

NEVER DID LIKE THOSE DISHES

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As I stood in my kitchen contemplating the various ways I could clean up the broken platters, plates, saucers, bowls and cups I realized I didn't care much about the pile of stuff on the floor and couldn't recall what had inspired me to purchase an expensive dinner set in the first place. My cupboards and counters had been decorated for years with just about every piece available (including a pasta strainer) in the pastel checkered design I'd selected so long ago. That is until February 22, when our house shook hard enough and long enough to break almost the entire set, along with just about every other breakable item we owned.

I stared at the shattered remains for the longest time before the appealing idea of not having to live with them any longer began to sink in. I should have sent the set back to the store the day I realized they were never going to look as good in my house as they did in the lit display cabinet of our local department store, but I couldn't bring myself to do it, mainly because I'd made such a big deal about buying the set. I was sure that eating from a nicely set table, complete with matching butter and salad plates, cloth napkins and placemats made food taste better, and I tried to convince my family of it too. So I decided, after using the dishes a few

times, they could stay and I would learn to use them properly -the way the manufacturer suggested in the booklet packed with the dinner plates.

Knowing I'd made a mistake, and letting myself off the hook about it was a struggle. I've devoted a lot of time and effort to training my mind to view the world in a 'glass half full' way, and while I'm better at it than I was twenty years ago, it still takes awhile to kick in. I suppose that's why it took a few weeks for me to realize that while most of us living in Christchurch NZ were frightened to the core when the first earthquake woke us at 4.35am on September 4, 2010 (a 7.1 centered about 40 kms outside the city) we didn't lose much. While the quake lasted a long time, left a huge crack in the earth and provided regular reminders of its power via daily aftershocks for months, it didn't destroy too much and most of us felt incredibly lucky to have escaped practically unscathed. But our luck changed dramatically a few months later, on February 22 at 12.51pm, when a rocking and shallow quake (6.3 centered close to the city) said more than 'hello' as it kicked us around, killed too many, flattened homes and buildings and cracked more than the earth.

Three of us were working in my central city event production office that day. It was crunch time. The printer was waiting for artwork and we were running late so we'd hardly spoken a word to each other for hours and when we finally did, it was more yelling than talking.

While we'd all become accustomed to aftershocks rattling the office every now and then, this quake seemed to lift the building and move us in a way we hadn't experienced before. Terrified, we yelled at each other to get down the stairs and away from the building as roof slates were flying off in every direction and we feared the building would collapse. We didn't stop moving until we'd found a clearing in a park across the road, and we didn't start talking about a plan to get out of the city until we'd caught our breath, wiped our tears away and let go of a few choice words. With so few escape options available to us, we reluctantly walked to the parking lot and sat in our cars listening to the news while we waited for text messages from family and friends. We tried not to respond too dramatically when aftershocks snapped and swayed the ground beneath us, and we quietly prayed it would be over soon, hoping something bigger wasn't on its way-something that would take us all with it.

The gray muddy liquefaction (a sandy liquid that bubbles up from beneath the earth's surface during a quake and solidifies into a clay like substance) was taking over the city streets faster than we could talk about it and we knew our small cars wouldn't make it through the muddy silt to get us home. So we waited for our husbands and partners to arrive and decided to leave our smaller cars parked where they were and walk the mile or so to my husband's four wheel drive.

We moved along the cracked and muddy streets in silence, too anxious for small talk and unable to react with more than sharp fearful grunts when a jolt moved us. As we passed others, some who were visibly frantic and terrified, all we could offer were a few kind words and an occasional hug in our hurry to get home.

At an intersection leading to the hospital a policewoman stood in the middle of the road directing traffic. When the first car she'd motioned to move forward passed us we saw an injured man tied to the roof and several policemen sitting on the door window frames holding on to him as they carefully made their way to the emergency entrance a few hundred meters away. That was the first of a row of flat bed trucks and cars with injured people in them, or on them, headed for the hospital. As we waited for the policewoman to signal us to cross the road, tears made their way down my cheek and I heard myself praying, asking for it all to stop.

The radio news told us buildings were destroyed in the central city and the police had received reports of injuries and casualties. It also reported our suburb, and main road to it, was badly damaged. Bridges were out, road cracks and liquefaction were causing horrific driving conditions and sinkholes were swallowing entire cars. Since the only bridge to our neighborhood was too unstable to use, we knew we'd have to park someplace before the bridge and walk the last few kilometers or attempt to use a back road that would likely be unsafe but still open.

We all worried aloud about the condition at our homes, and after hearing the epicenter of the quake was in our suburb, I feared ours might be gone; but I was much more concerned about our dog Scout. I was very worried she might be hurt or frightened or both. Neither my husband or I could bear to think of her being trapped under rubble, so when we finally arrived at his truck, he unhooked the mountain bike he'd attached that morning and joined a man from our neighbourhood who was also going to pedal to his house.

