

Outline: 1st draft

17 October 1996

OUT OF THE MOUTH OF THE DRAGON

The first earthquake recorder was invented in 132AD by Chang Heng. It consisted of eight bronze dragons in a ring, with eight frogs below. Each dragon held a ball loosely in its mouth. When the earth shook, one ball would fall into the mouth of the frog beneath. The direction of the earthquake's epicentre was given by a line from the middle of the ring through the ball that fell out of the mouth of the dragon.

PART I

1. Sue Chang, 40, is a successful detective with the San Francisco police. Half-Oriental, she is small, dark-haired and beautiful. Her approach to her work is organised, logical, neat and scrupulous.

Her arch-enemy is Marvin Hayles, a detective of her age with a contrary philosophy. He is lazy, intuitive, and brutal, and is willing to fake evidence to put the criminals in jail. He is a close friend of the captain of detectives, Charlie Kincaid.

Sue has just closed a major case and put a ring of drug-money launderers away. Now she expects to be promoted to Lieutenant and given a post that is vacant, head of the Crimes Against Persons department, which includes Homicide and Sex Crimes. She gets her promotion, but not the department. Instead, she is put in charge of the Department of Earthquake Preparedness. This new post has been created in response to media pressure and is considered a bullshit job. Marvin gets Crimes Against Persons.

Sue protests, but to no avail, so she decides to make the best of it. Her first question is: How soon can we expect an earthquake? She learns of an expert called Ben Quercus and goes to see him.

2. Ben, 35, is a fair-haired, outdoorsy type with a mild manner and a strong will. Having built up a high reputation in the academic world he left and started a business, a consultancy advising construction firms and insurance companies on earthquake hazards.

He believes in the stick-slip theory of earthquakes. This says that along a fault in the earth's crust, adjoining tectonic plates are under pressure to move in opposite directions, but most of the time they are stuck—held in place by frictional forces, like a jammed cupboard door. But the pressure builds up over time, until the slightest nudge will spring the jammed plates free.

The earth's crust is frequently subject to relatively weak, harmless vibrations. But where the fault is under intense pressure such vibrations, in exactly the right place, may provide the nudge that springs the plates.

At this point the plates slip, causing an earthquake. Almost immediately, they stick again in a new position, under lower tension. Then the process begins again.

In order to estimate where an earthquake may be imminent, Ben measures the tension at points along the major fault lines in California. He feeds the data into a computer program that produces contour maps of earthquake risk, with peaks like mountaintops where a quake is highly likely, and troughs like valleys where the risk is close to zero.

He has borrowed money to start the business. His office is in his apartment in San Francisco. Business is slow and he is worried.

Ben was married for eight years to Melanie, 30, sexy but crazy. She too is a geologist but she never finished her doctorate. They have a son, Duncan, 6. A year ago, Melanie left Ben for another man, taking Duncan with her. The new relationship did not work out, and after six months she wanted to come back to Ben. But he was finally getting over her, after half a year of anguish, and he will not have her back. She is very angry with him over this rejection.

Duncan suffers from multiple allergies. He sneezes uncontrollably, swells up, and comes out in unbearably itchy skin rashes. Doctors are unable to help him.

It is summer, and Duncan is spending a few weeks with Ben when Sue Chang comes to visit. At first Ben is attracted to her. She asks for copies of his maps, and he tells her he makes his living by selling information, not giving it away. She tries to insist, and he begins to like her less. Then she meets Duncan and is good with him, and Ben forgives her.

At this point Melanie shows up. She is put out to find a beautiful woman playing with Duncan. She makes a couple of bitchy remarks, and Sue leaves. Melanie persists in talking as if Sue is Ben's new girlfriend, so he explains that she came to ask for free copies of his maps. Melanie says Ben's information should be freely available to all. "Then you wouldn't get any alimony," says Ben. And he points out another problem. These maps pinpoint locations where the San Andreas fault is under greatest pressure. At any one such point, it may be years before a natural vibration triggers a quake. But given the information, a terrorist group could cause an earthquake by sending a shock wave through the earth's crust at precisely the right place. How would they do that? Easy: the oil exploration industry does it all the time. The commonest method is an underground explosion.

Melanie loses interest. She says she has come to take Duncan back. Ben protests: he is supposed to have the boy for another two weeks. Melanie says she has been offered the use of a friend's cabin in the mountains, due to late cancellation of a rental. It is the only chance she will have of a holiday. Reluctantly, Ben consents.

3. After ten days at the cabin, all Duncan's allergies have gone. Melanie credits the clean air, pure water and low-stress lifestyle. She wishes she could afford to quit her job and buy the cabin and live here.

