

The Richter Sanction

by Jack Swenson

A Satire

There were four of us at the table in the restaurant: Dr. Richter, my friend, me, and a mysterious woman. My friend, a colleague, was babysitting the expert who was giving a lecture at the college on the hill. The mysterious woman was with me, but I had no idea who she was. That was the mystery.

"Now," my friend said. "Tell us about earthquakes. Can we expect one anytime soon?"

The doctor was happy to talk about his specialty. He knew his stuff, too, of course.

My friend and I eagerly lapped up his comments and anecdotes. He was upbeat about big cities and earthquakes. "Gets rid of a lot of bad architecture," he said. I asked about an area nearby where they had built a community on landfill. The doctor said that in the event of a quake, it would shake like a bowlful of Jell-o. He chuckled. The thought seemed to please him.

We ordered. The Great Man had the schnitzel. I ordered a chop as did my friend. The mysterious woman ordered the fish.

The woman was dressed in black. She wore a wide-brimmed hat, which was also black. Her hair was the color of a Raven's wing; her lips were cherry red. Her eyes were in shadow. She held a black and silver cigarette holder in gloved fingers.

I asked her if she wanted another martini, and she said but of course and blew a smoke ring at the ceiling.

The doctor said that here on the Peninsula south of San Francisco the biggest problem in an earthquake would be the tsunami afterwards. "Did you know that most of the bay shoreline is below sea level?" he asked. My friend and I laughed. We weren't worried, we said; the college was on a hill.

The mysterious woman excused herself and went to the ladies' room. "Je dois prendre une décharge, aussi," she said. My friend

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looked at me. "Is she French?" he asked. I shrugged. I was looking at her ankles as she walked away.

After the sherbet, my friend glanced at his watch. "We better get going," he said. The lecture was at eight o'clock. He picked up the check. We all stood. I made a slight bow in the doctor's direction. I didn't know if you were permitted to shake hands with a famous person. The Great Man smiled. "A pleasure," he said. He kissed the mysterious lady's gloved hand.

At a hotel, in a room with a view of a million winking lights, I sat in my skivvies in an armchair smoking a Lucky Strike and wondered if I should call my wife. My lady friend sat on the bed wearing nothing but her hat and rummaged through her purse. I asked her what she was looking for, and she said her diaphragm.

