Ernesto Rasa and The Earthquake
Frank Russo

Two nights before the earthquake and tidal wave were due to hit, Ernesto Rasa wore to bed the singlet and shirt he had worn that evening. His wife Silvana watched as he changed into a pair of clean underpants then stepped back into the shorts he had just removed.

‘You’re not taking off your clothes?’ she asked, covering her body in a petticoat before removing her bra and underpants.

‘What if the earthquake comes tonight?’ Ernesto replied. ‘It won’t wait for you to put on makeup and a nice dress.’

Silvana sighed. ‘The man who had the dream said the earthquake wouldn’t come until Monday. Now you want to bring it forwards?’

‘You should make yourself ready,’ he told her. ‘In case it comes early.’

Silvana got into bed, turning away from Ernesto as she covered her shoulders with the cotton sheet. She closed her eyes as he knelt beside their bed to pray out loud, a practice he had adopted since joining his new church. ‘Lord, I give myself to you, so I can be filled with your spirit,’ he called out in a measured tone, as if giving a performance. Silvana whispered a Hail Mary to herself. She knew its words off by heart; its rhythms trance-like. They were perfect for blocking out the sound of her husband’s prayer.

Ernesto listened to Silvana’s breathing as he lay in bed, going over in his mind the things he had packed. Days before he arranged the things they would take on the floor of their sleep-out, but at odd moments he remembered objects he had forgotten to pack: a hammer and nails, batteries, kerosene, a box of matches. Small items came to him in the night, keeping him awake as he tried to remember where in the kitchen or his shed they were stored.

Sweat collected on his neck and underarms, but he forced himself to wear his shirt and shorts throughout the night; if the earthquake came early there’d be no time to fuss with clothes. The man who had the dream warned of a tidal wave to follow the tremors. If they escaped the earthquake, the tidal wave would still be a threat given their house was a suburb away from the sea. He found it impossible to get into a comfortable position in his shirt. When he turned its fabric pulled against his skin, its buttons pressed into him. He lifted himself on one elbow to adjust the fabric, waking Silvana as he moved.

‘Sta fermo!’ she snapped, ordering him to stay still.

‘I’m trying to get comfortable,’ he muttered.

‘You’d be more comfortable if you took your clothes off.’

He grunted and closed his eyes. He imagined the drive he would have to do the next day. He had never driven that far before. The drive would take him well past the suburbs, through the Barossa, then east towards the Victorian border. He had studied the route on a map the week before and confirmed with his friend Renzo the roads he would need to take. Drifting into a light sleep, he imagined these roads jammed. He pictured his family sitting in his Kingswood, stuck behind a mass of cars. Others shared the same plans as him. The roads out of the city would be clogged with people fleeing the city. He tried to imagine reaching their destination, imagining flat
orange groves as far as the eye can see, as Renzo described to him, but each time his dreams returned him and his family to the start of their journey.

In the early morning he dreamed he was driving in the streets near his house. The traffic in front of him came to a halt. Up ahead he noticed a police officer holding up a hand to stop drivers. Ernesto got out of his car and saw a police cordon stretching across the road. He imagined something awful had happened, an accident or a chemical spill. Behind the cordon a procession appeared. Ernesto didn’t recognise any of the people in the procession at first, even though they had the familiar look of kin or neighbours. Four men carried a plaster statue of a saint, balancing it on their shoulders like pall bearers. Hundreds of people walked behind the statue, worshipping it like a golden calf – priests, altar boys, a brass band. He recognised the statue: skin taut over its ribcage; thin limbs that could be snapped like twigs; naked apart from a loincloth and look of agony. It was a statue from the local Catholic church. Then he noticed Silvana walking in the crowd, holding their daughters’ hands. He called out to her, but she didn’t hear. He called out louder still, but she was caught up in the procession. He tried to jump the cordon, but the police officer stopped him. Silvana moved with the crowd until he lost sight of her. Agitated, he tried to run in the direction of his wife, but he was pinned down by the police officer.

He woke startled, wet with sweat. Panicking, he felt the bed sheets for dampness. They were still dry. He looked at the ground surrounding the bed. The linoleum appeared to be dry as well. They were safe, he told himself; the tidal wave hadn’t arrived.

The next morning Ernesto found his son Peter in the lounge room, dressed in his pyjamas, eating a bowl of dry cereal.

‘Get dressed,’ he said to him. We’re leaving soon.’

