse out socks and underwear in a bucket, lug jugs of water from the fire station, try to keep the kids from killing each other..." his voice trailed off.

"It's the uncertainty that's bumming me out," the woman said. "Before, we knew tomorrow would be like today. Get up, feed the kids, get them on the school bus, go to work. We always knew what would happen next and we had fun every weekend. Now we never know what's going to happen next, and nobody can tell us how long we're going to have to live like this."

Those two pretty much summed up what everybody was feeling.

Sometimes, supplies ran low before we got to the front of the line. This day was better. We trudged back up the hill with pork and beans, powdered milk, soda crackers, canned corn and two chocolate bars.

As we got to my front walk, a man stepped out in front of us from behind a clump of bushes.

“Hey babe,” he said quietly, looking at Darlene.

“Daddy!” April said with a gasp. Darlene gasped too.

“Bobby!”

“Not expecting me, huh? Looks like you’ve got a new thing going. Is this old man the best you could do?”

There was no humor in his voice or in his stare, directed at each of us in turn.

He was gaunt and grimy, clad in an old green army coat and torn blue jeans.

He reached out, grabbed the grocery bag from Darlene’s hand, and looked inside.

“Nice,” he said. He picked out one of the chocolate bars and started to eat it.

“We’ve been living here since the earthquake,” Darlene said, her voice quavering. “Bill’s let us stay here, along with some other people. You could stay here too, if Bill doesn’t mind.”

“Hell no,” Bobby said, to my infinite relief. “I take care of my own damn family. Me and Richie have a camp set up in the woods down by the creek. Get your stuff together and come on.”

Darlene didn’t move.

“Did you hear me, woman?”

Bobby made a grab for April’s hand. Darlene yanked the girl away from him. He pulled back his right arm to take a swing at her. I swung my grocery sack and felt a can of beans thud against the side of his head, but not hard enough. He lunged at me and I was flat on my back on the ground, his hands circling my throat as I tried to push him away.

April shrieked. Darlene shouted for help. I heard someone coming out the front door. Then there was a thud, and Bobby collapsed on top of me as his grip loosened.

“Oh God!” Darlene sobbed.

Gene was standing over me and Bobby with the broken end of his walking stick in his hand. Gene was still hobbling from his busted foot, but he and Darlene managed to roll Bobby off me. Bobby lay on his back, blinking, breathing hard. I did the same. I got up before Bobby did, but my back had taken a wrong turn, and it hurt to move. “Maybe you should take April inside,” I said to Darlene. I didn’t have to suggest it twice. “Now what?” Gene said, balancing on his good foot. “First, let me find you a new stick,” I said.

Episode 26 - Week 5

Friends forever

I was leaning on Gene and he was leaning on me as Bobby rose to a sitting position. He sat there staring at nothing and rubbing his head. Then he got up, seeming to notice us for the first time. By this time Jake and Sally were out on the front porch. Some of the neighbors were coming out, too, after hearing the commotion.

