

# MOMENTS OF MISFORTUNE

By Chuck Wallace  
Edited by Lisa Ballou

## PART 1

I knew it! Here he comes. Just like clockwork. He must have been waiting for me in the parking lot! My co-worker Matt dashes toward me in the pouring rain.

Trotting up, he loudly asks, “Hey, did you feel the earthquake last night?”

I heard him ask me something, but I was still leaning into my car to retrieve my briefcase, umbrella and cup of coffee when he asked.

I responded, “Sorry, Matt. I didn’t hear what you said.”

He breathlessly repeats, “Did you feel the earthquake last night?”

I reply, “I didn’t. I just heard about it while driving into work this morning.”

Excitedly, Matt exclaimed, “It was a 4.2 magnitude earthquake just offshore of the State Park, south of the Indian Nation. Lots of people felt it in the county!”

I answered, “Yeah, well, I didn’t feel anything or even know until the radio news broadcast the information.”

Matt further explained, “The radio said, there was no damage, but it was felt as far away as British Columbia and Oregon!”

I replied, “You do know we live in earthquake country. We just don’t have that many and the ones we do have, are fairly small. Hardly anyone feels them.”

Matt pressed on, “Sooner or later we’ll have a really big one. That’s what scares me the most.”

Walking away, toward my office, I answer over my shoulder, “Yeah, well hopefully, we’re all long gone when it does happen.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

I rub my forehead while sitting at my desk, fairly exhausted and semi-perturbed after answering the same questions about the earthquake all morning. The theme of the day continued during my morning phone call to my wife.

“Yes dear.”

I continued, “I heard about it. Ever since I walked into the office, everyone has been talking about it. You’d think the world was ready to tilt off its axis.

“I know, but nothing even really happened, I mean, with the exception of a few people feeling the ground shake. It’s just one of those things.”

I tell her, “We’ve lived here for 10 years and nothing has happened even remotely impacting us. This is the first earthquake we’ve had close to us and we didn’t even feel it.”

Half listening to her questions and concerns about the earthquake, I patronizingly offer, “Hmm, yeah, right. Look, don’t worry about it. It’s over. Hey, I have to go, I have a conference call starting in a few minutes, ok? Yep, yeah, everything’s alright. Ok. See ya tonight. Good. I love you too.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Sitting at my desk, shuffling through the stacks of files to find the particular one I need, I think to myself, boy, am I glad I didn’t go to the meeting in Seattle today, I have too much to do. Thankfully, I don’t have to pay too much attention to this conference call. I can chime in from time to time, while responding to some of these never ending e-mails.

After half an hour of listening to the same exact issue we discussed last month, I unmute my phone and break into the meeting, “Yeah, I agree with what was just said, we need to begin working on the next objective of our strategic plan.”

Someone else comments, “I’d like to revisit the notes I have from the meeting two months ago.”

Not believing what I just heard, I make a strong recommendation to the conference members on the phone, “If we don’t begin moving forward....” --What the...?

My entire office lurches forward, shoving me against the edge of my desk. The shelves hanging along my wall all tear away with books and files bouncing and falling in complete disarray on the floor. My computer screen goes blank as the office lights flicker.

I jump up, “ahhh,” shouting out as my steaming hot cup of coffee goes flying cross my desk, spilling everywhere and over everything, including me, soaking my shirt and trousers, onto my stomach and into my lap.

A few ceiling tiles begin to fall on the other side of my office as I hang onto the desk, half standing, attempting to wipe the coffee and cool the blistering heat in my lap. Suddenly, the light fixture over my desk swings down and slams into the side of my head. I feel like I’ve been hit with a baseball bat. I grab the right side of my head and fall to my knees, knocked senseless from the blow.

The entire event ends after a few harrowing moments. My right ear has a constant ringing. I can hear others in the building yelling, but am unable to make sense of what they are saying. I look around my office, my right hand holding the side of my head, and see everything in disarray. Walking down the hallway, passing the other offices in my building, I see a mess of papers, books, pamphlets, tumbled file cabinets and fallen ceiling tiles.

The department head from down the hall asks all in the corridor, “Is everyone here? Are we all ok?”

