

# SUERTE DEL TERREMOTO

By Joseph Hirsch

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *A dark tale of retribution in the underbelly of the drug world that is every bit as interesting for the way it's told as the tale itself. Action and dialogue are compacted between dense description and the resulting disrupted linearity whelps TNT dramatic tension. Shrouded characterization is minimally textured, mood big bad Noir-ish and the prose is so good it's like put your Trojan on Billy it's time to dance. Quote: 'The bulletproof Lexan glass windows could only roll down four inches. Roger stuck his head through the partition where there was no tinted glass, smiled with a mouthful of golds. "Raiders," he said, still grinning so hard his ears twitched. "My man." He tapped the side of the Jeep, the glossy apple-red topcoat showing his fingerprints for the moment before the smudges evaporated.' And, 'If his two friends found him, they would have nothing but time on their hands to engage in the kinds of tortures he knew they were capable of; they had the wire hangers and this building probably had a hot radiator; he had a sphincter, and there were no impediments to them engaging in that kind of party.' Five stars.*

Suerte del Terremoto about 2,900 Words

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Someone had left the lamp on in Mr. Durnham's room last night after he died and the medics came to carry him out of the Lancelot Arms SRO, and the day was overcast enough for the same lamp to pour a few rays of dying light out the window over the couple of city blocks where the retired and disabled sat around, shooting the breeze.

Clarence in the tattered Raiders fitted cap looked up at the window, watching that warm mica light radiating from the lamp in Durnham's room. The parchment of the shade over the lamp looked old enough to tear at the slightest provocation, ripping like a petrified mummy's wraps if so much as a breeze or a cat's paw hit it.

"They get his kitties out?" Someone asked. Clarence looked over to see who had spoken. It had been Earl, polishing the brass spokes of his wheelchair with an oilcloth.

"He never got the authorization, never filled out the forms, so Cutty just chucked 'em out." That was Curtis, an ashen-skinned older black man with an unkempt beard like a kinked wooly lamb's hide. Clarence didn't know much about Curtis, except that he liked to layer his clothes no matter what the weather, and once you got him started on the Bible, he wouldn't stop.

A light rain fell. Earl leaned back, contemplated popping a wheelie, cutting on a dime. He sometimes performed tricks to kill the hours. "They'll sell them Siamese cats to Yeung Ho Kitchen. Lots of protein in felines."

They laughed, except for Clarence. He lit a cigarette, cupping the flame on his lighter. A salty wind moved through the canyon formed by the shabby old brick and brownstone hotels in the Tenderloin.

The men heard loud rap music muted by the weight of bulletproof glass before they saw the Jeep Comanche.

Curtis kept his eyes averted, timid around strangers, especially flashy and young ones. He'd gotten beaten up too many times by the across-the-Bay-Bridge-kids. Earl didn't like it much either, but knew Clarence had to go with them.

The bulletproof Lexan glass windows could only roll down four inches. Roger stuck his head through the partition where there was no tinted glass, smiled with a mouthful of golds. "Raiders," he said, still grinning so hard his ears twitched. "My man." He tapped the side of the Jeep, the glossy apple-red topcoat showing his fingerprints for the moment before the smudges evaporated.

Clarence moved closer to the Comanche, hopping into the truck's bed. Rog and Smokey had made good on their threat to get a layer of Goldschläger flakes embedded in the car's alloy and Earl practically salivated as he watched them pull off, wondering how much it would cost to get those little gold speckles in his set of wheels.

Clarence watched his friends grow smaller and then disappear from his place in the bed of the truck moving through the downtown area.

Smoke looked back from the driver's seat, so familiar with this neighborhood that he could navigate it with one hand on the burlwood wheel while keeping his eyes on the guest in the backseat. "What you think, my man? A's or Giants?"

Clarence turned back toward the front of the jeep. Smokey's doo rag was low enough over his forehead to crease his eyebrows, scrunching the skin of his brow so that the rippled flesh looked like that of Worf on *The Next Generation*, which Clarence sometimes watched in the Lancelot's dayroom.

"I thought the Series was off?" Clarence coughed. His lungs burnt, and every time he spoke it felt like someone was pouring chlorine down his throat. He wondered if he had cancer.

