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'Is it going to stop? Will we survive?'

She arrived just in time for terror

Note: The author is a 1973 graduate of Douglas S. Freeman High School in Henrico County and a 1988 graduate of Virginia Commonwealth University. She and her husband moved on New Year's Eve to Van Nuys, Calif., only 20 miles from Northridge, the epicenter of Monday's earthquake. Following is her account of the disaster.

PATTY MARTINO ALSPAUGH

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

VAN NUYS, CALIF. — At a dead-to-the-world hour, 4:31 a.m., my husband and I are jolted awake by what one radio announcer here later described as someone treating your bed like a trampoline.

Immediately, I scream at my husband, "Get under the door [frame], it's an earthquake."

We both huddle in our underwear on the floor for what seems like minutes, but is only seconds. Everything around us is crashing and breaking. The ground under us is shaking so ferociously that we can't control the back-and-forth motion of our bodies.

We are speaking to each other with our eyes. When is it going to stop? Will we survive?

I am thankful we are together. To be alone now would be unbearable.

Soon it is silent. But the silence is quickly shattered by the wail of fire engines, ambulances, sirens and helicopters.

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I had lived in California for eight years in my 20s, so I'm somewhat earthquake-savvy. Glad to leave the snow and ice in Richmond, my husband and I moved to Los Angeles less than three weeks ago, arriving New Year's Eve. My husband, a poet-turned-screenwriter, wanted to be closer to the movers and

shakers of the motion picture industry.

We are staying in Van Nuys with my husband's sister and her husband until we find a place to live.

When the shaking finally stopped early Monday morning, we grabbed our robes and ran out, calling their names. There was no electricity, of course, so it was pitch black as we made our way through the house. I worried about fires, but knowing there is a pool in the backyard pacified me — a refuge, in case.

We found my sister-in-law and her husband in the dining room — lighting candles and tuning in the portable radio. The guy on the radio explained what to do if you smelled gas; that the main valve is near the gas meter and that you must turn it off. I looked at the candles, and wondered if it was a good idea. I didn't smell gas, but I wondered about aftershocks causing the candles to fall and start a fire.

Soon, it was light outside. The light made us all feel better, less afraid. Then we started assessing the damage.

I noticed what looked like confetti in the hallway. I looked up and saw a crack in the ceiling. Pictures had fallen off the walls; tables had moved several inches. A glass lamp had fallen and shattered all over our bedroom floor. Shards of china knickknacks were strewn throughout the house; precious memories destroyed.

After cleaning up, my husband and I tried to get some sleep and dream away the nightmare. After a couple of hours, we awoke hungry. We didn't want to open the refrigerator too often, though, since we didn't know how long we'd be without electricity. The batteries in our only portable radio were beginning to fade, so we walked to the local mart to buy batteries and get a doughnut at the doughnut shop

next door.

Walking outside and into a beautiful sunny day was a shock. Two elderly neighbors across the street were outside pruning their yards as if nothing had happened.

The first sign of external destruction was right next door. The adjoining concrete-block fence had fallen in pieces; our wall was undamaged. Walking further up the street, we saw much more destruction. The apartment houses blew out windows, toppled carports, caved in roofs.

And in the center of just about every apartment building were large groups of people. The adults were sitting on the ground in semi-circles, talking, while the kids were running around trying to entertain themselves.

We were lucky to find the market open. It had no electricity, so the register couldn't work, and there were broken bottles and dented cans everywhere. Someone was sweeping up as we entered. We paid \$6 for 4 AA batteries.

The donut shop next door had a "SOLD OUT" sign on its door.

As we walked back home a little boy was yelling, "The electricity is on. The electricity is on." I gave him a bravo fist sign; he smiled. We were luckier than most.

We all stuck close to home all day Monday. No one wanted to drive anywhere. I fixed us all a big bowl of Italian meatball soup, and we watched a movie we had rented the day before. We watched news updates on a small TV.

When we finally went to bed, I was afraid to go to sleep for fear of waking up to another bad quake. Aftershock after aftershock woke me up throughout the night.

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Tuesday morning I cried; I was shaken. My husband went with his sister's husband to help him clean up his office. I didn't want to be left alone. My sister-in-law, Nancy Alspaugh-Jackson — who was in my graduating class at Douglas Free-

man High School in Richmond — invited me to come with her to her office at NBC. She's the executive producer of "The Vicki! Show," a talk show with Vicki Lawrence (Carol Burnett's sidekick) that is not yet syndicated in Richmond.

As with any other tragedy, the jokes were already hitting the sidewalks.

One radio reporter said, after an intense aftershock: "The traffic is stopped, but the freeways are moving."

The best joke, though, is the one my brother heard on the radio the day after the Sylmar quake in '71 (he had moved to the area the night before — is it something in our genes?). "Last night's earthquake was a result of Mother Nature not taking her Earth control pills."

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Everywhere, people talked about the earthquake. Talking is cathartic.

Some stories were sadder than others. The woman, who, in her haste to check on her child, tripped and fell, hitting her head against the crib. It turned out to be a fatal fall.

People in Richmond thought we were crazy to move to Los Angeles because of all the recent troubles. I myself don't know how the people who have just been through the riots, and the floods, the drought and the fires can stand another jolt to their stability.

My husband and I are lucky to be living temporarily in his sister's house, a well-built, one-story Spanish-style stucco. We've been looking for a place of our own, but are now glad we haven't settled on anything, because we sure weren't looking with earthquake-proofing in mind.

I think it is ironic for the quake to have fallen on Martin Luther King's birthday, since he sure shook things up in his day. Now, unfortunately though, King's birthday will mark the anniversary for one of the worst quakes in Los Angeles history.