‘I’m watching The Jetsons,’ Peter replied without moving his eyes from the television.

‘There’s no time for this rubbish,’ Ernesto told him, switching off the television.

‘What did you do that for?’ Peter sulked. ‘I’m not going. I’m staying here. I don’t care if I drown.’

Ernesto shook his head, blaming the two shifts he worked – one manufacturing fridge bodies in an overheated factory, the other packing loaves of bread into crates. Every weekday and weeknight he was gone, providing for a wife and children who grew more distant and disrespectful each day. There was no time for teaching them manners. Things would be different after the earthquake, he told himself. He wasn’t sure how yet, but he knew they would be different.

Silvana had woken early to pack the last of the things in the kitchen. She sorted through the items remaining in the fridge, deciding what could be salvaged. Freezer bags filled with meat were left to perish in the bin. Milk and cheese and opened jars of preserves were jettisoned.

Ernesto was annoyed to see she had waited until the last minute to finish packing. He had planned for weeks the things they would take with them. Boxes and suitcases rested against the wall of the sleep-out. He searched the kitchen and then the shed for the items he had remembered during the night, then ordered Peter and Anna, the two eldest, to carry the boxes and suitcases outside so he could arrange them on
the car’s roof-rack and the trailer. In all there were seven suitcases, twelve cardboard boxes, a crate containing Silvana’s dowry, their dining room chairs, a mirror and three framed pictures. The boot of the Kingswood was filled with used soft drink bottles Ernesto had filled with water.

‘After the flood there won’t be any fresh drinking water,’ one woman from his church had warned. He spent weeks collecting the bottles, foregoing the refund for returning them. He rinsed them thoroughly to remove any last trace of fizzy drink before filling them with tap water. Silvana asked why he was collecting so many bottles. ‘After the flood there won’t be any fresh drinking water,’ he told her.

‘Won’t there be any water in the Riverland?’

‘Is there harm in being prepared?’ he told her.

Once Silvana and their children were seated in his car, Ernesto returned to the house. He moved from room to room, looking at the walls. Within a couple of days the windows would be shattered, the walls and ceilings cracked, if they remained at all. Ernesto imagined the water ceiling-high, like he had seen at Marineland the time Tina and Anna begged him to take them to so they could watch dolphins and fish behind glass. He locked the doors behind him out of habit, even though he knew it would be useless.

As he drove past the small park at the end of their street, Ernesto watched a group of children kicking a soccer ball. He wondered whether they’d still be playing there the following day. He shook his head, angry at the neglect shown by their parents, who would let them perish. Everywhere he drove he saw people in the streets: mowing lawns, returning from the corner shop with the paper, watering their gardens before the midday sun hit. Ernesto tried to make a mental note of everyone he saw. Something to record them. In just over a day every physical trace of them would be gone, buried under rubble or washed out to sea.

‘Fheé,’ Ernesto called out as he threw a card onto the kitchen table. ‘Bastun,’ he said proudly – clubs – knowing he had cornered his workmate, Renzo.

‘Sei venuto proprio dove non ‘aiu’ – you’ve come right where I have no cards, Renzo conceded.

Ernesto laughed, pleased he’d finally beaten Renzo. ‘While I remember,’ he said, changing the subject. ‘Can I get the number of your cousin who builds walls? I’m thinking of replacing the piece of rubbish wall out the front.’

‘E perduto,’ Renzo told him. ‘It’s wasted. It’s no use doing anything before the wave comes. It’ll destroy everything.’

‘What wave?’ he asked.

‘Where have you been?’ Renzo shook his head. ‘It’s been on the news. First there’ll be an earthquake, then a wave. Together they’ll destroy the city.’ He looked Ernesto in the eye. ‘Everything finish,’ he added in English, making a horizontal chop with his hand to demonstrate how the city would be flattened.

Ernesto was silent. He hadn’t watched the news in weeks. Silvana hadn’t mentioned anything either.

‘How could you not know?’ Renzo pleaded. ‘They’ve been showing him on the news – the painter from Melbourne. The one who had the dream, the message from God. January 19. That’s when the city will be destroyed. At midday.’

‘A painter? What kind of paintings does he do?’ Ernesto imagined religious
paintings, like the frescoes he had once seen in a church in Messina.  

Renzos shook his head. ‘No, not that kind of painting. He’s a house painter.’ 

Ernesto wondered if Renzo was having a joke at his expense. ‘But why?’ he asked. 