Smokey swung a left, taking a familiar backstreet with newspapers and litter scattered on the road and jagged pictograms of graffiti sprayed up and down the walls. "Nah, man, the engineers went down there and said it's safe."

"Play Ball!" Roger cupped his hands around his mouth, mimicking the sports announcer from his slouch in the passenger seat.

Smoke put it in park in front of an ancient concrete loading dock with its poured stone broken down to the rebar. A handful of seagulls nested in the architrave above the door. They cooed

until the doors on the Jeep slammed shut, at which point the birds scattered to the sky, leaving a wake of feathers behind them.

“Birds is headed to Candlestick for the game,” Roger said, sulking as he adjusted the cross straps of his web holsters beneath his Troop jacket.

“We got time.” Smoke checked his Presidential Rolex, its gold glowing white and making a counterfeit of Rog’s teeth. He let the bejeweled watch slide back down his wrist and threw aside the shuttered scissor gate barring the warehouse entrance.

Brown cardboard boxes sat stacked on either side of the room. Smoke and Co. had apparently tested the merchandise, as pink packing peanuts overflowed from one box. A Mitsubishi Diamond TV sat in a harvest gold cabinet in the center of the room, on a length of blood-splattered plastic.

A Galil automatic rested at the side of the TV. On-screen a man narrated the antics of a squirrel hopping from picnic table to picnic table on some campgrounds. The squirrel glided into the towering coiffure of a woman with too much hairspray. As she stood and screamed and the laugh track cued up, the narrator said, “Hmm, I think I’ll hide my acorns here!”

Roger giggled and made himself at home on the makeshift chair of a cardboard box where one of the TVs still sat. He opened his red Troop silk jacket to give himself easy access to the burners if he needed them.

He kept his eye on the TV and spoke to Smoke in the backroom getting things ready. “Hey, yo, we need to put some mag tires on that bad boy out there.”

Smoke’s voice sounded cautious, measured, as he was half-occupied. “I’m thinking run- flats is the way to go. Can’t outrun Jake and the Fat Man with no monster truck tires, my man.”

“That bulletproof shit’s already heavier than a mother anyway, though. Might as well.”

They let the subject drop. On TV there was an ad for a theme park. Two white children with corn-blond hair smiled as they went upside down on a rollercoaster’s loop.

Clarence took his Raider’s hat off, wiping down the thin strands of hair that stuck to the pate as if glued to the crown of his bald spot.

“Hey, you need to put that dope down and start mainlining that Rogaine.” Roger laughed at his joke.

Clarence rolled up the loose raglan sleeves on his gravy-stained Goodwill rugby.

“Nah,” Roger said, and stayed his hand. “Not this time.”

Clarence, slightly confused, obeyed, pulling down his sleeves. He looked around the room. “Where’s Bad Moon?”

“He’s pitting tonight,” Roger said. “Over in Oakland.” His bloodshot eyes hardened. “I told you you ain’t got to be scared as long as he’s on his chain, anyway.”

You couldn’t convince Clarence of that, though. Bad Moon was a Cane Corso mastiff whose boulder of a head and two testicles were larger than most men’s. His russet coat made him look like some kind of iron gargoyle weeping rust as it melted in the white-hot forges of Hell. The dog was a mass of marbled muscle on muscle, a pure monster whose presence even a spoonful of Mama H barely made tolerable.

“All right,” Smoke said, returning from the bathroom. He had the package in his right hand, the butcher paper wrapped around a glassine layer stamped with a Scorpion logo to let people know the batch belonged to the Triad. “This is high class, for the locals. Shit’s non-soluble.” He paused. “You know what that means?”

Clarence nodded, understanding now why Rog had urged him to roll his sleeves down.

“Usual deal,” Smoke continued, fitting some butternut-colored powder into the beveled mouth of the glass stem. “You rate it on a scale of one to ten. And then we pay you in powder for your service in this series of FDA clinical trials.”

“Don’t burn your eye,” Roger said. “Make sure not to light it too close, cause that thing gets hot.”

Clarence set the pipe in his mouth. Smoke turned around to Roger, who watched a commercial in which a Corgi in a Hawaiian shirt and sunglasses surfed on a banana-colored board. “Hang Ten!” The dog said, “with Aloha Punch!”

