By the age of 20, I had experienced three earthquakes in three different cities in the world. My most recent one was the Chilean earthquake in 2010. That quake devastated parts of the country, and from the incident, Chileans came together in a time of need. When I started working on "Quakes" for my creative nonfiction class last year, I thought the piece would be about fate, survival and human perseverance in addition to my unfortunate luck of attracting earthquakes. Instead, the story turned into a narrative of my panicked Chilean host family and their quirky reaction to fear.
When I woke up in the middle of the night to the ground shaking, I didn't get up.

It wasn't the first time I had been woken up by an earthquake. Instead, I stayed in bed for about twenty more seconds, feeling it rock side to side before I realized the shaking was getting worse.

When I moved to Chile nine months before, the first thing I learned was the ground always moves. Chile is located on one of the most active fault lines in the world, and is plagued with small earthquakes Chileans call temblores.

That night when my Chilean host mother, who I called Mom, threw open my bedroom door I sat up in bed realizing it was not just another tremblor. We looked at each other in silence for a moment before she hissed, "Stephanie! Come here!"

I threw myself out of bed, struggling to unwrap from the sheets. Mom grabbed my arm and pulled me up the steps to the landing between her and my host sister's bedroom where my host sister, Barbara, was already standing with her two-year-old son, Martín, in her arms.

At the top of the stairs, I moved to stand next to them. I covered the back of my head and neck with one hand, and covered Martín's head with the other. As the shaking got worse the ground began to move in waves, as if it were a blanket being shaken onto a bed. I hugged closer to Martín, shielding his head with as much of my body as I could.

"Mama!" Barbara screamed. Mom had disappeared into her bedroom after we had gotten up the stairs and she was out of sight from where we stood.

The ground bucked and I grabbed onto Barbara's doorway to catch all three of us from falling down the stairs.
The ground began to roar and the house screamed under the stress of the movement. Martin's toys spilled out of the closet and the sound of breaking glass seemed to be everywhere. Barbara's enormous TV bounced off the top of her dresser and made a horrible crunch and a bright flash as it hit the floor. The shaking lasted forever. When it finally stopped there was a moment where no one spoke and the air filled with car alarms and barking dogs.

"Are you guys okay?" Mom asked, emerging from her room.

"I think I'm going to puke," I said, bending over and swallowing back the urge to vomit.

"We're fine," she said. "We're fine." She touched my arm and then Barbara's, as if to assure herself we really were okay.

I kept my hand on Martin's head.

"What the hell were you doing?" Barbara asked her.

"Holding up my TV," she said. "I didn't want it to fall.

"You saved your TV?"

I wanted to laugh but I was afraid I was going to puke. Mom ignored Barbara's tone of voice. "Okay, we're all going to go down to the living room and take turns getting dressed," she said, her voice low and shaky. "Then we are going to go to Mari's house."

Mari was her sister who lived a block away.

I didn't respond and stood frozen until Mom grabbed my arm and we walked down the stairs in the dark from memory, trying to avoid the broken glass that sounded like it had fallen everywhere.

As we reached the downstairs the house shook and the door rattled against its frame, as if someone were trying to kick it in.

"What was that?" I jumped, grabbing Mom's arm.

"It was an aftershock," she said, her voice still low.
"We’re fine. We’re fine.” She repeated it again, mostly to herself.

Another aftershock ran through the house. I gripped her arm tighter.

Why wasn’t it stopping?

We felt our way to the couch and my host mom burst into rapid prayer looking toward the ceiling, thanking El Señor for keeping us safe, then she crossed herself.

“We need candles,” she whispered. “Stay here.”

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Barbara and I sat down on the couch, Martín still silent. My heart pounded and my body shook so bad it felt like the ground was still moving.

Mom disappeared again and when she came back she set a candle on the coffee table, lit a match, and tried to light the candle, but her hand shook so violently she couldn’t.

“Give it to me,” Barbara said.

“No, it’s fine. We’re fine,” she said again.

When she finally lit the candle her trembling hand knocked it over, sending drops of hot wax onto the table.

“Good God, Mom give me the matches and I’ll do it,” Barbara said, holding Martín with one arm and snatching the matches away from her mom with her other hand.

“Stephanie,” Mom said, turning to me. “Hurry and go get dressed. Then come back down and stay with Martín so Barbara can get ready. I am going to get water.”

