

What not to do in the big one

The thing about earthquakes that come in the middle of the night is that awful moment when the house begins to rock and the things in it start to rattle and you have to decide what you're going to do.

Here's how it played out in our house.

"Hell's teeth - what's with the banging?"

"It's the painting, and the mirror. It's a bloody earthquake."

"A bloody big one."

"It's going on forever."

"Is it bad enough that we should stand in a doorway or something?"

"Should we get under the bed?"

"No chance. We wouldn't fit."

"What do they say - drop, roll and something? Not great for the bionic knee."

"Should we run for it?"

"If we do, where do we run to? There might something out there in the dark, like a power pole or a chimney or power lines or a tree, that could fall on us."

"How long do we wait before we decide?"

"This might be just the leadup. It could get worse."

"This has been going on a helluva long time, hasn't it. Is this the worst we've been in?"

"Are we in the middle of it? Or is someone else somewhere else getting it worse?"

"Turn the radio on."

It's on. A woman announcer is talking to someone on the phone who's saying how bad it is. But we missed where he's calling from.

She tries to sound reassuring. Where is she broadcasting from? It's RadioNZ, so must be Wellington.

She says there's so many calls coming in she'll have to hang up on the man who's still saying how bad it is. Somewhere.

Then she says she'll put music on for a moment while she finds out more. It's awful music, show music from the 50s, maybe.

The painting that was banging on the wall has stopped. It's very quiet.

"What time is it?"

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"Seven minutes past midnight."

"Could be another one coming."

The woman on the radio is back, telling us she has to move to another studio. Music.

"I'm getting up to check the house. If the ceilings have cracked I'm going to be gutted." They're newly replastered.

No ceiling cracks. Nothing fell. All that anti-earthquake fastening with screws and blu-tack has worked.

What about the newly tiled floors, the tiled open shower. Nah. All good.

"Anyone else up in the neighbourhood?"

"Yep, there's lights on everywhere."

"Anyone out and about?"

"No."

"Well, can't be too bad, eh."

"What's GeoNet saying?"

"Wow - it's a 7.7, 44 kilometres deep."

"Really?"

"No, wait, now they're saying it's 6.5 and it's 11 kilometres deep."

"Where?"

"South Island somewhere. Culverden or somewhere."

"Where the hell is that? Kaikoura?"

"Jeez, not Christchurch again. Those poor buggers."

She's back, sounding pretty stressed, awed, but doing her best to be calm and reassuring.

"I felt another bump. Did you?"

"I didn't feel anything."

"Do you reckon there's any more coming?"

"They're saying it's been felt as far north as Auckland."

"I wonder what Diane's daughter and her husband from England are thinking. I bet they've never felt anything like it in their lives."

"Some poor buggers are going to be far worse off than us. We just copped the aftershock."

JT column for Nov 19

"There might be a tsunami."

"Remember that big one in 2013 when we were staying at the Paraparaumu motor camp? The caravan rolled around so bad we got out of it, and all the Lawsonia trees in the hedge were dancing like a row of Cossacks."

"Was this one worse?"

"About the same, I'd say."

"Stuff's got something up. Nothing on the Herald, yet. They're too far away from it, I suppose."

"Do you think it's safe to go back to sleep?"

"I was asleep when it hit. You woke me up yelling."

"I thought you were having a nightmare or something."

"I'm going to watch the news sites for a while."

Next morning, RadioNZ, Kim Hill, the prime minister. Calm, calming.

Now we know where it was, how big it was, how bad. People killed.

Stuff has photos of cracked roads, shattered glass, distressed children, broken wine bottles in supermarkets. Don't those people ever think to put something on the edge of their shelves...

The PM's voice reassures us. We've learned a lot over the last few years.

Except perhaps what to do when the house starts to rock and roll, and you don't know if this is going to be the big one.