One of the women from the office down the hall asks, “Aren’t we supposed to evacuate and get to high ground?”

A male voice responds, “Are we in an inundation area? I think we’re on high ground.”

Another person in the office calls out, “Where is the Weather Radio? Information should be broadcast on that.”

The woman answers, “I don’t think we have one. I’ve been here for 6 years and I’ve never seen one.”

A male voice from the middle of the crowd asks, “Well, what are we supposed to do?”

Half of the nine or so people in the second floor hallway are texting or trying to call someone.

A man from an office on the other end of the building shouts for all to hear, “The cell lines are busy.”

Another says, "I think I can text!"

The department head states in a loud authoritarian voice, "Let's get outside. We're supposed to go outside after an earthquake, then have the building checked to be sure it's safe."

Another woman in the building speaks up and exclaims, "I'm not leaving the building. If a tsunami is coming, I am not going to be on the street."

Their babbling and indecisiveness is driving me crazy as my head continues to pound from getting hit with the light fixture.

I shout, "Yo! Hey! Listen Up! We are not in a tsunami inundation area. Let's just go outside like the boss said, and make sure everyone in the building is safe. We can figure out what to do once we're outside."

Matt approaches from the other end of the hallway wearing a rain poncho and backpack. He slowly high steps through the debris, shuffling it with each step, as he walks around the overturned file cabinets and maneuvers himself along the wall.

He asks, "Is everyone all right?"

I reply, "We're going to get out of here and see if everyone from the building is ok."

A voice from the back shouts, "It's pouring rain out there. Can't we just stay here?"

Matt responds, "Actually, newer buildings are built so they don't collapse during an earthquake onto the people inside, but I think this is a fairly old building. Either way, they are only designed to prevent collapse from one earthquake. I'm not sure what would happen if we have an aftershock."

The office manager asks "Where did you get that information?"

Matt replies, "I've read about it and have gone to a few conferences where they talk about building safety in earthquakes, non-reinforced masonry buildings, non-structural damage..."

Another worker cuts him off, "Yeah, well, I'd rather be wet than trapped in here if we have an aftershock."

Hesitantly, the group agrees to leave and we begin exiting the building through the stairway at the end of the hall. My head is pounding as I follow the group and try to call my wife, worried about her and my kids. Attempting the call, all I hear is a busy signal.

I whisper out loud, “Unbelievable,” as I try twice more with the same busy signal. I think to myself, “I guess that’s why they’re called family plans, when one phone won’t work, none of the others will either.”

Walking out of the building into a gusty, steady downpour, toward the assembly area, I see other employees from the building congregating in their pre-designated assembly areas in the parking lot, the same ones we use for a fire drill. Everyone looks drenched from head to toe. Glancing to my left, I look at Matt in his rain poncho and backpack and begin to chuckle. What is this guy doing?

I teasingly offer, “Did you pack for the weekend?”

He says, “It’s my Go Kit. Don’t you have one?”

I look at him like he’s crazy, “What are you talking about?”

He replies, “A Go Kit. Everyone should have one. In case of earthquake, flooding...”

I interrupt, not wanting to know any more, “Yeah, well I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

He responds, very concerned, “It’s a necessity for everyone living around here. I have food, water, a radio, clothes and a first...”

I speak over him, “Yeah, sounds great. But I’m not carrying all that stuff with me all day.” Changing the subject, I ask, “Where is our assembly area anyway?”

Matt replies, “Follow me. I know where we are supposed to go.”

Rain water is running down my back as we move across the parking lot to join the others. I slowly begin to survey the area immediately surrounding us through the sheets of rain and gusty wind. The chimney has collapsed on the home across the street and one of the parked cars in front of our building has a large tree branch laying across the hood. This earthquake was worse than I thought. People are congregating on street corners and in other parking areas. It’s almost surreal looking at the panicked expressions on the faces of everyone as they gather. Their voices

are muffled by the continuous honking, wailing and whooping of the multiple car and home alarms activated during the ground shaking of the earthquake. Looking up, I see Harry, a first floor employee, limping toward us.

Someone yells out, “Oh my God, Harry has blood all over him!”