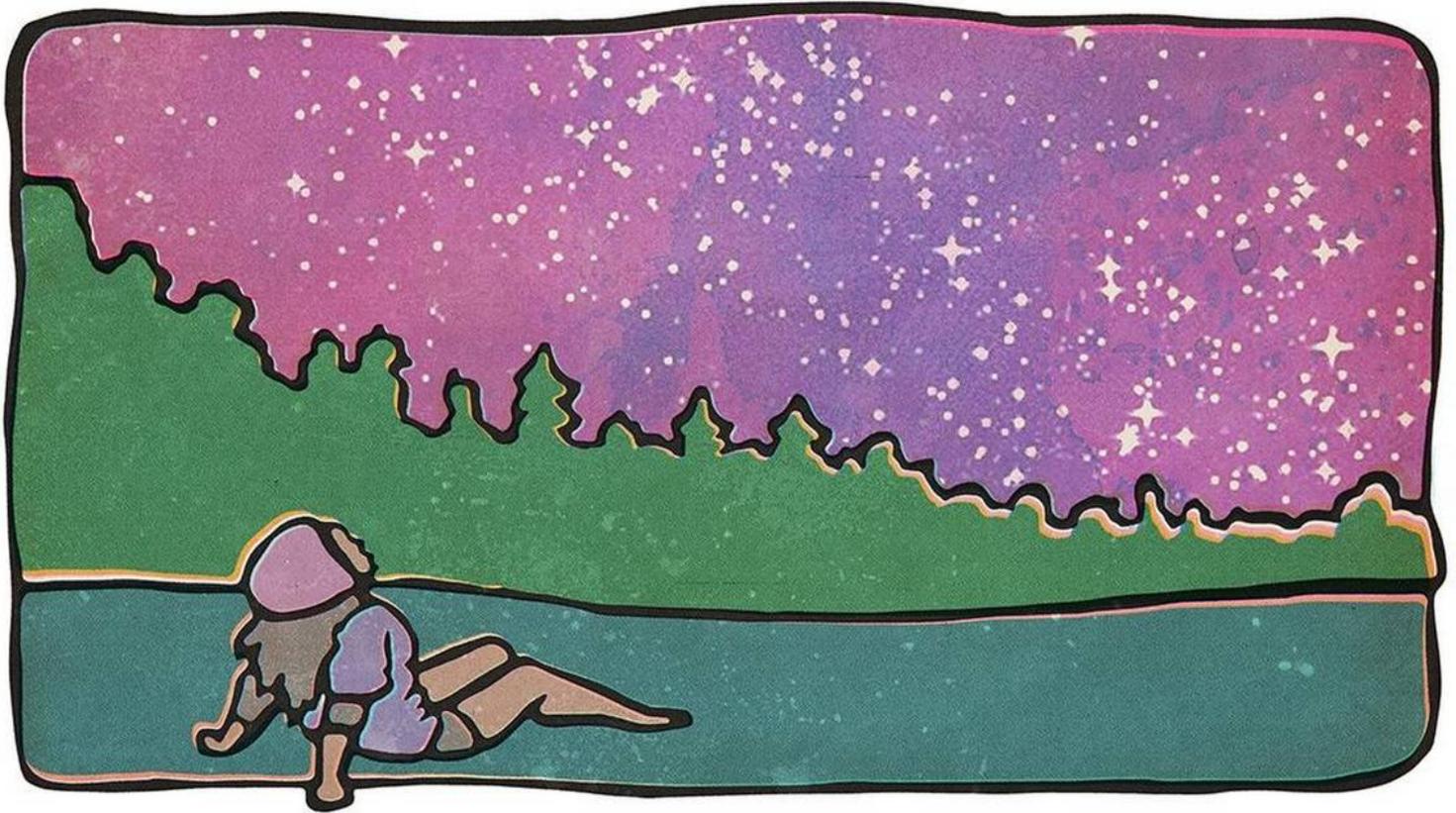
Bobby glared here and there, trying to look scary. Then he managed a sneer and started walking slowly south. Nobody cared to stop him.

Back in the kitchen, April was crying on Darlene’s shoulder. Darlene’s face was wet too. Sally was holding her hand.

“Is Daddy OK?” April asked, between sobs.

“I think so,” I said. “He’s gone.”

“He always comes back,” Darlene said through clenched teeth. “He comes back and messes up our lives. I always let him back in, because I didn’t know what else to do, you know? I didn’t think I had a choice. Living here with you people the last few weeks, nobody fighting, nobody hitting anybody, nobody drunk ... it’s like, maybe this is how things are supposed to be. Maybe this is how it can be for my daughter...”



Mark Brinn/marksbrinn.com for the Riverstyx Foundation - Courtesy to The Bellingham Herald

For the next week, we were always looking over our shoulders for Bobby, but he did us all a favor and never reappeared.

As the days passed, we were inventing a new neighborhood culture that seemed to be a big improvement on the electric-powered isolation we had taken for granted before quake day. We got together to share meals. Afterwards we would sing and talk and even read to one another.

A couple of teachers who lived in the neighborhood organized activities for the kids – everything from story time to soccer games in the street. One of the teachers put me in charge of organizing a kids’ news service. We had no way of printing anything, but the older kids went out two-by-two to chat with people and find out what was going on in the neighborhood. When they met at the end of the week to read their reports, a few dozen neighbors would gather to listen.

By now, we could also listen to the news from local radio stations, which had been knocked off the air by the quake for the first couple of days. Internet service was still not back to normal, and there was no morning paper, but reporters from The Bellingham Herald were reading their reports on the radio.

We got some grim local news: A few homes washed off their foundations in the Sandy Point tsunami. Massive rockslides in the foothills had obliterated some homes, although casualty estimates were sketchy. A few older downtown buildings made with unreinforced brick and masonry had collapsed. There were more than a dozen deaths, and a few people were still unaccounted for. Some older buildings were still standing, but had been too badly damaged for habitation.

Makeshift bridges had been put in place across the Nooksack River, helping to clear the way for a trickle of airlifted people and supplies from the big airport in Abbotsford, B.C. It also made it easier for our usual population of B.C. visitors to find their way home again. Some were stranded here in the days after the quake.

But our main obsession was electric power – the magic key to getting us back to our comfortable lives. We could see utility crews on the job – people from all over the country, called in to rebuild an entire region. But nobody was making any promises about when our lights might come back on.

I was glad I had spent a few bucks on a solar phone charger. It took awhile to get my phone anywhere near a full charge, but it did the job. I was soon exchanging texts with my son in Lafayette, Indiana, and my daughter in Houston.

