



Looks Like We're Having an Earthquake

18.01.2019, Episode 9

A Thousand Words

Hi. This is Richard. Welcome to the New Year and the podcast, "A Thousand Words", for January 18th, 2019.

So... you've probably heard that California has lots of earthquakes [1], not just lots of wildfires. I've never been in a wildfire, but once when I was 12 there was one close by, and the sky went orange for three days while bits of ash fell from the sky. The flames didn't come close to our home, but we felt the effects.

In Switzerland, wildfires aren't usually such a problem. There are some during dry seasons, but nothing that bad. In the mountains there are winter avalanches [2], and summers bring flash floods [3] to the valleys. Luckily, there are no volcanoes here. No shark attacks in the lakes. Alien abductions [4] are rare. And there are almost no earthquakes.

All up and down California we have earthquakes, every day. We don't feel them all, but they do move that sensitive needle on the Richter Scale. I was told my whole childhood that one day California would have an earthquake so big that we would break off into the ocean and sink. Luckily that day never came. But one day in October, back in 1989, it actually felt like it did.

I was working at a restaurant on Fisherman's Wharf then. It was just after 5, a beautiful Indian summer evening. I had only one table of customers. I served them their food, fish meals if I remember, and was up front by the door, asking the manager if I could leave work early when a noise underground shut me up [5]. If you don't know the sound... I don't wish it on you. You should live your whole life and never hear it. It was, simply, the sound of force [6] pushing through whatever was in its way.

The glass walls started shaking, in the slow rhythm of two people in a car having sex.

"Looks like we're having an earthquake," I said casually. But I saw my manager's eyes, and the grip his hands held onto the desk with, that this was his first big earthquake. All the earthquakes I ever felt before that usually just shook for a few seconds, or pushed me while driving from one highway lane into another.

My customers ran from their food. They looked at me in panic, and then ran to stand in the frame of the entrance doors. I shouted at them to get away from the vibrating glass all around them. But they pointed [7] to the top of the door frame, that it was safe there.

Normally a door frame is the best place, but not if it's surrounded [8] by shaking glass.

As I was waving them away [9], everything got quiet, and the building stopped shaking. I turned back to my manager, wanting to say - Welcome to the club, friend. So, you survived your first quake. Wasn't so bad, right? Well... It's over.

When the second wave hit. And it hit!

It came as if the first shaking was an animal underground that gently [10] woke up a moment ago, but was now grumpy [11]. It took hold of the building with two hands this time and, like an angry child, tried shaking free that small thing it wants inside that larger thing. The restaurant became flexible like only in a dream. The walls flapped [12] like butterfly wings. I tried to keep my balance on a floor that was no longer flat. The roof started to break away from the walls. The floor stretched. We all looked at each other with that same look I'm sure people in all live-or-die situations give - that what's happening might actually end all of our lives in a single moment.



I waited for the roof to fall on our heads. The kitchen staff came running out from the back, shouting in their native languages. Dishes in the kitchen began breaking as they fell to the floor. We heard a loud crack [13], and the lights went out. And then the entire building, as if it was lifted off the ground for a moment and then suddenly dropped [14], came crashing back down.

And then... silence [15].

I remember thinking that it was impossible that the building had not fallen on us. How could something shake that long and so hard without collapsing [16]? One by one we went outside, afraid to stay inside. It was quiet on the streets. People were standing still with their mouths wide open, not trusting [17] the ground. If you can't trust the ground, what can you trust? And then, as if the car alarms woke up from their shock as well, up and down the streets they all began crying out what none of us had the air in our lungs to do. But the Wharf didn't look so bad for what just happened. Maybe because we were on landfill [18], flexible ground, we survived as well as we did. But I started to think about other parts of the city. I thought of my friends, my apartment.

Buses and trams weren't running. Luckily, I had a motorcycle then, and the cook asked for a ride home, so we zigzagged through the streets. Traffic signals were all out. At every corner we turned, we had to avoid [19] cars shaken from their parking spots, and bricks and wood and glass on the streets that were once part of buildings.

At his apartment, the lobby looked like a bomb blew up, plaster from the walls all over the floor. We needed to step over it to get to the stairs, as the elevator wasn't working. He unlocked the door of his fourth-floor apartment but had trouble pushing it open. Inside, his broken aquarium lay on the floor and his dead fish beside it.

His LPs and plants were on the floor, too. I left him nursing [20] his fish and fallen houseplants, worried what waited for me at my own home.

I lived only five minutes away. But my own front door opened easily, and when I stepped inside, everything was remarkably [21] in place. Earthquakes are sometimes funny [22] like that.

But I wanted to see more of the city. So I hopped on my bicycle this time. It was dark out now, the street lights were still not working. Shop windows were dark too, and homes were black or lit with flickering [23] candles. I rode slowly past people standing around cars, doors open, listening to news on the radio. Someone said it was the fires afterward and not the shaking that destroyed the city in 1906. Another said the fire department was having trouble getting enough water pressure. And then someone smelled the gas. It was in the air, and we all smelled it. Someone said it was from the broken pipes under the cracked streets.

I looked up and watched all the colors that the lights were making in the night sky. Red and blue lights were flashing from police cars and fire trucks. Three spotlights somewhere on the other side of the bay searched the sky. Helicopters flew overhead, shining lights down on the ground.

Without all the lights, the city would have been black.

Thanks for listening.

If you liked this podcast, or others you've listened to on our website podclub.ch, tell a friend. You can also write us a message. As well, you can download our app if you'd like, and we have a vocabulary trainer to help you practice some of the new words you hear. You can also follow us on Instagram.

I'll be back on February 1st to talk about something strange that happened to me the last time I took a bath.

Bye for now.

Glossar: A Thousand Words

[1] **earthquakes**: when the ground shakes

[2] **avalanches**: snow sliding dangerously down mountains

[3] **flash floods**: rain so hard and fast that high water covers the ground

[4] **alien abductions**: creatures from outer space taking us away from Earth

[5] **shut me up**: stopped me from talking

[6] **force**: the energy or power something has when moving

[7] **pointed**: showed where to look with their finger

[8] **surrounded by**: the things that are nearby and around something else

[9] **waving them away**: using your hands to get someone to move

[10] **gently**: softly, quietly, not strong

[11] **grumpy**: in a bad mood

[12] **flapped:** moved in rhythm from side to side

[13] **a crack:** a sound when something breaks apart

[14] **dropped:** let go of something you are holding

[15] **silence:** no sound

[16] **collapsing:** falling down

[17] **trusting:** reliance, dependence, belief in

[18] **landfill:** land humans create by adding wood, sand, garbage etc to coastal areas

[19] **avoid:** move out of the way

[20] **nursing:** trying to make something/one healthy again

[21] **remarkably:** surprisingly

[22] **funny like that:** strange, surprising

[23] **flickering:** light constantly changing in strength