A small crowd gathers around him as he tells them he is fine. He explains how a cabinet in his office fell over and hit him on the corner of his eye, causing all of the blood.

Harry says, “It’s just a cut. I’m all right.”

Someone shouts out “I have a message! Texting works!”

Others begin confirming “Me, too!”

“Yeah, mine works.”

I notice almost everyone around me texting on their phone. I pull mine from my pocket and begin to text my wife and kids,

*Are u all ok?*

Within seconds, my wife replies via text, *I’m ok. It was scary. House shook like crazy. Lights r flickering. Nothing from the girls - YES, your dog is fine!*

She continued, *Radio said EQ centered off coast. Some cities - Aberdeen have damage. That’s where the school is & where Janie works!*

Adding, *No message from Katie’s school. Hopefully, they r ok. I’m worried.*

I reply, trying to remain calm in the moment, but very worried about my kids. *We have a few minor issues. I don’t think it was anything major. The girls will be fine. They know what to do.*

Impatient, frightened and very concerned, she texts, *Well, for knowing what to do, nobody’s doing anything!*

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Matt, has been attending to the cut above Harry's eye with the first aid kit he stored in his Go Kit, walks over and hands me an extra rain poncho he is carrying.

“This will keep you dry.”

I thank him but give the poncho back, “It's a bit late for that. I'm soaked!”

Matt nods and stores the poncho in his backpack.

With a concerned look on his face, he offers, “The USGS said it was a magnitude 6.3 earthquake about 6 miles off the Grays Harbor coast along the Cascadia Fault Line. I looked at some social media sites, and they say there is moderate damage to some homes and buildings along the coast.”

I ask, “Do they say anything about people hurt?”

“Not really,” he adds, as he scans the various social media sites.

Wiping the droplets of rain from my phone screen, I try to call my daughters, but the lines are still busy. I heard one person talking to someone on the phone, but I guess with the earthquake being local, everyone is trying to make a call.

The building manager comes out and asks all to gather around.

The drenched group huddles around as he starts, “We don't have anyone qualified to inspect the building for damages. There are a few cracks along the first floor storage areas and at this point, I don't believe it is safe to re-enter the building without someone with some engineering knowledge looking at the damage. My suggestion is for everyone to go home, check on your family and then for tomorrow, confirm whether the building will be safe to re-enter with your supervisor.”

A voice comes from the middle of the pack, “Are we getting paid for this?”

The manager just looks at the person and shakes his head, apparently dumbfounded by the question.

The voice asks in a very irritated manner, “Are we still getting paid?”

The manager replies, much more composed than I would had been, “I don’t know. Let’s get out of the rain and attend to our families first. We can worry about money when the dust settles.”

As the crowd begins to disperse, I start walking to my car and realize my keys are on my desk in my office.

Exasperated, I blurt out, “It figures.”

Matt who is walking beside me asks, “What figures?”

I say, “My keys are on my desk.”

Matt offers to take me home, but I’m hesitant to accept his offer. And then, realizing I’m cold, wet and there may not be any other solution I tell him, I’ll take him up on his offer. Suddenly, half startling me, my phone rings. It’s my wife.

“What’s up kid?”

My wife begins talking a mile-a-minute, half sobbing. I can’t make out what she’s saying.

I say, “Slow down, I can’t understand what you are saying.”

She says, “Jack! Jack! Oh my God, Oh my God.”

I realize something is terribly wrong and try desperately to focus on her words.

“Shar, you have to slow down. I can’t understand.”

She composes herself and says, “The school called. Part of the roof collapsed onto some classrooms. They think Katie is trapped under the roof!”

## **END OF PART 1**

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

## **PART 2**

My knees buckle at the news my daughter is trapped at the school. I'm not absolutely sure I correctly heard what my wife just told me. I feel as if I'm going to become physically ill.

After what seems like an eternity, I'm able to swallow the lump in my throat and ask for clarity, "Tell me again Shar, what happened?"

My wife once again blurts out "Katie is trapped inside of the school, it collapsed! The school called and told me and ..."

I become oblivious to everything else she is saying. My entire soul is on the verge of panic. I don't know how to respond to my wife. I'm having trouble thinking straight. My mind begins whirring; oh my god...oh my god.... The news is crushing. My heart is beating so fast and hard, I can hear the blood pulsing through my veins. I feel as if I'm going to pass out, as I drop to one knee in the puddled parking lot.