At first, they both wanted to drop everything and come back to Bellingham to help me. But their lives weren't set up that way. They both had kids and jobs. I told them not to worry, but they had seldom taken my advice and they weren't about to start now. They were still seeing news updates from the Northwest, focusing on the most devastated areas, and they double-teamed me with entreaties to get out of town and come to live with one of them as soon as I could manage it.

Maybe I should have taken their advice, but I didn't. Bellingham was my town. In my own small way, I was helping to keep it alive. If I had evacuated, my conscience would have bothered me.

When Jake and Sally had a chance to leave and get their lives back on track, they took it. It was the sensible thing to do. Other state universities were taking steps to make it easy for WWU students to transfer to complete their educations if they wished. Jake got into the environmental sciences program at Washington State. Sally said she didn't want to go to a big school; she chose Eastern. They had stopped being a couple in the first few days after the quake. Sally, the hardier of the two, had been sleeping by herself in the tent all this time.

“I like to get up in the middle of the night and look up at the Milky Way,” she told me once. “You couldn't do that here, before.”

Jake left first, getting a ride with a friend who was also bound for WSU. Sally gave him a perfunctory hug.

Two days later, it was Sally's turn. Darlene and April left with her. Les and Joe had fixed Darlene's truck. Darlene said she wanted to get as far away from Bellingham and Bobby as possible, and she offered to give Sally a ride to Cheney. Sally said maybe the three of them could share an apartment there for awhile and see what might develop for Darlene.

I hugged all three of them. So did Gene, who had come down to see them off. He was walking without a stick now.

We said we would keep in touch. People always say that when they leave, but in this case, we meant it.

Episode 27 - Epilogue

Power returns

After more than a month of chaos and upheaval, Daisy and I were alone in the house again. It might have been unbearably lonely, but in our post-disaster culture, I was seldom alone. People kept dropping in to pass the time, share a bite of Spam, or even a sip of wine as it began to become available again. When nobody dropped in to see me, I got up and dropped in on somebody myself.

Joe, Carlos and I carried on now like old war buddies. We had nothing in common and disagreed about everything – politics, sports, religion, even the weather. But none of that seemed very important. By mid-May, we were taking turns cranking my little radio between innings of the Mariners games. They were having an OK season, for a team that had to play its entire schedule on the road.

I did miss Gene. A few days after Sally's departure, he told me he was moving to Cheney.

“What a coincidence,” I said with a grin.

He left me a foil pouch of spaghetti and meatballs – the last of his stash.

Not long after that, I was on the front sidewalk looking out at the sunset at the end of a long late spring evening. There was a glare in the sky – a glare I had not seen in weeks. The lights were back on in the big condo buildings in Fairhaven.



Mark Brinn/marksbrinn.com for the Riverstyx Foundation - Courtesy to The Bellingham Herald

Pretty soon everybody was outside looking at the spectacle. A couple of people whooped. In general, though, the reaction was subdued.

It would be several more weeks before our homes would light up too, and it didn't happen all at once. Power would come on for a few seconds or minutes, then shut off again. After three days of that, the power supply became reliable again.

Not long after that, it occurred to me that I could once again listen to jazz on my stereo – something I had done almost constantly in earlier times. I popped in my favorite: Grant Green's "Idle Moments." I lost myself in it for the thousandth time – and then I heard people singing in Les's back yard, a few doors down. I turned off the stereo and headed there.

Things were still a long way from normal. Gasoline remained scarce, and natural gas service was being restored a lot more slowly than electricity. On the radio, we were repeatedly warned not to reopen the gas lines into our homes until our system had been inspected by professionals – and that was going to take awhile. I was glad we were now in the warmer part of the year.

The temporary bridges over the rivers north and south of us had limited capacity. Traffic also had to detour around fallen overpasses on I-5 and other highways. Putting all that back together would take years. A getaway weekend in Seattle or Vancouver was not an option, for the time being.

Money was tight: A lot of people had not been working or getting paychecks. Public assistance payments were at a subsistence level. Smaller restaurants and shops could not survive. I was still getting my Social Security, my little pension check, and a trickle of income from my investments. I felt rich, but I also didn't feel like buying much.

Life in a disaster zone involves a lot of standing in line. Money was no different. If an ATM was working, a line would form. Sometimes the cash would run out before I got to the front of the line.

As the weather warmed, berries and fresh vegetables began to show up at the farmers market, and that was where most of my cash went.

Many people who had family outside the region had left, as had anyone who could find a job elsewhere. Wealthy retirees who had come to the city for the quality of life departed in droves.

Bellingham, which had become gradually more cosmopolitan in the last few decades as the city grew, began to feel like the small, depressed little mill town I remembered from 1980 – except that now there was no mill.

But we hit bottom fairly quickly. New people began to move in. For people who had experienced the devastation of Seattle, Portland, or the coast, Bellingham seemed like an oasis.

