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When I was living in Tokyo in the late eighties, I grew used to the frequent little tremors. But one night I was rudely awoken by a larger tremor. For the first few seconds I had a sleepy vision of a gigantic rat running underground. Shortly afterwards I was in a panic, frozen in my bed, short of breath while the windows were still cracking and the books kept on falling from the shelves.

Another time, at work on the ninth floor of a downtown office building, the beast came again, moving the heavy furniture about as if it were nothing. I did not dive under the table, as the Japanese are trained to do. Again I was frozen, paralyzed by fear. Shortly afterwards, the building started moving north to south, east to west as would a crème caramel shaken on a dessert plate.

Nothing like Kobe a few years later. Nothing like many other destructive earthquakes in places less prepared for them and that destroy thousands of lives and turn seemingly solid structures into rubble.

Ever since, I have stopped taking solid buildings for granted. A house, a street, a city, my own bed could all start

moving and shaking at any moment. It is a chilling prospect.

What happens then to a city waiting for 'the big one'? That's the prospect that faces the people of Tokyo, Mexico City, Los Angeles and San Francisco every day. Perhaps they grow accustomed to it. Once, while in Mexico city, a friend laughed at me when, going to bed, I said half jokingly: What do I do in case of an earthquake? Is this building safe? It's amazing the vitality of some cities. Sometimes you can feel the energy they have. Just when you thought a city couldn't possibly recover from a disaster like a major earthquake, back it bounces, like a phoenix rising from the ashes.

It did not seem like that in San Francisco in April 1906. That was indeed 'a big one'. The city seemed doomed to complete destruction. Look at the headlines at the combined edition of the three main newspapers in the city: "No hope left for safety of any building". "Blow buildings up to check flames", "Whole city is ablaze" and the worst one: "San Francisco, in ruins". The entire city was "in danger of being annihilated".

And look at the city today, so vibrant, so full of energy...but still dreading another 'big one'.