Matt, reaches out and grabs my arm, steadying me. "Are you ok? Are you alright Jack?"

I struggle to look up. I nearly drop my phone as I cling to Matt's arm and leg. I'm barely able to nod my head.

I can hear my wife shouting, almost pleading for me to begin conversing again, "Jack, are you there? Jack? Jack?"

Matt helps me to my feet and guides me past two other cars. "Here, sit in my car, get out of the rain."

Finally I'm able to put together a coherent thought and ask, "Shar, can you get to the school? I have to figure out how to get there."

She responds, "Where is your car?"

I tell her, "My car keys are on my desk in my office. We had to leave the building because of structural damage and I can't get back in."

My wife begins to sob, "I thought you'd pick me up and we'd go together. I don't want to go alone."

"Shar, I can't use my car. I'll try to get a ride to the school with someone and meet you there."

Matt overhears the conversation and offers, "I can take you wherever you need to go, Jack."

I look at Matt through the tears in my eyes and nod.

I tell Shar, "It'll be alright. Just get to the school. I'll meet you at the entrance."

Hesitantly, and still sobbing, she agrees.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

The drive to the school is taking forever. Some streets are blocked and Matt is doing his best to navigate secondary routes. It's all I can do to maintain my composure while I sit in silence.

During the ride, my oldest daughter, Janie, texts my wife and I, *That was crazy! R U guys OK?*

Shar texts back, *Thank God U R ok. We're good.*

Janie texts, *I'm at a friend's home. They closed the office. She lives around the corner. I'm helping her clean up.*

Adding, *The earthquake knocked me down and I broke the heel on my boot, tore the knees out of my pants, broke 2 fingernails and I think I lost my lipstick!*

She continues, *On top of all that, my mascara isn't waterproof and now I have black streaks around my eyes and down my face.*

I smile and chuckle; her message taking me away from this frightening moment.

"You really scared me to death out there," Matt offered, trying to work up a conversation to keep me from thinking about my daughter. "I thought you were having a heart attack. Are you sure you're ok?"

I shake my head and reply, "I'm ok."

My wife returns Janie's text, *Janie, I just tried to call you, but the phones are still busy. Katie has been involved in an accident at her school.*

Texting more, *Dad and I are heading there now. We will let you know more when we do.*

Janie texts, *WHAT? What's wrong, Is she hurt?*

Shar replies, *We'll let you know more when we do.*

Matt, showing great concern for the situation, reaches over, puts his hand on my shoulder, squeezes it and says, "Don't worry buddy, it'll be ok. We'll be there soon."

Not really listening, I grunt a few times to appear I'm paying attention to him, but can't keep my mind off Katie. She must be terrified buried under the building. I feel helpless.

Matt states, "We're here, but it looks like they're restricting access to the school."

I don't hear a word he is saying.

After a few seconds he declares, louder this time, "Jack, we're here. We're at the school."

Matt parks the car along the side of the road. There is gridlock at the school entrance. I am entrenched in my thoughts about my daughter. Panic catches me again, at the sight of the flashing lights of police and fire vehicles.

"Please let her be safe," I mumble as I weakly step from the car.

Matt immediately joins me carrying an umbrella, protecting us both from the rain. He offers, "I'll go with you. I'm here for you, buddy."

After a few steps, I see my wife attempting to get through the barricaded parking entrance to the school. An officer is talking to her, but I'm still too far away to hear. She's soaking wet, and I see the puffiness of her eyes, from crying, along with expressions of fear and disbelief.

I walk up behind her and put my hand on her shoulder. In fear and frustration, she jerks away yelling, "Don't you touch me!" Glancing around, she recognizes me and hugs me tight.

"They won't let me in, Jack! They won't let me see my own daughter," she exclaims loudly so all nearby can hear.

I plead with the officer, "The school called us, and said our daughter is trapped in the school. Please let us enter."

The officer looks at me and explains, “Everyone needs an escort. All families need an escort to a specific location.” He further exclaimed, “I’ve radioed for someone to come and escort your wife. They will be here soon.”

