Bryant Godfrey

English 1010

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8.8

Three minutes. My entire being awakens to violent shaking. My body tosses to and fro, like a small rescue boat trying desperately to make it across the Atlantic Ocean. Child sized, the aluminum bunk bed begins moving to the center of the room. The cold, metal window grate I hopelessly cling to, praying the movement will stop. Three minutes is all it takes to profoundly change my life forever.

We walked through the unpaved, dusty streets. Doors slammed coldly in our faces. It had been, in every way, a normal day in the life of a Latter-Day-Saint missionary. The large, uncluttered sky was becoming dark as my companion and I staggered the last few steps to our apartment. The door to the cast iron gate, which surrounds the abode, squeaks out a scream as the key hits the lock. Our feet are sore. The once neatly polished black shoes are now hidden under a thick layer of tan, colored dirt. I think to myself, “I have never been more tired in my entire life.” Somehow, even with the exhaustion, I cannot help but notice the large smile enveloping my newly colored face. I love Chile, no matter how tired I am.

The best part of the day had now arrived, sleep. With a bit of effort, I haul myself onto the top bunk of the bed. With the gray wool blanket snuggled tightly against me, it doesn’t take long to drift off to sleep and begin dreaming.

A sound, deep and profound, begins to slowly enter my ears. The volume of the noise increases until it reaches a beastly roar. I am jolted awake. The entire house and everything in it, has begun to quake and tremble. Having had no previous experience with an earthquake, my first instinct does not surprise me. Get out NOW. As if in slow motion, I leap from my perch on the bed and hit the tiled floor. Someone has managed to, in the darkness, find the keys and open the front door. In a matter of seconds all four of us are outside, taking it in, watching, hearing, feeling the sixth largest earthquake ever recorded.

Three minutes was all it took for the 8.8 magnitude quake to decimate the small town of Hualqui. It is 3:34 A.M and it is into the darkness we intend to venture, however we need supplies. Upon re-entering, it appears the house has vomited. Books, pamphlets, and shattered glass make up a haunting mosaic on the tiled floor. We quickly put on jackets, pants, and shoes. I snatch my black Nike backpack from the bedpost, toss my Black Diamond headlamp awkwardly upon my head, and we are off.

It isn’t until outside again that the gravity of the recent events really hits me. Words like earthquake, injured, and killed, all go sprinting through my head. I am informed by my companion, Elder Gary, that we have a plan.

A bright, red sun is just beginning to peak its head over the nearby mountains. The gray, eerie fog that crept in overnight, now slowly wisps away into nothing. We have been hiking for about an hour, twisting and winding, following the road to Chiguayante. The plan that my companion spoke of is just this; get to Chiguayante and re-group with other missionaries.

The distance we must go is six miles, and I feel we have made impressive progress. The people we pass seem stunned, even bewildered, not knowing what their course of action should be. Many of their wrinkled, tan faces look down, no doubt comparing the cracked, tan earth with their own faces. Being focused on the people and their faces, I hardly notice the vehicle that has pulled up alongside our small quartet.

With some resemblance to its original white, the rust covered Suzuki L40 squeaks to a halt next to us. “What is this thing? My four-wheeler has bigger tires than that!’ I think to myself.

The van is miniscule, probably intended to seat a maximum of three passengers. I am astounded when the passenger side window rolls down, and I see at least seven people squished into every crack and crevice the van offers.

“Do you need a ride to Chiguayante?” pipes a woman with a large mole on her cheek.

“Um, yes, we actually do.” I reply, already nervous of my decision.

It takes a moment for the four of us to heap ourselves into the already overloaded van, but somehow we fit. The van reeks of sweat and has trash filling the remaining crevices we somehow manage not to fill. Formalities are exchanged between us and our band of rescuers. I give my name, where I am from, and how long I have been in the country; surprised they can understand my broken Spanish.

After what seems like an eternity, trapped inside our sardine-can size prison, we reach our destination. One by one we slide out of the van, grateful to be out of the putrid situation. Turning my head slightly to the right, I see a comforting, secure sight, the church. Massive white walls, and a forest green tin roof make up the exterior of the building, however it is not what is outside I care about. Deep down inside of myself, I know that inside that building await my comrades, just as scared and unsure as I am. I know the hell the earthquake created is far from over, but that I do not have to face it alone.

I look to my companion. He is not there. I look back to the van. It is not there. It is in this moment I realize where I really am. I am yanked back to the present. The tan micro-fiber couch is comfortable and familiar, it is the first time I have felt it in two years; I am finally home. I sit upon it, contemplating the events that shaped me over the course of the last two years. Vivid and bright, the memories of the 8.8 come flooding back. A familiar grin begins to envelope my face once again. I think to myself, “The earthquake was the most difficult thing I have ever been through, how did I do it?” It is then that I realize it wasn’t my personal strength or survival skills; it was the strength I found in numbers. When life continues to upheave and quake everything I know; I don’t have to face it alone. I am prepared and ready for any subsequent 8.8 experience that life has to offer.

I calmly tilt my head downward; glancing at the metallic Fossil watch situated firmly on my wrist. The grin on my face grows a little more as I realize something. I have been on the couch for exactly three minutes. Three minutes was all it took.