

# Respecting Nature

Good Times 10.14.98

**A lifelong Californian finds a new respect for earthquakes**

by Lisa Jensen

**E**ARTHQUAKES NEVER bothered me much. As a lifelong Californian, I always found them as ordinary as morning coastal fog, and a lot less annoying. Until the day my house did the Bunny Hop.

It was Indian Summer in mid-October, hot and still, what we've since come to call "earthquake weather." My workspace at home is at the top of a two-storey addition and is crammed with bookshelves on steel brackets plugged into perforated metal strips bolted to the walls. I was standing at my desk just after 5 p.m., wondering if I should work for another hour until my husband, Jim, came home from his downtown store, or if I should turn on the World Series, when I felt the first shake.

My room shakes if a large truck goes by outside, so I didn't panic. Even when I realized the room was swaying like a hammock, I was more surprised than alarmed. Then, all the books, toys and photo albums jumped off the shelves. Then the shelves jumped after them, wrenching the brackets out of their fastenings. With all these inanimate objects flying around the room like *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, it dawned on me that maybe I should go downstairs.

They claim the first 7.1 shaker only lasted 15 seconds, but the aftershocks were coming so fast, it was like one continuous rumba. I tried to call Jim at work, but the phone was dead. The TV didn't work any better. I dug out an old portable radio and tuned in KSCQ, which would become the lifeline of the county over the next couple of days. But it was a good thing at that moment that there was no news yet of the devastation downtown. With all the neighbors outside assuring each other they were OK, my only immediate worry was where my cats had disappeared to — and cleaning up the mess inside.

I took some snapshots around the house — piles of rubble on the floor under empty shelves, as if swept off by a petulant hand, rows of Jim's paintings hanging on the wall at bizarre angles, cabinet doors yawning open. A substantial Art Deco hutch crowned by a 4-foot slab of marble that weighs a ton had taken a stroll of about 6 inches away from the wall. There was plaster dust everywhere, some broken glass and cracks in the drywall, but nothing much that a broom couldn't fix.

When I went out to the back yard, Sheena came over the fence. The cat



LISA JENSEN

**From buildings to books, the quake's destruction was indiscriminate.**

*Even when I realized the room was swaying like a hammock, I was more surprised than alarmed.*

who has been known to play "chicken" with a vacuum cleaner for the thrill was seriously freaked; always a "talker," she could barely squeak. But I couldn't find my old cat, Maynard, anywhere. When they passed out courage, Maynard was taking a nap, so I knew he'd run for cover at the first quiver, but every entry to the crawl-space under the house was grated over. I checked all of his hiding places inside, too, then convinced myself he had run upstairs during all the commotion and been buried under the wreckage. I didn't want to find him flattened like a cat rug under that pile of debris, but when I sifted through it, he wasn't there.

By then, it was nearly 7 p.m. Jim was not yet home and the first reports were coming in of downtown engulfed in flames. Jim's comic book store, Atlantis Fantasyworld, was on lower Pacific Avenue, but I told myself I'd feel a great disturbance in the Force if anything had happened to the man from whom I had not spent a night apart in 12 years. Still, when I heard the car in the driveway, I raced outside, Sheena at my feet (make that under my feet). Jim had been trying to get home for two hours; it had only been his keys, not him, buried under an avalanche of comic books. He

finally remembered a spare car key in his wallet, but the car parked on the street had been so badly shaken, he had to force the key into the lock. On the road at last, he found the Murray Street bridge between Seabright and 7th avenues closed and all traffic to Live Oak rerouted back to Soquel Avenue. With everybody in town trying to get out the same way, and no streetlights, traffic was barely crawling.

One house near the store had burst into flames from a ruptured gas pipe. But all Jim could see of Pacific Avenue was under a choking cloud of black dust from the collapsed buildings. As dark and thick as smoke, it looked like the town was in flames; he expected to find our neighborhood in ruins. Back in the house, we surveyed our minor damage and realized how lucky we were. All we lost were a few things. And as we puttered around the kitchen, we heard a pitiful bleating and Maynard came stumbling down the hallway. He had wedged himself so far back in a closet behind my shoes, I hadn't even see him. He was not at all amused, but he wasn't hurt.

There can be no rebirth without destruction. The new downtown is booming, at last. The old Atlantis building was yellow-tagged and torn down (there's still a poignant empty lot where it stood), but the business survived in the tents for three years and now thrives on Locust Street, operated by Jim's ex-partner, Joe. Jim sold his half of the business for a busy career as a full-time artist. But I still work upstairs, surrounded by books, with a view of Mount Loma Prieta. Earthquakes still don't bother me, but I give them a lot more respect.