Someone saying they’re from a news outlet overhears our conversation and asks for an interview.

I softly reply, “I’m sorry, not right now.”

The newsman continues to ask, “Who are you? It will only take a few seconds.”

Continuing to hound us, he holds out his cell phone and holds it in front of my wife’s face asking more questions.

I get extremely angry and shout, “LEAVE US ALONE! What’s wrong with you? We want to be left alone. What’s wrong with you people?”

The police officer at the entrance beckons us to step inside the barricade. “Please just stay here until your escort arrives. They can’t bother you in here.”

We thank him for his compassion. Holding hands, we start into the entrance.

Matt hands me his umbrella and says, “I have my poncho. You guys need this more than I do. Take care of your family.”

I take the umbrella, look over my shoulder and say, “Thanks for everything, Matt.”

He gives sort of a half salute and waves goodbye.

Waiting silently, holding each other close, we await our escort. I feel Shar sobbing, as she pulls me tighter. I pull her to my chest, under the umbrella, comforting her as I attempt to keep us both dry. She’s softly praying to herself.

A few minutes later, a young woman approaches and speaks to the officer. He points to us and she makes her way toward us.

She asks, “Are you Mr. and Mrs. McFadden? You’re Katie’s parents?” As we nod, she introduces herself, “I’m Susan Griffin, a nurse with Public Health. I have wonderful news, Katie has been found and she seems to be fine. I’m going to take you to see her. Right now she’s being checked out by the paramedics.”