I drove my office mates as close to their homes as the roads would allow, said I'd see them soon and headed for the back road to join the long queue of cars. As I navigated around boulders, mounds of liquefaction, sinkholes and the occasional abandoned car I was relieved, and grateful, to get a text informing me that Scout was hungry and happy and our house was still standing.

The traffic cleared as I rounded the corner into my beach suburb and I caught a first glimpse of the cliff hill I live on. A large part of it had fallen and several homes were now much closer to the edge than they should've been. I passed a friend driving down the hill- his car stuffed with belongings -and felt like I should say something or at least wave to him as his house was teetering off the edge of the cliff, but I was too anxious and couldn't bring myself to do anything but drive.

I passed a couple of cars crushed by landslides as I rounded the first of several winding curves leading to my house. Their doors were wedged open and I could only hope the drivers had escaped unharmed. Further up, I passed two men putting boards and buckets over sink holes and I slowed just enough to wave a thank-you before I eagerly pushed on, grateful for the bit of daylight that remained as the earthquake's devastating impact on the road had created an obstacle course that would have been impossible to navigate through in the dark.

It was a huge relief to see our house still standing and a huge shock to see the neighbour's house partially collapsed and their swimming pool completely empty. I absently wondered where the pool water had gone as I hugged Scout, scratched her belly and told her how happy I was to see her. We both headed inside and I quickly had a look at the pile of broken dishes on the kitchen floor before I headed to the living room to find my husband taking down a few paintings that hadn't fallen off the walls. I quickly wrapped the unbroken artwork in towels before going to our storage closet to take stock of emergency supplies and to grab a flashlight and a few bottles of water.

Once we decided our place was safe for the night, my husband and I walked up the road to check on neighbors. We were surprised and saddened to find so many damaged homes, a few on the verge of collapse, and several families packing up with plans to leave as soon as they could.

Staying in our broken home, with consistent aftershocks and no power or water was impossible so when a family friend called to offer us their furnished holiday home a few hundred miles north we gratefully accepted and made plans to depart as soon as we could secure our home.

An evening of strong aftershocks convinced us to sleep in our garage rather than our second story bedroom, which moved a lot more with each quake than our garage floor did. Even though we were exhausted, neither of us got much sleep and by 5am we were weary, anxious and eager to leave. We woke to a beautiful sunny morning, so beautiful and warm it seemed impossible to believe our city was so broken and in so much trouble. I was happy we'd gone to the trouble of filling a spare closet with emergency essentials- including a camp stove, food and fresh water because instant coffee with long life mild never tasted as good as it did that day.

Inspired by a few cups of strong coffee, we shoveled and swept with determination, hopeful we'd find an unbroken Italian vase under the pile of rubble in our dining room, and we did. After packing it away with the other pieces of rescued artwork, we emptied the fridge, boarded windows, gave our emergency supplies to a neighbor, packed our dog and a few valuables into our car and left.

A safe distance from Christchurch, the aftershocks and the devastation, we felt guilty for leaving but relieved to be away from the chaos. We spent our days walking on the beach, reading newspapers, cooking, texting friends and, best of all, sleeping without disruptions. We turned on the radio news every hour to hear updates about the water and power conditions, availability of food and petrol, the ongoing search and rescue efforts and the escalating death toll- hoping not to hear another familiar name- or any name.

Weeks went by and more than anything we wanted to return to Christchurch, but knew our neighborhood was still without basic services, so we stayed put, kept in touch with friends and family, called contractors (hoping they might look at our house soon) and started a list of things lost in the quake and what we would replace. I felt guilty for worrying about things like smashed TVs, dishes and furniture when bodies were still lying under ruins and families were desperate to find loved ones, but I couldn't seem to stop myself from obsessing about the disastrous condition of our home, and our city, and wondering if they could or would ever be repaired.

The quake death toll stopped climbing after a few weeks, about the same time my shock and grief began to subside enough for me to be able to hear something other than my fear. I began to worry about my own mental condition and thought I should try to find a way to accept our situation, even though I found it totally unacceptable.

After thinking about it for a while, I decided I'd write something positive about the city, the people or the situation every day- a silver lining of some sort. The first few days were difficult, but as I continued it got easier- the more I looked for good things the more I found.

I listened and read about people who had stayed in Christchurch after the quake and how many of them were unselfishly rising to the challenge of meeting the needs of others, often at great cost to themselves. Someone called them the 'Quake Heroes'. From feeding people off a barbeque grill on a street corner to taking strangers and abandoned animals into their homes, the heroic acts of so many made me proud to live in Christchurch. I also realized I had changed, that even though losing my dinner set was the first thing I wrote on my silver lining list, I was grateful I'd moved beyond looking for silver to find a bit of GOLD.

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