She takes Duncan on a long hike and they get lost. As she is starting to get seriously worried, she hears a gunshot. She screams. A man appears. He apologises for scaring her and says he is hunting deer. He is about 40, rangy, laid-back. His name is Jesse Matthias. He says he has seen them before. On their way here, Duncan had an allergy attack in a Macdonald's parking lot, and Jesse happened to be passing

and felt sorry for the boy.

Melanie confesses to being lost. Jesse leads her and Duncan back to their cabin. She invites him in. They put Duncan to bed. Melanie makes dinner. She and Jesse sleep together.

4. In the morning, Jesse takes Melanie and Duncan to his home. It is a hippy commune in a stony valley. The communards live in wood cabins without electricity and they use no money.

The commune was founded in 1970 and lurched from crisis to crisis for years until Jesse came along. As a young man, Jesse built up a drinks business and was a millionaire at 25. Then he gave away all his money and went searching for peace. He found it here.

Although he renounced money, he could not shed his leadership qualities. Under his direction, the communards terraced a hillside, diverted a stream for irrigation, and planted grapevines. Now they make a famous chardonnay.

However, they refuse to sell it for money. Purchasers have to barter with food, clothing, tools or drugs. The commune has no bank account and no legal status. They are squatters on land owned by the federal government.

The commune's other leading personality is a woman called Star. Famous in sixties San Francisco for her beauty and her insatiable promiscuity, she is now fifty years old and weighs 175 pounds. She is a strong earth-mother character with a mean streak.

Star and Jesse are close, despite intermittent blazing rows. They are occasional lovers, although both take other sexual partners freely, in accordance with hippy principles. Star has two children. One of them, an eleven-year-old girl called Flower, is probably Jesse's. However, the children are raised communally and taught to regard every adult in the group as a parent.

The hippy ideal has been realised here. The communards till the vines all day, then at night they smoke pot, drink wine, sing folk songs and make love with anyone

they fancy. Both Jesse and Star realise that the ideal would not work without the underpinning of what is essentially a hugely profitable commercial enterprise, the winemaking. All the same they are both passionately committed to the commune and would defend it with their lives.

Jesse has the remorseless will power of many outstanding business and political leaders. In addition, he gave up everything for this ideal, and he made it work. He would not only die for the commune, he would kill for it.

The place seems like paradise to Melanie, especially as Duncan suffers no allergy attacks here. She asks Jesse if she and Duncan can live here. The commune gets many such requests and turns down nearly all of them. However, Jesse wants to agree to this one for two reasons: (i) he feels sorry for Duncan; (ii) Melanie is a great fuck.

Star gives her consent.

5. Ben gets a call from Melanie to say that she is not coming back to San Francisco—ever. He is furious with her for proposing to take his son to live a hundred miles away, and deeply suspicious of the commune. He asks Sue to check it out. She reports that nothing worse than dope-smoking goes on there.

He drives out there to visit. He cannot deny that Duncan is better here. He gives in.

6. Jesse is hunting deer a couple of miles down-valley from the commune when he gets a shock. Heavy earthmoving machinery has beaten a road through the woods to a spot where the valley narrows. Some major construction project is under way. Jesse gets a bad feeling.

A Cadillac drives up. Out gets a black man in a business suit. He is Carl Fraser, CEO of CleanPower, an electricity generating utility. He tells Jesse he has bought the valley from the government and is building a dam to generate hydro-electric power. The valley, including the commune and its vineyard, will be flooded.

PART II

1. Three months later, Jesse and Star are at the California Supreme Court, waiting for a judge's decision on their application to have the dam prohibited. During the legal process, building has continued and it is now almost complete.

Legally the hippies have no case, and as they have no money they do not have lawyers. However, they have used the media well, and CleanPower is embarrassed by the publicity. Now Carl Fraser approaches them and offers a deal. If they will drop their lawsuit he will pay them what they would get if the vineyard actually belonged to them.

Star is inclined to take the offer. They could start again somewhere new, or even buy an existing successful vineyard.

Jesse is fiercely opposed. One vineyard is not the same as another. This is the one he created. And they would never achieve the same purity of ideals in another place, he feels sure.

Finally he talks Star around by saying Fraser must believe that CleanPower is about to lose the case, otherwise he would not make the offer.

But Jesse is wrong. The judge rules in favour of the utility and refuses leave to appeal.

2. Melanie is heartbroken. Duncan's allergies will surely return if she goes back to San Francisco. She calls Ben and demands that he buy her a house in the mountains.