Renzos shook his head. ‘It’s punishment.’ 

‘Punishment for what?’ 

‘For Dunstan,’ Renzo replied. 

‘For Dunstan,’ Ernesto repeated, nodding his head, even though he didn’t understand. 

‘Dunstan and his laws,’ Renzo muttered. 

Ernesto asked Silvana if she had heard about the house painter and his prediction. 

‘It’s been on the news twice this week,’ she said. ‘Maybe you were in the garden when they showed it.’ 

‘And you didn’t say anything to me?’ 

Silvana shrugged. ‘I’m supposed to know you want to hear about things like that?’ She found the previous day’s Advertiser and turned the pages. ‘Here,’ she said, pointing to the paper. It was a notice for a meeting, headed ‘EARTHQUAKE! WHEN?’ 

Renzos scanned the notice and saw the meeting was being held in a Christadelphian Hall not far from their home. 

‘Is that place like the church you’ve joined?’ Silvana asked. 

‘No,’ he told her. ‘My church is in Italian. You know that. Why don’t you come and see for yourself?’ 

‘I already have a church,’ she replied. ‘Anyhow, it’s just a man who’s saying it. He says it came to him in a dream. How do you know he shouldn’t be locked up in Hillcrest?’ 

In a smallgoods store on Tapleys Hill Road Ernesto overheard a conversation between two elderly women. ‘Cosimo s’indàjùì,’ one of them said. ‘Cosimo’s gone. Went to Melbourne. Sold his house.’ Ernesto listened closely. 

‘Come, what are we meant to do?’ said the other woman. 

‘My husband says we should go to Italy for a month. Maybe for longer; maybe there’ll be nothing to return to.’ 

‘Are you going?’ 

‘Too much money,’ she said, rubbing a thumb and forefinger together. 

‘Instead we’ll go to the Riverland. We have a cousin there to stay with.’ She looked across at Ernesto, sensing his eavesdropping. He picked up a packet of Savoiardi and quickly turned towards the cash register. 

The following Sunday when he attended church there was more talk of the prophecy. Before the service he greeted Renzo and a group of his new acquaintances in the car park outside the small hall that served as a church. 

A man called Ennio, referred to as Professore on account of being a teacher, said ‘It’s all a load of rubbish. The man who said this is a house painter. He doesn’t know anything.’ A man called Cesare interrupted, ‘Professore, you’ll wish you weren’t so critical when the wave comes. You better change into your bathers beforehand because you’ll end up getting a nice bath.’ Everyone laughed.
A woman called Concetta told the circle of people that there was no decision to make. ‘All you have to do is leave. Some have already gone to Melbourne. Others are going to the Riverland. Even Mount Lofty,’ she said. ‘From there you’ll be able to see everything, but your feet won’t get wet. You drive there on the morning of the nineteenth. All it takes is half an hour. You won’t regret it when you see what happens.’

Throughout the service Ernesto waited keenly for the pastor to speak about the prophecy, but instead he spoke of it only indirectly. Disasters, he said, were God’s answer to acts of evil, to people turning their backs away from Him, to the licentious hedonism of the modern age. It was a time to listen to the messages of the Bible, to recognise the signs and warnings of what will be the great tribulation. Organ music lifted inside the church’s brick walls as the words to a song were projected onto a screen above the pastor, who whispered them into his microphone as the congregation sang. Ernesto sang with them. In the second verse he heard a groan from the back of the church. He turned, and saw in the last row a girl in a wheelchair, a woman in a head scarf sitting beside her. He recognised them from his old church. He remembered the noises the girl made during mass, a cross between a yawn and a groan, jolting her head from side to side as she bucked in her wheelchair. Her groans came at inconvenient times during the mass at Mater Christi, during prayers and silences. They broke his concentration, making him nervous.

Ernesto turned to look at the girl again. She rocked her head back and forth with the music as she clapped out of time. No-one other than him seemed to be distracted by it. After a while he noticed the girl was groaning quietly to the music. Her mother, who at Mater Christi quietly mouthed the words to the psalms, sang out loud, her chest rising and falling. Ernesto couldn’t help wondering whether his presence at his new church had something to do with the prophecy.