And people figured that with the big Cascadia quake out of the way, we would be good for another few centuries – even thought that's not necessarily true.

House prices in town had dropped to levels not seen for 20 years, and bargain-hunters came in and started pushing prices back up again. Every now and then, a smiling real estate guy would rap on my door to ask if I might want to sell.

It was tempting, even if the sales price would likely be half what it might have been a year ago. I could have a decent life with my son or my daughter back east, or I could bounce back and forth, annoying both of them by turns so as not to reveal which one I really liked best.

I wanted to visit them before the summer was over, but I knew I would come back to Bellingham. It was my home, in a way it had never been before.

John Stark retired from The Bellingham Herald in 2014. His fictional account that imagines imagine what life in Whatcom County would be like after a Cascadia great quake is funded by the Riverstyx Foundation and also appears online at bellinghamearthquake.info.

Stay alert: Sign up for Bellingham Herald news alerts by text message at bit.ly/2G8amIy; sign up for Whatcom Emergency Alerts and get the AlertSense My Alerts app for your mobile phone in the Apple Store or from Google Play.

Take action: Family and neighbors are our first line of response in an emergency. Use the map we've printed in the Feb. 25 newspaper, or download it from our website or from our partner agencies. It will assist you in talking to your neighbors and taking note of skills and concerns that will help us all be more resilient and survive in the aftermath of disaster.

We've created the map in four pages so you can print it on a home printer with 8.5 inch-by-11 inch paper. Record your neighborhood resources, your neighbors to the left, your neighbors to the right and consider skills and supplies you can share.

Here are the agencies who have partnered in this effort: Bellingham Public Schools, Bellingham/Whatcom Chamber of Commerce, City of Bellingham, Chuckanut Health Foundation, Lummi Nation, Opportunity Council, PeaceHealth, Ram Construction, Stratum Group, Sustainable Connections, Unity Care NW, Volunteer Mobilization Center, Whatcom County Health Department and Whatcom County Sheriff's Office.



Mark Brinn/marksbrinn.com for the Riverstyx Foundation - Courtesy to The Bellingham Herald

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

What should you do if you're outdoors when the big one hits?

Drop to the ground so you don't get knocked down. Move away from buildings, trees, powerlines or anything else that might fall on you. Then, protect your head by covering it with your hands.

There's more online:

Ready Check from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security at ready.gov/earthquakes.

"Drop, cover and hold on!" from the Southern California Earthquake Center at shakeout.org/california.

Do you have emergency supplies in your car, in case the quake hits when you're way from home?

Ready Check from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security at ready.gov/car has tips and so does Popular Mechanics at popularmechanics.com.

Suggestions include blankets, first aid supplies, drinking water, emergency food, flashlight, extra batteries, extra clothing, rain gear, pet food.

How well do you know your neighborhood?

After a quake, your normal transportation routes may be blocked: bridges, streets, even footpaths may be blocked or disrupted. Creeks could change course. Your phone won't be working to navigate through a detour. If you don't have a paper map of the community, print online maps of the areas you frequent and keep them in your car and emergency kit.

Is your home ready for a big quake?

The Insurance Institute for Business and Home Safety offers tips at disastersafety.org/earthquake.

- Secure hot water heaters, refrigerators and other appliances or furniture that could fall. Hardware stores have earthquake straps. Take steps to keep breakables from falling off shelves.
- Cuts from broken glass are among the most common earthquake-related injuries. When a quake happens at night, people jump out of bed in the dark and cut their feet on broken glass. Keep shoes and flashlights by everyone's bedside.

Have you got tools that would be useful in an emergency?

Pry bars, shovels, chain saws, ladders? Will you be able to get to them after the quake? Do you have heavy gloves to protect your hands while you clear away debris?

Is your home anchored to your foundation?

Get your home bolted to its foundations if it was built before the mid-1970s. Houses that are not bolted to the foundation can move off their foundations during earthquakes. Resources for checking and making repairs are online at earthquakecountry.org.

What kind of public safety issues will we face after a quake?

The biggest public safety concerns will be dangers from debris, downed power lines and fire.

People who have studied disasters say find that looting is rare. Opportunistic burglary actually dropped by a third in cities hit by Hurricane Sandy. Vigilante behavior can increase danger.

Public safety those issues will be manageable if people keep their heads and look out for each other.

What if you are inside a store or other commercial building when the quake hits?

Ready.gov/earthquakes says to move to the end of store aisles. Get down on all fours and cover your head and neck with arms or other protection. Move away from windows and other possible breaking-glass hazards.

What's the scope of danger when the big one hits?

Although nobody can say for sure how bad a great quake – one that measures 9.0 or greater on the Richter scale – will be, it could trigger widespread devastation locally. It could disrupt power, water, sewer and communications systems for months. Emergency relief agencies may not be fully mobilized locally for weeks.