3. Ben tries to borrow the money but he is turned down all around town. He is already up to his credit limit.

4. Sue Chang tries to get back into the real detective force but she fails.

5. The hippies discuss illegal action to save their home. They consider trying to

destroy the dam with a bomb. They talk about kidnapping Carl Fraser and holding him to ransom. Then Melanie says: "I know how to cause an earthquake."

PART III

1. Jesse gets a job with an oil exploration company, working on a truck-mounted drilling rig. The team drills a small-bore shaft about 600 feet deep then sets off an explosion at the bottom. The shock waves from the explosion are reflected off the earth's core and picked up by seismographs. Computer analysis of the readings indicates whether the shock waves have passed through oil.

When he has learned how to operate the rig, Jesse steals it.

2. Melanie goes to Ben's apartment with Duncan. She gets Ben out of the way somehow then takes copies of his maps.

3. Jesse disguises the drilling rig as a truck-mounted carnival ride then drives it to California.

4. The hippies prepare a statement. It purports to come from the extreme offshoot of a genuine Green political movement called ZEROE—for Zero Economic Rise Or Else!—which calls for zero economic growth in California as the only answer to pollution. They demand an immediate freeze on all construction in the state, and threaten to cause an earthquake if their demand is not met.

5. More or less as a joke, Captain Kincaid, the head of detectives, tells Sue Chang to deal with this threat.

She assumes it is the work of lunatics but she asks Ben whether it is possible for a terrorist group to cause an earthquake.

Yes, he says, it is.

6. The hippies drive the drilling rig, still disguised as a carnival ride, to the neighbourhood of the Owen Valley fault, near Death Valley. They drill a hole, plant a bomb, close the shaft, set off a timing device, and drive away.

They find a vantage point a couple of miles away and watch. The result is spectacular. The earth opens up and swallows half a forest.

PART IV

1. Sue talks to Ben. He confirms, based on his seismograph readings, that the earthquake was triggered by a shallow explosion, and was therefore caused by human agency.

The case is immediately taken away from her and given to Marvin Hayles. He arrests the staff of ZEROE. He begins to interrogate everyone on their mailing list, even though it lists everyone who has ever asked for information about ZEROE, including Jane Fonda.

Sue makes the connection with the stolen drilling rig. Working unofficially, she gets a description of Jesse from the exploration company. Now she has a suspect, while Marvin has nothing. Captain Kincaid is obliged to give the case back to her.

2. No construction freeze is announced, however, and Jesse proposes a second earthquake, this time in an area where there is some property to be destroyed.

Many of the hippies are troubled. There could be loss of life. However, Jesse talks them around.

He issues a new warning and a modified demand: a freeze on all construction other than homes. But the politicians refuse.

3. Hundreds of thousands of residents in neighbourhoods near fault lines move out, jamming the freeways. Others fatalistically remain.

Sue and Ben try to forecast where the next earthquake will come, based on Ben's maps. They come up with several possibilities. They alert police patrol officers

to look out for the drilling rig, or any unusually large vehicle.

4. Jesse drills a shaft and plants a bomb in empty countryside near Highway 101.

5. Sue gets a report that a truck-mounted carnival ride is parked in one of their hot zones.

They rush to the spot, arriving just as the earthquake rips the freeway apart spectacularly. Their car crashes, along with fifty others, but they escape with bruises.

6. The dam is completed and the waters begin to rise.

PART V

1. The hippies issue another threat, but the State of California still refuses to freeze construction. But the hippies will not countenance another bomb. Disconsolately, they begin to move out of the valley.

Jesse, now angry as hell, decides to go it alone. Melanie dumps Duncan with Ben and goes with Jesse.

They plant a bomb near the suburban community where Carl Fraser lives with his wife and children.

Jesse issues his final demand: destruction of the dam.

2. Sue and Ben now guess Melanie's involvement, but she is in hiding with Jesse. Once again they narrow down four or five possible sites for the last blast.

3. To throw them off the scent, Jesse dumps the carnival ride/drilling rig in downtown San Francisco.

4. There is a major panic as everyone tries to leave the city. Ben takes Duncan to his parents' home, which is in the suburb where Carl Fraser lives.

5. The mayor offers Jesse a deal. The dam will be destroyed. But Jesse must stand trial. Jesse refuses and demands a free pardon. The mayor cannot do this.
6. Melanie realises that Duncan is in the earthquake zone. She escapes from Jesse and calls Ben.
7. Ben, Sue and Melanie all race to the suburb. They get there as the earthquake hits. This one is a monster. It levels an area the size of a small town. Ben fights through the wreckage and finds his parents and Duncan still alive. Melanie is killed.
8. Jesse returns to the vineyard as the water covers his precious grapevines. He drowns himself.
9. Ben marries Sue.