He began to take any opportunity he could find to talk about the prediction and to seek out the views of others. He mentioned the prediction to the newsagent where he bought the paper. She nodded and listened to him as he talked about a column he had seen in the paper the day before by an Anglican minister who advised calm, but she offered no opinion either way. His barber was the same, shrugging his shoulders and telling him he didn’t know about these things. He mentioned it to his workmates at the fridge factory, some of whom shrugged and showed little interest, while others reinforced his fears. A Greek man named Fotis said he had already organised a fortnight of leave around January 19 and told his daughters to take time off from their secretarial jobs. Slavko from Macedonia talked about an earthquake in his home town of Skopje. ‘Many thousand kill,’ he said. ‘All house broken. Everything broken.’ He too had planned holidays around the earthquake.

Ernesto wove the earthquake into conversations with Silvana’s relatives, waiting for opportunities to mention it. With relations it wasn’t merely about getting their views, but about ensuring they made sufficient preparations. At Silvana’s Uncle Cosimo and Aunt Mela’s house he brought up the earthquake while Cosimo described the plans for his daughter’s wedding in February.

‘It’s wasted’ Ernesto told him bluntly. ‘Tell them to wait until after the earthquake. Who knows what will be standing?’

Cosimo laughed. ‘Come on. Don’t believe that rubbish.’
‘There are many who believe it. I’m not going to be here when it happens.’
‘Nothing is going to happen. It will be a day the same as any other.’
‘Some people say it’s going to be worse than the earthquake that destroyed Messina in 1908.’
‘Don’t be a fool,’ Cosimo chided.
‘A fool?’ Ernesto questioned, trying to contain his anger. ‘My grandmother used to say Se si veru Gesu; fa che Reggio-Messina non esista piu. It will be the same here.’
‘That’s just superstitious old women with nothing better to say.’
‘Ernesto, we need to go,’ Silvana called to him. ‘It’s late. The children need to go to bed.’
‘All right,’ he said, shaking Cosimo’s hand. ‘For your sake, I hope you’re right.’
Aunt Mela followed them to the car. She turned to Silvana to ask, ‘Do you believe it’s going to happen?’
‘Don’t worry, Zia,’ Silvana told her. ‘We’ll just have to wait and see.’
‘Are you going to the Riverland?’ she asked anxiously. ‘The neighbours behind us say they’re going.’
‘What else can I do? I go where my husband goes.’
‘I told Cosimo maybe we should go too, just for the day, but he said I was becoming stupid.’
‘You’ll be safe here,’ Silvana told her. ‘Just close all your doors and windows and stay inside.’

It didn’t strike Ernesto as remarkable that God should have made known His intentions to a house painter by means of a dream. God had sent the Angel Gabriel to a carpenter. God had chosen the carpenter as His son’s earthly father. Ernesto’s mother had always placed great store in listening to the messages in dreams, fearful of dreams involving relatives or loved ones, anxious of the ill news they augured. She dreamt of her father on the night he died in his sleep. She dreamt of Clark Gable dressed as a priest the week he died. Once she had a dream about Ernesto and rushed to visit him in the morning. She sighed when she saw him. ‘Last night I dreamed you were sitting very still. You were wearing a black suit and were surrounded by white crows.’

‘I’m all right,’ he told her, abashed by her excessive concern, although later that morning he called in sick to both his places of work after his mind wandered to the machinery he used each day and the drive to and from the bakery and the factory, to all the possibilities for injury.

He remembered the descriptions his grandmother had given of the earthquake of Messina, which she repeated constantly, as if nothing else of consequence had happened in her eighty-six years. She had been a teenager when it happened. The house of her parents swayed with the quake, but escaped serious damage. The houses of two aunts were not as fortunate, both swallowed whole by the earth with all their occupants inside. Friends and other relatives were lost under the rubble of their homes. Sometimes she mentioned the earthquake was followed by three tidal waves which washed over the city, drowning many who hadn’t already perished. Other times she spoke of fires that burned for days, the city rendered a vast crematorium. Gloved
soldiers pulled the dead from the city’s ruins, their nostrils plugged with antiseptic balls of cotton wool to protect them from the spread of contagion. She recounted how her father was so shaken by the early morning quake that from then on he refused to sleep indoors again. Sometimes she recited a verse that sounded like a children’s rhyme, even though it spoke of destruction: *Se si veru Gesu; fa che Reggio-Messina non esista piu*. The verse was a challenge to Jesus, and perhaps to God Himself; a dare to prove his existence by destroying both cities. Even though he knew it was wrong to challenge God in this way, he liked the poem’s sing-song rhyme and wondered what the people of those cities could have done to deserve such destruction. He substituted the word Adelaide for the cities of Reggio and Messina and whispered the poem to himself, but it no longer had the same ring. He tried to translate it into English: *If you’re true, Jesus, make Adelaide exist no more*. He whispered it over and over, at different speeds and in different tones, but despite his attempts, it had no resonance.