In the Northwest, the death toll could be 10,000 or more, the vast majority from the tsunami expected to strike counties on the Pacific Ocean coastline. But deaths and injuries will also occur in Bellingham and Whatcom County, and there is significant tsunami danger at Sandy Point and the Lummi Peninsula.

Across the region, property damage could total \$70 billion in property damage. Are you ready? The Washington Department of Natural Resources offers a comprehensive look at the danger from a great quake at dnr.wa.gov.

What if your children are in school when the big one hits?

Every school in Bellingham and Whatcom County has an emergency plan. John Gargett, deputy director of the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office Division of Emergency Management, encouraged parents to get a copy, read it and ask questions.

Families are also advised to have their own emergency plans. Do your children know what to do – and not do – if the house starts shaking? Where will your children go if you are not available to get them? Have you updated emergency contact information? Have you talked to your emergency contact people about what you would like them to do in your absence?

School and emergency officials also acknowledge that communications may be limited or non-existent in the immediate aftermath of a really bad quake.

The Bellingham School District emergency procedure information is available online at bellingshamschools.org.

Do you know that aftershocks are near-certain to occur after the big one?

A DNR report on earthquake risks in Washington state says during the first month after the Maule earthquake in 2010, Chile experienced 19 aftershocks larger than magnitude 6.0 (the largest was magnitude 6.9). Japan's great Tohoku earthquake in 2011 was preceded by a magnitude 7.5 foreshock and followed by multiple aftershocks, the largest of which measured magnitude 7.9.

Aftershocks of that magnitude would be major events even by themselves. After a major quake, they could cause collapse of structures weakened in the main quake.

What's in your pantry?

The stocks of food and other essentials at local supermarkets will not be enough to feed us all for more than a day or two. After the quake, it will likely be too late to go to the store, even if the store is up and running.

Until recently, emergency agencies advised everyone to keep a three-day supply of food at home. That's a great start, but it won't be nearly enough after a catastrophic quake. Try to plan on surviving on your own food stash for three weeks, and emphasize canned or instant foods that won't require a lot of fuel to cook. Plan to share with those around you.

The Department of Homeland Security offers sanitation and powerless cooking tips at ready.gov/food. And the Red Cross offers food storage tips online at redcross.org.

The Bellingham Food Bank suggests that as you rotate your emergency food supplies yearly, you donate them to the food bank where they'll be quickly consumed.

Where are you going to go when the plumbing is gone?

With water and sewer lines busted by the quake, basic sanitation will be an immediate concern. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers tips online at .cdc.gov/healthywater.

A trench latrine dug into soil, with a temporary privacy structure (a tarp on a rope), is a likely option. Waste should be covered daily with soil.

How will you heat food and water?

Planning to rely on your wood stove for heat after a quake? That might be a bad idea. A cracked chimney can leak flames that can set your house ablaze. Lighting up your home with candles is also a risk.

Many fires break out after an earthquake. Even if a fire truck gets to your house, there will be no water in the hydrants. Do you have a fire extinguisher? When did you have it recharged? Is one enough? Do you have one in your car?

Talk with your neighbors about fire risk. Everyone plan to put their fire extinguishers out in front of their houses after a quake. Plan on responding immediately to fire yourselves.

The University of Rochester Medical Center offers fire extinguisher information online at urmc.rochester.edu/encyclopedia.

How much water should you store for an emergency?

FEMA recommends one gallon per person per day. That's 84 gallons for a family of four, if you want a three-week supply.

Fortunately, Bellingham borders on two freshwater lakes and is crisscrossed by creeks. Do you know how to purify surface water? You could boil it for a minute – but you're going to need your fuel to cook. Outdoor supply stores sell a wide range of filtration systems meant for campers, as well as purification tablets.

You can also purify water with unscented household bleach that contains 5.25 to 6.0 percent sodium hypochlorite. Clorox says to first remove suspended particles by filtering or letting particles settle to the bottom. Pour off clear water into a clean container. Add 8 drops of bleach to 1 gallon of water. Allow the treated water to stand for 30 minutes. Properly treated water will have a slight chlorine odor. If not, repeat dosage and allow the water to stand an additional 15 minutes.

There's more information online at ready.gov/water.

Which of your neighbors has first aid training?

Peace Health St. Joseph Medical Center can keep critical electrical systems operating for up to nine days, using backup generators and the generator fuel stored on site. After that, additional fuel could be brought in by helicopter if tanker trucks are not available.

The hospital's water supply could be more critical. There is a 48-hour supply on site. After that, water would have to be resupplied by truck or helicopter.

After a catastrophic earthquake, hospitals and clinics will need to prioritize life-threatening injuries and illnesses. Learn first aid and have supplies on hand. Know how to treat minor and moderate injuries yourself.