I realized I was in my underwear and an oversized
I stood up from the couch and ran my hand against the wall to guide me up the stairs and into my bedroom. I stumbled across my room, tripping over the fallen things on ground to the place where I knew I had left my cell phone. With the light of it, I could see everything that used to be on my bookshelves and desk was now on the floor. My closet door had popped open, sending all of my neatly folded clothes onto the ground in a big dark pile.

I tore through the pile of clothes, throwing them around the room trying to find something to wear. I put on sweats and a sweatshirt and left them on for a second before taking them off again. I couldn’t wear sweats. No one wears sweats in Chile.

I pulled jeans on and a sweatshirt over my head, then promptly took the sweatshirt off again. It was too hot. It was the end of summer and still uncomfortably warm, but I felt the need to wear warm clothing anyway.

What are you suppose to wear after an earthquake?

I slid my feet into flip flops before I spastically kicked them off again, remembering the glass on the ground. I shoved my feet into socks and tennis shoes.

“Stephanie! Hurry up!” Mom hissed from the kitchen.

“Coming!”

We were all still whispering.

I left my room and saw Mom scurrying around the dark kitchen filling up pots and pans with water.

“What are you doing?”

“They’re going to cut the water,” she said.

I had no idea what that meant.

I went downstairs again to the living room and Barbara handed Martín to me. Martín didn’t cry or say anything. He had not made a sound since the earthquake.

He grabbed my sweatshirt with his tiny fingers and
buried his head in my neck. He was shaking.

Barbara went upstairs.

"Martín, are you okay?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Are you scared?"

He nodded again.

I left my room and I saw my Mom scurrying around the dark kitchen filling up the pots and pans with water.

"What are you doing?"

"They're going to cut the water," she said.

"Don't be scared mi amor, nothing will happen to you."

He nodded.

The potted plants in the living room had all tipped over in the quake, spilling dirt into dark shapes all over the carpet.

Mom came downstairs holding Martín's clothes.

"Can you help me dress him?" She tried to pull Martín off me but he wouldn't let go.

"Martin I need to dress you. Let go of Stephanie," she demanded.

He wouldn't.

"Martín?" I whispered to him. "I am going to turn you around. I won't let go of you, don't worry,"

He nodded.

I turned him around on my lap and Mom began to roughly shove pants and a shirt on over his pajamas.

Barbara came downstairs again.

"Good thing Tío Rodrigo is home tonight or Tía Mari would be shitting herself," she said.

Mari was Mom's older and more neurotic sister and the only Chilean who was scared of tremors. A few months
before, a particularly strong tremor sent Tía Mari running into the hall screaming, “The children! Get the children!”

All of the “children” she referred to were older than twenty years old.

In addition to tremors, she was also terrified of being alone. Her husband, Rodrigo, lived in another city during the weekdays for work.

“She is probably shitting herself of fright anyway,” Mom replied as she tugged a stocking hat on Martín’s head.

“Okay, are we ready? Let’s go.”

“MOM WAIT!” Barbara said. “We need to get money!”

“Barbara for what? We are going to Mari’s house.”

“Well, I don’t know... what if we need it?”

“Mari has more cash hidden in house than you will have in a year,” Mom replied, opening the front door.

“Oh, right.”

Tía Mari’s fear of earthquakes or any other type of disaster made her hoard enormous wads of cash in her house, just in case.

As soon as we got outside, another aftershock made the metal gate in the front of the house rattle in its frame. The three of us froze. The fence groaned as if it were going to break out of the pavement that held it in place, and just as abruptly as the aftershock had started, it stopped again.

We walked down the stairs and out of the gate. Mom grabbed Barbara’s and my arm and pulled us into the middle of the street to avoid the overhanging power lines and we half-jogged down the street until we got to Tía Mari’s house.

When we rang the bell on the outside of the gate the door opened and Mari and all three cousins crowded in the doorway around her.

“It was an earthquake!” she shouted, flashing an enormous and painfully bright flashlight at us.

“We know it was an earthquake!” Mom shouted back
at her sister, shaking the gate in its frame just as the aftershock did. "Now open the damn gate."

Mari reached to press the switch on the inside of the house that normally would have unlocked the gate. Nothing happened.

"Shit," Mari said. "I forgot the power was out."