He wished his mother were still alive. She would have known from her dreams whether something catastrophic was about to happen. He watched the news for updates and signs and paid particular attention whenever Dunstan was interviewed, trying to glean anything he could. But all Dunstan spoke of were retail trading hours and the education system. Ernesto wanted him to speak about the earthquake. Instead he spoke about the opening of an automobile components factory and about the flow of the Murray.

As the day of the prophecy approached, Dunstan finally spoke. The news showed a Greek festival at Glenelg. An Orthodox bishop cloaked in black threw a gold cross from the edge of the jetty and a group of young men dived into the water to retrieve it. A seventeen-year-old emerged with the cross in the palm of his hand. Dunstan spoke of spurious claims of disasters made in the media and told the crowd there was no basis for the prediction. He told people not to be alarmed and promised that he himself would be at Glenelg Beach on the day of the predicted earthquake. Ernesto looked at Dunstan’s face and gestures and listened closely to his voice. He looked and sounded like he had conviction in what he was saying. Ernesto wanted to believe him, but he figured Dunstan was a man, like the house painter. Both of them had equal standing, except one had spoken with God.

One afternoon it reached 40 degrees. Ernesto’s children begged him to take them to the beach. The idea made him nervous, even though the earthquake and tidal wave were still weeks away. He asked Silvana what she thought, but she shrugged her shoulders and left it to him to decide. Pressured by the nagging, he drove them to Grange beach, but when they got there all of the car parks were taken, so he drove further north along the coast. There were thousands on the beaches. He kept driving until they came to a stretch where only a few houses dotted the road, alongside the timber frames of others being built. The new side-streets leading up to the sand dunes were deserted.

‘Where have you brought us?’ Silvana complained. ‘To the middle of nowhere?’

‘Let’s try it,’ Ernesto tried to convince her. ‘Maybe it will be better without so many people.’ They walked through dunes covered in pigface and low-lying brush, carrying their swimming suits and towels in plastic shopping bags. The beach was...
empty bar a few people. They placed their plastic bags a few metres away from those of another family and the children took turns changing into their swimming costumes behind a towel which Silvana held up.

Ernesto reclined slightly in the water, his arms outstretched to give the impression he was floating while his feet were anchored in the sand. His children played a game of chasey next to him. Their ability to swim amazed him, as did their fearlessness in the water. He wondered where they had picked up this ability when neither he nor Silvana could have taught them. Silvana wore a loose cotton dress over her bathers and waded out only as far as her knees, calling out to Peter and Anna not to swim out too far. ‘Look after Tina,’ she called. ‘Don’t go out so far. She can’t follow you.’

After lying in the water for some time Ernesto noticed that apart from the other family, all of the people on the beach were men. Three men sunbaked alongside each other at the foot of the dunes, laughing amongst themselves. An elderly man with leathery skin sunbaked nude. Another wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses stood behind the first row of dunes and surveyed the beach. Ernesto watched as two men walk towards the ocean, their arms appearing to rub against each other. He thought his eyes were playing tricks on him when one of them placed his hand on the small of the other man’s back.

‘Come on, let’s go,’ he said to his wife. ‘This isn’t a good beach.’
‘But we’ve only been here a while,’ Peter protested. Tina and Anna readied themselves to protest as well.

‘Don’t complain, or I won’t take you anywhere again,’ he said to cut them off.

They walked out of the water begrudgingly. On the way to their towels and clothes Tina entered a shallow pool of water trapped behind a sand bar where the tide had receded. She lay down in the warm water and called out, ‘I’m in a spa bath.’

‘I said we’re going,’ he told her. ‘Get out of there.’ His instincts told him that within weeks the beach would be gone.

As they walked through the sand dunes to the car, the wind picked up and blew sand into the air, stinging their arms and legs. The sky was blanketed by clouds. Ernesto looked up and noticed the sun. It glowed bright red, hovering just above the horizon. It reminded him of the descriptions his grandmother told him of what it would be like at the end of the world; descriptions he discovered were repeated in the Bible he had taken to reading. They held their wet towels around their heads to prevent the sand from stinging their faces. Ernesto turned back towards the beach and saw the men pack up their belongings, running to escape the sandstorm. They had left just in time.