Are you ready to share?

Once you think you have enough supplies stored for your household, think about how you will react when you're confronted by people who weren't ready: the clueless, the poor, the people who lost their food stockpile when their house burned down. What about tourists? Who's going to feed them, if you don't? Be sure to prioritize those who need it most. Healthy adults can survive for days on half of their normal calories, or even without food. Children, pregnant women and those with injuries and illness, will be more vulnerable.

FEMA and the Red Cross have a booklet online about food storage online at rdcrss.org/1Ov3XHQ. Download and print now for important information to put in your emergency kit.

How well do you know the people in your neighborhood?

Sharing and cooperation will increase everyone's chances of survival. For more information about Map Your Neighborhood and how to get involved, please contact Whatcom Unified at 360-676-6681 or info@whatcomready.org.

As our fictional account wraps up Feb. 25, The Herald and partner agencies will offer a printed map in the newspaper and downloadable maps online that will assist you in talking to your neighbors and taking note of skills and concerns that will help us all be more resilient and survive in the aftermath of disaster.

Should you be concerned about looting?

Looting and panic are disaster myths. Those who study disasters find that disasters tend to bring out the best in people. Cooperation and altruism are common. Crime drops. When people do enter homes, it's most often to search for water, food and clothes or to find personal belongings of friends or family.

A Chicago Tribune story notes that people often exaggerate the threat of looting after a disaster.

What would you do for fuel?

Fuel will be precious after the quake. How much propane do you have for your camp stove or backyard grill? How much firewood? How long will you be able to operate that emergency generator?

With power cut off, gas stations won't be able to pump fuel. If they have power sources, they will likely run out of gas quickly and resupply may take days or weeks. How much gas is in your tank right now?

How soon will relief supplies get to Whatcom County in any meaningful quantity?

The swath of devastation from the big quake could stretch from Vancouver Island to northern California. Bridges and overpasses will be down and landslides will block rail and highway links that supply us with food and other essentials. Big cities to the south and north will likely be full of desperate people.

In our fictionalized account, we imagine the Alaska ferry arriving with supplies, just three days after the quake. But the quake is expected to cripple the ports of Seattle and Tacoma – the lifeline for Alaska. Alaska won't be able to help us much. They will likely experience food shortages of their own.

Port of Bellingham officials say they expect the small-scale local shipping facilities to be usable after the quake – although nobody knows for sure. If that does turn out to be the case, it is conceivable that large amounts of relief supplies will be offloaded here for shipment south.

If local shipping terminals are unusable, vessels could still anchor in the bay for offloading.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offer a list of emergency supplies to have on hand online at cdc.gov/disasters/earthquakes/supplies.html.

Will we be able to communicate?

After a great quake, normal communications systems are likely to shut down. That means everything from radio and television to cellphones and internet. For how long? Estimates vary, but be prepared for the worst.

In the first few hours or days, some vital communications may depend on HAM radio operators.

When cellphone service comes back online, it won't be at full capacity. If everyone tries to use the system at once, which is highly likely, service won't be available. Because of the way the system is structured, it may be easier to get a call through to someone outside the quake area, rather than to your relative across town. Your out-of-area contact may then be able to relay a message to someone back in Whatcom County.

A solar power charger for your phone could come in handy, even if you never need to survive a great quake. A small one is a lot cheaper than most phones.

Emergency management experts recommend keeping calls to a minimum. Rely on short text messages rather than voice calls that put a bigger load on the system. In the immediate aftermath, they ask us to be content with the simplest of messages: IMOK.

Tips for dealing with power outages are online at ready.gov/power-outages.

What foods can be foraged?

Vitamin tablets should be part of your stock of emergency rations, as long as you remember to rotate your stock, and use and replace them before they reach their expiration date.

Many common local plants could be foraged for vitamins in an emergency. And some people already enjoy them. There are suggestions online at northernbushcraft.com/plants/.

What will happen to the people in the Whatcom County Jail after a great quake?

Given its current condition, the jail will likely be damaged in a great quake. But the Whatcom County Sheriff's Office is prepared to find alternative secure housing, depending on what buildings are safe and suitable after a quake.

What happens to the economy after a big one hits?

A catastrophic earthquake could have long-term impacts on the economy of the Northwest and Whatcom County. It could take years to bring highways, railroads, public utilities and other facilities back to their pre-quake levels of service.

All over the world, cities have endured catastrophic quakes, and the survivors have put their lives back together afterwards.

In Christchurch, New Zealand, a 2011 earthquake killed 185 people and did extensive damage to the city's central district. More than half the buildings did not survive the quake. But after five years, the city was thriving again.

NO POWER. NO WATER. MAYBE NO CELL SERVICE. HOW WOULD YOU COPE WITH THAT?