"Oh great," my host cousin, María Paz, groaned at the inconvenience. "We have to actually unlock the gate with a key now."

"Cristian, go get the key from Abuelo," Mari commanded to my other cousin.

He disappeared for a second and came back with an enormous key ring.

"What key is it?"

"I have no idea, I always used the buzzer."

"Oh good God," María Paz groaned again, and even in the dark I knew she was rolling her eyes.

"Abuelo!" Cristian shouted. "What key is it?"

When Cristian finally found the key and unlocked the gate we rushed in house and into the master bedroom where Tío Rodrigo was still in bed.

"He didn't even get out of bed when the earthquake happened," Tía Mari explained. "He was embarrassed because he wasn't wearing any underwear." She shone her flashlight at him.

He cringed in the bright light, "Turn that damn thing off!"

"Good thing I bought these giant flashlights!" Tía Mari exclaimed happily, shining it upward at her face as if she were telling a ghost story. "Just in case of things like this."

Abuelo, the ninety-year-old grandfather, also stayed in bed in his room.

"This is Abuelo's third earthquake," Tío Rodrigo explained to me later. "Chile has a major earthquake every
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thirty years or so.”
He then asked me if I had ever been in an earthquake before this one.
“Yeah,” I replied. “This one was my third too.”
“Are there are a lot of earthquakes in Seattle?” He asked surprised.
“No, I am just an earthquake magnet,” I said.

My first earthquake was when I was nine months old and my mom took me to visit her cousin in San Francisco. As tourists, we arrived in time to experience our first California earthquake. My second quake was in Seattle when I was eleven years old and sitting in math class learning about fractions. While both of those quakes were dwarves in comparison to the Chilean quake, I had been in three earthquakes in three different places in the world, and I wasn’t even twenty-one years old. At the rate I was going, I was definitely going to beat Abuelo’s earthquake record.

The aftershocks continued several times an hour for the rest of the night and well into the morning. Each one sent me running and squealing into the nearest doorway. My host family, however, treated each aftershock as a typical Chilean treated temblores, which was as if it were normal for the ground to move. After a few hours, the aftershocks barely even stopped their conversations.

“If this is your third earthquake,” Tio asked me suspiciously, “then why are you still so scared of them?”
I told him I had no idea why I was still scared of them, but probably because earthquakes are scary things.

When morning came and it began to get light out, we went downstairs and outside to assess the damage to the house and rest of the neighborhood. Fortunately, the worst was broken wine glasses and a large crack in the backyard patio.

“They haven’t cut the water yet,” Mom said, turning on the kitchen faucet. “Though we should collect more water.
Just in case."

"Why would they cut the water?" I asked.

"They always do after earthquakes," Mom replied. After major quakes, she explained there is damage to underground pipes so the city shuts off the water until it's fully repaired.

"Well at least we have enough food to feed everybody," Tia Mari said cheerfully. Her other major fear in life was running out of food, so she kept two closets stocked full of canned food, in addition to two stuffed refrigerators and two full-sized freezers, just in case.

"We have enough food to feed the whole neighborhood," María Paz said under her breath.

Tia Mari glared at her.

"Anyway," she continued. "We should go to the supermarket as soon as we can to buy more bread, just in case."

She was serious. It seemed Tia Mari was far from the shitting-her-pants-scared we had thought she would be. Instead, she was ecstatic she had been so well prepared.

The long morning dragged into an even longer day and afternoon. We sat around listening to Abuelo’s old, battery-powered radio. Through it, we learned the initial reports of the quake put the epicenter of it in the southern Chilean city of Valdivia. They estimated the magnitude to be 8.8.

"Ugh, it's so boring without TV," Barbara said. We had been without power for less than ten hours and, of all people to lose their TV, Barbara was the one who would definitely miss it the most.

Mom snorted, "You don’t even have a TV to watch anymore."

“Well excuse me for saving my kid instead of my TV," Barbara retorted. "Unlike somebody."

“I did save my kids!” Mom insisted, horrified at Barbara’s insinuation. “I went and got Stephanie and made
sure all three of you were okay, then I saved my TV. You know we don't have the money to buy another one.”

“Don't remind me,” Barbara groaned.

“But on the bright side, if the worst we lost was your TV than we were really, really lucky,” Mom continued.

Despite the optimistic outlook, the death of Barbara's TV was mourned for the following months.