Clarence gripped the glass stem in his mouth and pointed the gun-shaped lighter at Smoke. He pulled the trigger. There was a soughing hiss, like high tide’s echo trapped in a seashell, and then a spout of bluish-white flame erupted, boiling the filmy mucus from Smokey’s retina, his eye opened in surprise.

Smoke shouted as the sable flesh of his face melted to blackened charcoal. Clarence dropped the pipe from his lips, the lighter from his grip and snagged the package from the screaming man’s right hand. He hauled ass for the front door as the tinkling of shattered glass whispered behind him.

Clarence heard his breath pounding in his ears, heard Roger’s “The fuck?!” faintly over the roar of Smoke’s full-throated screams.

He made it outside, tripped as he was coming down the ramp and flew into the building in front of him, breaking through a termite-eaten creosote train tie lain over a boarded-up window. He

tumbled to a stop inside, stirring up a floury wake of powder that might have been asbestos as he touched down.

Gunshots rang out and the black mold on the surrounding walls exploded, sending a fungal musk into the air. He coughed as the plaster danced and his eyes burned, and ran through the empty room.

The boards groaned beneath his feet and he figured one false step would put him through the duckboards and into a basement where the pipes dripped.

If his two friends found him, they would have nothing but time on their hands to engage in the kinds of tortures he knew they were capable of; they had the wire hangers and this building probably had a hot radiator; he had a sphincter, and there were no impediments to them engaging in that kind of party.

He put more spring in his step.

The windows on the other side of the ground floor of the building were tarped with thin sheets of plastic blowing free with the wind, in and out like a translucent ghostly shroud. He ran through that, fighting the wraithlike form as it clung to him, landing on a grey patch of gravel outside.

Beneath him lay a bed of green beer bottle glass glittering from the concrete and a couple empty syringes with orange blood like gum arabic congealed on their points.

“Motherfucker!” The Comanche jerked to a stop in the alleyway to Clarence’s right, blotting out the light in front of him. Smoke, his face mangled by the kiss of flame, skin around his eye welded into a waxen mass of proud flesh, winced but leveled his Sig through the hurt, rage overcoming all else.

A bullet left the chamber and claimed a piece of mortar from the wall next to Clarence’s ear. He rolled backwards, falling through the window through which he’d just come, back into the empty building that felt like it might collapse on its foundation with the next false step.

The car door slammed shut, an echo ripped through the barren stone of the alley.

He could hear them cussing and picked himself up, running for the hole in the opposite wall through which he’d initially busted his way like the Kool-Aid Man, just as shots stitched their way around him. The bullets buzzed like hornets from a nest that had been kicked one too many times.

The Israeli rifle poured the rest of its full magazine through the breach, one shot ripping a tear in Clarence’s billowing shirt as he booked it, finally making his way through the gap glowing with daylight in front of him.

In the alley he could hear someone shouting in Vietnamese and a police siren wailed. He ran right, down the alley, knowing they could appear in front of him any second. Left was Skid Row, and right was the Tenderloin.

The Row was downhill, which was easier on the legs, but people were less likely to care about shots down there and so Smoke and Roger could pick him off like it was a duck hunt. If he could hoof it up the hill, there were nonprofits and even some police cruisers that would make it harder for Roger's dumbass with his firepower and Smoke with his smaller guns and bigger brain to light him up.

Decisions, he looked left, held the dope package to his belly, beneath his shirt, like he was the Make a Wish kid and it was the game-winning pigskin a quarterback had brought to his bedside.

A Muni came, the bus lumbering and hissing as it left a cloud of heavy, warm exhaust in its wake. He watched its metal body parade past, slowly, like a papier mâché dragon through Chinatown on New Year's, and then he ran across the street, almost tripping, getting his foot caught in an old cable car line lain in the pavement.

He ran until he was ahead of a postman in his blue khakis and pith helmet. The guy walked with the mail in a leather satchel as his chain wallet rattled.

Clarence slowed to a walk-trot, spinning three-hundred and sixty degrees and seeing the world shake around him, panic spiking in his heart, unable to shake the threat of those two men in their red ride bearing down on him.