By Julie Shirley, The Bellingham Herald

It's been 318 years since the last great quake on the Cascadia subduction zone on Jan. 26, 1700. That quake, believed to be a magnitude of 9, was felt along the coastal interior of the Pacific Northwest and caused a tsunami that may have been as high as 33 feet.

The 800-mile fault stretches from northern California to southwestern British Columbia. The Cascadia Region Earthquake Workgroup says earthquakes on the fault occur, on average, every 500 to 600 years, but the years between events have been as few as 100 to 300 years.

We can all do the math. The big one is out there. It's overwhelming – something we'll think about when the time comes. I've edited as many disaster preparedness stories as you've probably read. Did they move you to action? I worry they didn't. And I'm not alone.

So, starting Monday, we're trying something new. Something out of the ordinary for The Bellingham Herald. Something I hope gets your blood pumping enough that it moves you to action.

"Imagining the Big One" is a 28-part fictional series that ponders what life in Whatcom County might be like after a great quake. Each episode offers preparedness tips and discussion points. You'll find a daily chapter online at bhamherald.com/op-ed and we'll print the week's chapters in the Sunday newspaper.

The idea came to us from Jim Swift and his team at the Riverstyx Foundation. The Bellingham businessman was concerned that people weren't prepared for disaster. The foundation created the bellinghamearthquake.info website and funded the fictional series written by John Stark, who retired from The Bellingham Herald in 2014.

The series is Stark's informed imagination of one person's experience in the wake of an earthquake big enough to cripple power, water and transportation systems – damage that will take weeks or months to repair.

He consulted geologists and emergency managers and researched how other communities have coped with devastating natural disasters. It was reviewed by area experts for accuracy.

John Gargett, deputy director of Whatcom County Sheriff's Office Division of Emergency Management, on what people should ask themselves

Stark says he wants readers to imagine what that would be like, and take at least some steps to get more ready than they are now.

"In a region-wide earthquake catastrophe, Whatcom County residents should be prepared to take care of themselves and their neighbors, without expecting immediate assistance from police and fire departments or other emergency responders," Stark says.

I've been through several evacuations from natural disasters. I'm more prepared than some. But John's story worked on my subconscious. I woke up early Tuesday, worrying about freshwater sources. That's when I saw the news about the 7.9 Alaska quake and potential tsunami.

Talk about providential timing.

So, too, was my Tuesday meeting with John Gargett, the deputy director of Whatcom County Sheriff's Office Division of Emergency Management. He has 40 years of experience working on 50 large disasters around the world.

Lessons learnedHe says resilience is key. We can prepare to be personally resilient, prepare to help our kids, our parents, our neighbors. That's how communities come together and survive.

Emergency service professionals are prepared and have learned lessons from the past. The lesson of Katrina was learned for Houston: After the hurricane and flooding, we didn't hear a lot about trouble in Texas. Gargett says that's because people were allowed to start helping others right away.

Not that there isn't lots to worry about. But Gargett shared these thoughts with me:

- We're not going to lose law and order. Disasters bring out the best in people.
- Communications will be a challenge, but they won't fail. Cell service may be slow and not available everywhere. After the Japan quake, service was back after 36 hours. Cell service continued during the recent California fires. It's in the best interests of those companies to keep or return service quickly.

- Utilities will be an issue. Power resumption will take longer with infrastructure issues. It took nine days for service to fully return after the Sumas ice storm in early January. Gas infrastructure will have to be checked before service is returned, area by area.
- We're fortunate to have lots of naturally occurring fresh water. We just need to be prepared to treat it for drinking. (That's easy to find how to do on the internet. But, oops, that might not be so easy after a great quake. I'm marking it on the bottle: For a gallon of water, Clorox says we'll need 8 drops of regular bleach or 6 drops of concentrated bleach.) Don't forget your water heater may be a source of clean water.
- Food won't be an issue for most. Our pantries hold more than we suspect. We just need to be prepared to bridge the time from the quake to when emergency supplies arrive.
- Sanitation has the potential to be problematic. But some rope, a tarp and a trench latrine will have to do. Or a bucket.
- Transportation will be an issue. Some roads will have issues. We'll want to save our gasoline for emergencies. You might need to take somebody to the hospital, or better, the local fire department for treatment. (Even better, know which neighbor is a nurse.) Keep in mind your vehicle can be a great shelter.

Plan ahead Gargett reminds us that quakes happen without warning. It might not happen at a time when the family is together. Now is the time to plan ahead, to ensure family members' schools and senior living facilities have updated emergency plans that are exercised regularly.

He added that we also need to prepare in case the quake hits while we're at work or in our car.

Returning to the theme of resiliency, he says we need to ask ourselves, "can I survive without modern conveniences for a couple of weeks?"

I won't like it, but I can do it. And I'll bet you can, too. But it will be easier for us all if we're prepared. So I hope you'll read Stark's story. Don't let it scare you, but let it inspire you.

