

City consumed by flames

An awesome shudder like the end of the world

Eyewitness

**Dennis Kessler
in Kobe**

The suddenness with which the earthquake struck was almost cruel. One moment we were fast asleep, an instant later the floor — the entire building — had turned to jelly. But this is no gently undulating, liquid motion. This is jarring, gut-wrenching shuddering of awesome proportions. It is impossible to think straight.

You are in bed, the safest place in the world. Your bed is on the floor, what you used to think of as solid ground. And with no warning the world has turned into a sickening roller-coaster ride, and you want to get off.

Possibly the most frightening part is the sound. This is not the dull rumble of thunder. This is a deafening, roaring sound, coming from everywhere and nowhere, and it sounds like the end of the world. It is terrifying.

Then you take in the other sound effects: books toppling off shelves, glasses and crockery smashing, pictures crashing to the ground. You realise the horrendous creaking all around you is the building you're in; walls, ceilings and floors looking and feeling as if they're not just breathing, but hyperventilating. Everything is rattling and shaking.

Suddenly you're very aware of the six storeys of other apartments right above your head. You shouldn't be sitting up in bed thinking about what to do. Just like all the children are taught in

Japanese schools, you should grab some clothes and get the hell out.

But that assumes you're reacting rationally and decisively, that your thought processes are of an order greater than those of a frightened rabbit. Instead you run out of your bedroom and stare open-mouthed at your flatmates, who have just done the same. It's an earthquake, we all blurt out. But there shouldn't be an earthquake in west Japan; everyone knows it's not an earthquake prone zone, unlike Tokyo.

So far this has all taken about 15 seconds. Thirty seconds later we're dressed and out the door, but by then the shaking has faded into nauseating swaying, and the loudest sound is the pounding of my heart in my ears. With the sun beginning to rise, a quick walk around the block confirms that there is no damage to survey. No one else is on the street, no signs of life.

Then the aftershocks start, one after another. At 6.30am, 45 minutes after the quake, every television channel has a bleary-eyed, unshaven announcer presenting the first accounts of damage. Every television station has a video camera permanently recording in its newsroom, just to capture the moment a quake might hit. The scenes we are shown are unbelievable: a massive shudder striking like a bomb blast, except it goes on and on; chairs, filing

cabinets, lights, books — everything that can move, does.

So far we're still in shock, only just able to start laughing it off. Maybe everyone else was as lucky as we have been. Then the reports of damage start coming in; of the fires raging throughout Kobe, of the houses that have collapsed. Then the first helicopter footage showing the modern, elevated expressways that have toppled over; the trains derailed, tracks bent like wire. And then, inevitably, news of the death toll: first 60, then 74, then 104, then over 200. Twelve hours after the earthquake, the official death toll is over 1,000 and rising.

An expert assures us that further large tremors can be expected, and that many buildings that appear to have withstood the quake may have been severely weakened and not up to dealing with another.

What is certain is that I, like many others, will be sleeping fully clothed and very lightly tonight. And I will never again use the phrase "safe as houses".

Dennis Kessler is a freelance journalist living in Japan

Figure 7.1.1 From the *Guardian*, Wednesday January 18 1995.