He felt the pressure of the ghetto wane in increments and slowed to a walk. In front of him a pretty girl in a cornflower blue sundress pushed a tan canvas baby stroller.

The houses around here were Victorians, two-storied and with yellow bay windows and pistachio-colored minarets and cyclamen spires, the fairytale inverse of the world where he lived only a few blocks away.

He didn't sense too many eyes on him. He could be here to cut someone's lawn or something like that. Some rich people were oddities and wore ragged clothes from time-to-time. He'd seen the fallen stockbrokers and CEOs hitting the pipe or plunging the needle with him on Murphy beds.

The lines in the city existed, but they blurred. Not like in the old days, with the Haight and the head shops, but still.

He passed the old Bank. The once-blond stuccowork had mostly flaked off, but the Palladian shell of the thing stood intact, looking like a ramparted outpost in some dying kingdom. From above the next hill a tangerine-colored cable car took the incline, clanging as its wooden body shimmered from the light of the sun setting over the horizon.

The Jeep broke the moment's idyll, peeling off and burning rubber where before the trolley had clanged and made its unhurried rounds with a carload of tourists.

He knew, somehow, even through the impenetrable black of the tinted windows, that they had seen him, and the hard turn Smokey made only confirmed his gut feeling.

Something broke in him and he could run no more. It wasn't just that his lungs and his legs hurt.

He walked into the middle of the street, ready for them to gun him down.

The Jeep drove on the unbroken yellow that separated the four lanes where there was no traffic. Clarence straddled his own piece of the yellow line, squinting against the turtle-waxed shine of the car bearing down on him.

He shifted the package to the front of his belly, hoping that when that car hit him the pouch would explode and the dope dust would go everywhere, like ashes from an urn scattered to the four winds.

The Comanche ate up the road, a second and some change from plowing him, and still he didn't move.

He closed his eyes, accepted the end, and the ground shook.

"Aftershock!" A woman shouted from a trattoria on the sidewalk. A sandwich board collapsed to the ground and a man in spandex fell off his carbon fiber bicycle, cutting his elbows as he bounced to the concrete and landed splayed sideways and moaning.

Panes of glass shattered immediately in their storefront sashes and their sparkling shards fell

him got lifted by the concrete which the enraged center of the Earth had turned to liquid in its rumbling, flipping the ride on its top and letting gravity do the rest to carry it down the steep hill.

He felt the heat of the burning metal deathtrap as the ride breezed past him, watched the upside-down car emit a shower of sparks as its shiny hood burnt free of its metal skin with a horrid shearing sound.

The thing finally rolled to a stop, crashing into a Honda Civic's side after having lost most of its momentum. For all its previous terrible power it might as well have been a shopping cart.

The impact had triggered the car's horn, and the blatting joined the chorus of other alarms going off up and down the block, along with a clarion-like tinkling that came from several parking meters that had fallen over and vomited up coins onto asphalt hot as oven-warmed butter.

Clarence continued up the hill and toward the lowering sun, wishing he hadn't lost his hat.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** Suerte Del Terremoto came to me pretty much in toto after watching the same homeless man working the same concrete island (without much success) who I pass on my daily commute into the city. I wanted to make an “invisible man” the centerpiece of a story, to suggest his history and backstory without being too explicit or diving in depth (since I wanted the piece to center on a couple of action set-pieces). Looking for analogs in the world of fiction, I'd say it's a distant cousin to my favorite Chester Himes novel, Run, Man, Run, a minimalist masterpiece of the “Chase” story in the suspense genre. There's something very elemental and compelling about a straightforward story of the hunted and the hunter, so much so that when you write such tales it's sometimes not even necessary to give the characters names, though I saddled my protagonist with “Clarence”. I debated calling him just “the Man in the Raiders Hat” at some length in an earlier draft, but that just kept reminding me of “The Man in the Yellow Hat,” from the old Curious George stories, which wasn't quite the vibe I was trying to achieve.

Nothing against Curious George, though.

**BIO:** Joseph Hirsch is the author of many published books, short stories, and essays. His books can be purchased [here](#): More information can be found here: [www.joeyhirsch.com](http://www.joeyhirsch.com)