He had expected the roads out of the city to be crammed with the cars of people seeking refuge, but instead the traffic on Main North Road was normal for a Sunday. Even so, he drove slowly, nervous of changing lanes while towing the trailer. They drove through grids of Housing Trust maisonettes that stretched for kilometres, broken up by vacant paddocks overgrown with dry grasses and fennel gone to seed. The children complained about the heat and asked if they could go to the beach, but Ernesto told them to roll down their windows.

Outside Nuriootpa they stopped for a packed lunch in a park beside a church. At Ebenezer Ernesto stopped again so Anna could be sick in a field of Salvation Jane.

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The road from there was easier, with fewer bends and fewer cars to overtake them.

As they reached Waikerie Ernesto followed the instructions to the farm that Renzo had given him. On a dirt road they passed a truck packed with people. Old men in cotton shirts and trousers and women in hand-sewn dresses sat on suitcases and boxes in the truck’s tray-top. Ernesto honked his horn to salute them. ‘See, there are other people who believe,’ he said to Silvana.

He turned off to a road leading into orange groves. In the middle of the orchard appeared a cream-brick house with dozens of cars parked alongside it. A woman came to the door. She reminded Ernesto of one of his aunts.

‘You’ve come from the city?’ she called. Ernesto nodded. ‘There are places still.’ She looked at Ernesto, Silvana and the children, and told them to park behind the house.

The woman’s husband introduced himself as Nicodemo and took them to the rows of fruit pickers’ quarters. They were given a room containing three sets of bunk beds. Silvana felt the threadbare sheets and said she was glad she had brought her own.

After they had settled in they walked to a garage which had been converted to a makeshift lounge room for the people from the city. Some people sat around a television, others played a game of cards. Ernesto recognised a few of them. He recognised the woman who said there would be no fresh drinking water after the tidal wave. Not far from her he saw one of the women he’d overheard in the smallgoods store. Then he saw the woman with the wheelchair-bound daughter who had turned up at his church. The girl contorted her head from side to side, her mouth open. Ernesto thought she might have been trying to smile, but wasn’t sure. He said hello nervously and the girl let out a groan.

‘She’s saying hello back,’ the girl’s mother said.

Ernesto nodded and said ‘Yes’. He wanted to leave the garage to relieve his discomfort, but felt everyone there was watching him. Then he noticed the Professore sitting in a corner of the room with his wife.

‘What are you doing here?’ he asked, surprised to see him.

‘What does it look like?’ the Professore replied. ‘I’m enjoying some country air.’

On the day of the earthquake more people arrived at the orchard but were turned away, the dormitories full. ‘See,’ Ernesto said to Silvana. ‘We got here just in time. These other poor people have nowhere to go.’

‘They’re lucky,’ she said. ‘Maybe they’ll be forced to go home. They can sleep in their own beds and eat their own food.’

Before midday he dropped Silvana and the children off in the main street in town then drove back to the orchard. Outside the pickers’ quarters a group of fourteen had gathered in a clearing amid the orange trees. Among them were the Professore and his wife, the woman who predicted the water shortage, the girl in the wheelchair and her mother, Renzo, Cesare and the pastor. They greeted Ernesto with handshakes. A young woman with blond hair and golden olive skin held a guitar. She had small blue eyes, slightly sunken in her face. Her hair was parted in the middle, reminding Ernesto of a Florentine Madonna. She was beautiful, he thought, then felt guilty when he realised he’d admired something that reminded him of a graven image.

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The Madonna passed around sheets of music and began to play her guitar. They sang *Each word you give to me I will sing; Each prayer I ask of you, you will bring; Your spirit will shine through me*.

Ernesto knew the words by heart. He had sung them many times now. He closed his eyes and prayed as he mouthed the words. He prayed for the members of his extended family left in Adelaide. He prayed for the children he had seen playing soccer the morning before, for the other people he had seen along the roads out of the city.

The girl in the wheelchair groaned as she shook her head then began to clap out of time. Ernesto couldn’t concentrate. He wanted to tell the girl’s mother to make her stop. ‘Can’t you control her?’ he wanted to say. ‘She’s destroying the atmosphere for everyone.’ He wanted to be lifted into a state of bliss, no longer aware of who he was or where he was.