My wife and I both break down, crying, hugging and thanking Susan. She smiles and says, “Let’s get you both to where she is.”

~~~~~

We're led to a modular school unit far away from the affected school building. Stepping inside, I look around and see our daughter sitting up on an ambulance stretcher. She has a slight smile on her face, but I can tell she has been crying.

I quickly move to her and hug her tightly, "I'm glad you're safe, baby."

Katie breaks down, "Oh, Daddy!"

Shar approaches from the other side of the stretcher, hugs Katie and whispers, "I was so afraid. Are you alright?"

Looking around at the paramedics and others in the room she asks, "Is she alright?"

Not giving anyone a chance to answer, Shar turns back to Katie, "You're alright, right? You're not injured?"

One of the paramedics reveals, "She seems to be ok, other than a few cuts and bruises. I would suggest getting her a Tetanus shot soon, if she hasn't had one recently. Your daughter told us she hid under a table during the earthquake. Everything collapsed over and around the table. Another girl was with her. Neither were hurt. The table protected them. They were just trapped where they were. Firefighters and a few construction workers helped to get the girls out."

My wife says to Katie, "I prayed they would find you. Thank God you're alright."

Another paramedic offers, "We can transport to the hospital for an observation by a doctor if you'd like. The decision is up to you."

I ask Katie, "Do you want to go to the hospital? Do you hurt anywhere?"

She replies, "I just want to go home, daddy, I don't want to be here anymore."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Maneuvering away from the news media and the crowd of people attempting to get a glimpse of something, we arrive at my wife's car and begin our journey back home. As I drive, I can feel my stress level drop significantly. It's amazing how different I feel now that Katie is safe.

My wife begins questioning Katie about the earthquake, what happened in the room and how did the girls know to get under a table?

Katie doesn't want to talk about it, but my wife won't stop probing Katie with questions.

Suddenly, Katie yells, "It really scared me, mom!" Then lowering her tone, "The building started shaking and making noises. Sara, the other girl who was trapped with me, told me to get under the table in the room. I closed my eyes as hard as I could, wishing the noise

and shaking to stop. The next thing I knew, everything started falling... I don't ever want to go through that again! I'm never going back to the school again, either."

Shar responds, reaching for her hand, "I'm sorry, honey. You don't have to talk about it anymore. Just sit back and relax. We'll be home soon."

As I continue driving, I notice a few homes have chimney damage along various streets.

I ask my Shar, "How did the house hold up to the earthquake?"

She says, "Some of the book shelves fell and the spices from the kitchen cabinet are all over the floor. I was so worried, I didn't finish cleaning everything."

Chuckling, she tells me how our dog, Kailani, ran under the kitchen table to hide. I think Kailani knew the earthquake was coming, because she ran under the table before the shaking began.

Then in an alarmed tone she states, "Oh No! Your dog is probably eating the spices! I didn't get the chance to clean them up. She'll get sick."

I jokingly respond, "She'll be sorry if she gets into the chili flakes."

Looking into the rear view mirror, I'm relieved to see Katie dozing off to sleep. My wife finally gets a phone call through to our daughter Janie, explaining what happened and that we're all fine and are heading home.

Suddenly Katie starts shouting, "MAKE IT STOP." She begins thrashing around in the back seat, straining against her seat belt.

I nearly drive off the road as her yelling practically scares me to death.

I shout, "What the..?"

Shar shouts, "What's the matter? What's the matter?"

Realizing Katie has had a nightmare about her ordeal, I pull over. Shar gets in the backseat with Katie, holds her and strokes her hair, calming her. She stays in the back seat, comforting Katie the rest of the way home.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"Well, the damage wasn't too bad here, and the dog seems to be fine," I state later that evening, as we finish cleaning up. Katie is asleep on the couch.

I add, "There are a few areas I may need to patch on the walls, but it's not too bad."

Out of the blue, my wife declares, "Jack, I want to move."

Dumbfounded, I ask, "What are you talking about?"

“Jack. I want to move. I’m serious. It’s too dangerous here. Our daughter isn’t even safe at school. Our home is broken. I’m scared. She’s scared. Did you know I had to sit in the bathroom while she showered because she was afraid to be alone?”

I stare at my wife, trying to understand exactly what she’s saying.

She continues, “I don’t feel safe. We’re not safe. I want to move.”

I reply, “Shar, it’s over. Yes, we had two small earthquakes, but we’ve been here for 10 years and never had anything like this before. It’s just happenstance.”

She cuts me off, “No Jack. I’m serious! I want to move. Our daughter almost lost her life!”

Raising my voice in a flustered tone, “So where are you gonna go?”

She responds, “I don’t know. I just want to move.”

I assert, “Shar, no matter where you go, there is always something that could happen. You just need to be prepared and understand what the issues are and get ready.”

She demeaningly fires back, “That’s great to hear, Jack. We’re not prepared for anything.”

I respond, “Then, we’ll get ready and start preparing.”

More demeaning than before, “Yeah, right. I asked about that preparedness business before, and did it happen? No. You’re just trying to buy time, hoping this blows over.”

Just as Shar begins to storm out of the den towards the dining room, the dog bolts upstairs ahead of a loud rumble that echoes throughout the house. Our home begins to shake and jerk. Everything goes dark as the lights go out. The motion knocks my wife to the floor near the dining room table, tosses me out of my chair, and flips the couch on top of Katie. The noise increasingly intensifies until it’s almost deafening. Glass is breaking everywhere, the walls are creaking and Katie is screaming at the top of her lungs from under the couch.

I yell out, “Katie, stay where you are! Shar, hold on to the table leg and stay there!”

It’s pitch black. I try to crawl to the table Shar is hiding under, but the jerking of the house keeps pushing me in different directions. I cover my head with one arm as some sheetrock from the ceiling falls onto my back.

Katie is screaming, “MAKE IT STOP...OH GOD... STOOOOOOOP!”

Shar is crying out “Katie, stay where you are...stay where you are! Jack? Jack?”

I puncture my hand on a nail that fell onto the floor, cursing as I crawl over broken glass, cutting the palms of my hands. As I finally make my way under the table with my wife, I feel the warmth of blood seeping around my knee. This is really, really bad! My eyes are darting all around the room trying to see what is happening.

Katie screams, “DADDY? DADDY? WHERE ARE YOU? HELP ME. MAKE IT STOP!”

I yell across to her, “Just stay still baby. Stay where you are. I’m here. It’ll be over soon.”

But it seems to last forever. The noise is getting louder. My home appears to be disintegrating as it jerks left, then right. Everywhere, I hear objects crashing onto the floor, walls and wood creaking, and glass is breaking. Katie begins to scream hysterically, and Shar sobbing, has a death grip on the center post of the table. I’m scared to death.

**END OF PART 2**