Julie Shirley: 360-715-2261, @BhamEditor

MAKE THIS THE YEAR YOU PREPARE FOR RESILIENCY

By Heather Flaherty, For The Bellingham Herald

The most common remark I've heard while working on "Imagining 'the Big One'" is "I just hope this doesn't happen in my lifetime."

Trust me, I also hope it doesn't happen in my lifetime – but the reality is that it could. Odds are 1 in 3 that a 9.0 Cascadia megaquake happens in the next 50 years. Those are about the same odds of developing cancer. We see others in our lives get cancer and we take active steps to prevent what we can – we wear sunscreen, we exercise, we eat our vegetables. When it comes to talking about the earthquake, the "hope" expressed doesn't often turn into a plan. Hope is not a strategy. We don't take comparable preventative steps, even though the odds are about the same.

With all of the education and awareness out there about earthquakes, and all of the great groups working on preparedness and recruiting for CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) and the Volunteer Mobilization Center, we wanted to try and get through to people in another way. We wanted to bring to life the realities of life post-quake in Bellingham through a story, and sprinkle preparedness tips and important facts throughout.

Over the last four weeks we've gotten to know Bill and his dog Daisy, followed him through the neighborhoods of Fairhaven and Western Washington University, seen through his eyes the devastation that a quake like this will leave upon our geography, our homes and our community.

We have learned about some of the most important ways to prepare, and some of the innovative approaches as well. If you survive the quake, you will need shelter. You can take steps to make sure your home is as safe and ready as possible. You may be thinking you want to brush up on first-aid training and restock your kit.

Once you have shelter and first-aid, the next most important thing is water. Have at least 1 gallon per day per person, for at least three weeks if possible. Learning about water storage and sanitation methods is helpful. Having a good filter or rain barrels on hand would be smart. After water, food. And if the electricity is out, staying warm will also be important.

There are steps we can all take today to prepare, and what I have come to understand more than anything else is that it doesn't matter if this quake happens in our lifetime or not – it's not really about the event. It's about making resiliency a part of your life, creating a habit of thinking ahead and knowing how to take care of yourself and others.

It's about passing on these lessons and a way of life to the next generations who face increasing risks and ever-changing, complex world challenges. Learning how to be more self-reliant is not something you can do in one day, it is not one stop at a store to stock up on batteries and bottled water. It is a mindset that has the potential to save your life.

Thank you for reading along with us. As we conclude our series, we ask that you don't let fear or overwhelm lull you into inaction. Make this the year you take the steps to prepare. Share the story with your family and your neighbors. Lead a map your neighborhood exercise. Read up on bellinghamearthquake.info. Take stock of what you have in your own home and what you need to get. It doesn't need to be all at once, and it doesn't need to be every exhaustive thing, but make it the year that you become fully aware and prepared to live in the beautiful, amazing, water-rich, caring earthquake-country Pacific Northwest.

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WHAT EMERGENCY SUPPLIES ARE YOU MISSING? TAKE THIS LIST AND CHECK.

John Gargett, the deputy director of Whatcom County Sheriff's Office Division of Emergency Management, offers this list for your emergency kit:

Basic assumptions:

There will not be emergency response by Fire Services, Emergency Medical Services or Law Enforcement for an unknown time.

Individuals must be self-resilient until services are restored

Neighborhoods are the basis for community resilience.

Basic survival kit (home, workplace, vehicles):

First aid kit;

Non-perishable food;

Plastic cup and spoon;

Matches (waterproof matches and at least one butane lighter);

Flashlight;

Knife, such as Swiss Army, with saw blade;

Whistle;

Gloves, leather is best;

Hardhat (with reflective band);

Reflective vest;

Prescription medicine;

Toilet paper;

Vehicle survival kit additions:

Always fill the tank when it is half empty;

Charger for cell phone for car;

Blanket or sleeping bag;

Warm waterproof coat;

Non-perishable food;

Coloring books/toys for kids;

Change of clothes;

Flares;

Tool kit.

Home survival kit additions:

Propane barbeque;

Solar cell phone/tablet charger;

Cooler;

Fluids (almond/soy milk, water, etc.);

Non-perishable food;

Coloring books/toys for kids;

Prescription medicine.

Know your neighbors: Meet the immediate neighbors to the front, rear, side, up and down (for apartments/condos) and learn their capabilities, needs and expectations. Map your neighborhood. Know who has first aid training, belongs to a Community Emergency Response Team or operates a ham radio.

Think about your kids: Get a copy of, and read, school and college emergency plans. Prepare your children for a disaster occurring when you are not there and know how you will communicate with your kids.

Workplace survival kit additions:

Water/fluid stored under desk;

Non-perishable food;

Prescription medicine.

SUGGESTED FOR YOU