He tried to drown out the girl’s groaning and clapping and focus on the music, but all he could think of was her groans at Mater Christi; how they disturbed him then and how they had followed him like a spirit. Throughout the singing he couldn’t help but wait for a tremor, for something to indicate the earthquake had struck. They were safe in the orange orchard, yet close enough to feel a tremor strong enough to destroy the city.

They sang nine more songs before the Madonna put down her guitar, ushering a moment of silence. Ernesto looked at the people in the circle, their heads bowed towards the grass. The Madonna had tears on her cheeks, but she seemed calm. Cesare’s eyes were moist, a resigned look on his face. Renzo offered Ernesto his hand to shake and whispered, ‘They’ll have had a nice bath at Glenelg by now.’

Ernesto wanted the same calm he had felt on his first visit to his new church, but instead he felt agitated. He thought of Silvana’s uncles and aunts and cousins, all of them too arrogant to leave. They were like the people who had mocked Noah. Then he thought of the isolated beach where he had taken his family a few weeks before. He wondered whether any men had been on the beach at twelve and whether they ran for their clothes when they saw the tidal wave coming.

Silvana and the children stood in front of a bakery in town, waiting for Ernesto to pick them up. From the back seat, Anna called out that they had been shopping, and showed him a book she had bought. Tina told him she had bought a set of farm animals and held up a tiny plastic cow in the palm of her hand. Peter sat eating an ice-cream, licking it until a dollop fell on his lap, for which Silvana threatened to slap him.

‘But I couldn’t help it,’ he pleaded. ‘It just fell.’

Ernesto wanted them all to be quiet. What did little plastic cows mean anymore? What was it if a pair of pants became stained with ice-cream?

That evening they gathered in the garage behind Nicodemo’s house and huddled around the television set with the other visitors. A few people speculated with confidence what images of destruction would be shown.

‘Shh, shh,’ ordered the Professore. ‘The news is about to start.’ The woman from the smallgoods store crossed herself and mumbled ‘Gesu Christu’ under her breath.

The first news item was about the prediction, but there were no images of
destruction. Don Dunstan was at Glenelg Beach and appeared to be having a party. A small group of people held placards ridiculing the prediction. ‘Che scemi,’ – What idiots, someone muttered, before the Professore called for quiet again.

Ernesto braced himself for the pictures of the wave, of people on the beach being washed away. Instead a naked child played at the water’s edge with her mother, unaware of any danger. Office workers were filmed on their way to work in the city. One woman was wearing a bikini. A man wearing a business suit with flippers and a diving mask waved at the camera. The images cut to an interview with the house painter from Melbourne.

‘There he is,’ someone shouted. ‘That’s the one.’ But it was nothing new. It was a recording of an interview he had given weeks before. The television showed the roads out of the city. A reporter said ‘Some people chose to leave the city. Some even sold their homes.’

There was silence in the garage. Ernesto hoped for more, but instead there was news of a robbery in the southern suburbs. He felt relieved to know his house would still be standing, waiting for his family to return, but also cheated that something more hadn’t happened. He willed the story not to end, to at least show some pockets of destruction, then he wondered whether it was wrong to think things like this.

‘God decided to listen to our prayers,’ Renzo said. The woman from the smallgoods store sighed and nodded.

Ernesto told Silvana and his children to get up. ‘Let’s go to our room,’ he said. He walked silently towards their dormitory, hoping none of them would speak. Just this once, he pleaded, let them be quiet.

‘We came here for this?’ Silvana turned and said to him. ‘Tonight I have to sleep in a bed where God knows who else has slept, instead of being comfortable in my own bed. Let’s go home now.’

‘It’s best we stay here a few more days,’ he told her. ‘Maybe the painter got the date wrong. Maybe it will happen in the next few days.’

‘A few more days? We’ve seen the town already. The children were bored today. I bought them rubbish to keep them happy. There’s nothing to see here but orange trees.’

They walked through the clearing where Ernesto and the others from his church had sung earlier that day. Silvana moved ahead with the children, holding Tina’s hand. Anna skipped alongside them. Peter kicked a dried-up orange, its skin shrunk and desiccated as though it had been embalmed. He roared as he kicked it between two tree trunks, pretending they were goalposts. Ernesto looked at the orange trees and lamented that at this time of year they were featureless. In the summer they were just leaves. No Autumn blossoms, no Winter fruit. He walked as close to the trees as he could, seeking their shade.