

Chapter 3
Of Women and Men, Married
Life and Single

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Many mountains to cross

By Karin Hanazono, 40s, Kobe

My small home was my kingdom, over which I ruled supreme for 15 years as a professional homemaker. But, as the saying goes, all good things must come to an end. When the kingdom crumbled, I was left with the old folk.

At the crack of dawn the day of the quake, my parents-in-law came, clutching a salvaged antique cigarette box. "The house is gone," they said and moved in with us. Although the two of them had previously boasted that they would never become a burden on their children in their old age, their independence collapsed with their house in just 20 seconds.

It is said that the elderly are slow to adapt to changes. This is simply not true! As soon as the phones started working again, they called everybody they knew, giving the royal pronouncement that it's the children's duty to look after the parents. "Leave the shelters," they advised their friends, "and go to your eldest son's home. What else are children for?"

What happened to the idea that society was obligated to take care of the elderly? The revision brought storm clouds to my kingdom.

I felt that our home, newly built with its subtle gray yones, was invaded. The invasion was symbolized by a plastic chopstick stand they bought at the 100-yen shop. From sun-up to sundown they nag at the kids, telling them to be careful, quiet and tidy. They seem to want to provoke trouble.

Based on the reasoning that the wife of the eldest son is nothing more than an appendage, they propagandize about filial duty. But great grandma, nearly 90 years old, is left at an evacuation shelter. I'd like to know how they got exempted from their filial duty.

The local government and the media only want to see the number of people in shelters declining. Once the evacuees get accommodated elsewhere, their living expenses and conditions will become their own responsibility. If everybody was absorbed into relatives' homes, there would be no more statistics and everything would be just fine.

Some people idealize the family as some wonderful image built on pure love. They constantly blab on about this nonsense. Those who do not fit into this ideal image

are labeled as heartless or evil and are ostracized by all.

For this middle-aged woman who has experienced the true face of “family love,” climbing back to my own sovereignty is difficult and it’s a long way there.

The old nest

By Keiko Inamura, 40s, Kobe

The terror I felt was as if I had experienced heaven and earth turned upside down. After that, I first felt inexpressible relief.

My arms and legs were tingling as if newly growing. Before dawn, as the four of us in my family ran to the shack where my father lived, this strange energized feeling persisted.

The smell of gas was everywhere and sparks danced in the darkness. When the roof of my father’s house came into sight, the energy that had been pulsating throughout my body suddenly dissipated.

As I pushed open my father’s front door, his dog jumped out to greet me. I asked loudly to the back of his house, “Are you all right?” My father came out with a flashlight, limping. His face looked more like a monkey’s than that of my father. At that point, my legs gave way, and I sank to the floor.

It amazed me that this poor old house, which is almost 50 years old, had not been flattened. On the way over, we had seen many completely destroyed buildings and homes. Neighbors told me that immediately after the earthquake they had repeatedly told my father to come out of the house. He never did.

Although every corner of the house holds memories of my mother, I can say that I have absolutely no emotional attachment to the house. I had often brought up the subject to my father to rebuild the house so we could all live together. He had always adamantly refused to listen to such a talk. Now, gazing up at the bald-headed roof, which had lost its tiles in the quake, I heaved a deep sigh.

A month later, my father decided to have the house pulled down. Soon after, he began to complain about a loss of appetite and excruciating stomach pains. He was wracked with pain day and night.

Was he aware how difficult everything was for me? While I was preoccupied with the major chore of getting water, he was talking of his death being imminent.

We got the results of a detailed medical examination. The doctor advised that possibly the elastic in my father’s underpants was too tight.

My Great Hanshin Earthquake story

By I.M., 30s, Kobe

In my case, damage from the earthquake was slight. The house was basically untouched. Among our belongings, only a glass display case and some other glassware were broken.

Only the car was severely damaged. We bought it new late in 1994, but it was destroyed off by the quake. We were so lucky that my husband, who was in the car when the quake struck, escaped injury.

We were also fortunate on the domestic side of things. We had electricity restored before the fateful day was out, and I felt that we didn't suffer any major inconveniences.

The major difficulty and the issue that caused me most anguish was having my husband's mother come to live with us.

Because my husband's sister had to live elsewhere because of her job, my mother-in-law lived alone in her house in Kobe's Chuo Ward. Her house was partially destroyed by the quake about 70 percent of the outer walls fell.

My husband was driving his car in the area of Rokko on his way to work when the quake struck. He was trapped under fallen buildings inside his car and a passerby helped him out. He then started off on foot for his mother's house, from where he walked back home. (We live in the suburb of Tarumi.) It all took five hours.

The next day, my husband went to get his mother by bicycle. A round-trip took a whole day. On the way home the two of them were deeply shocked by the dreadful damage they saw in Nagata and Suma wards. All in all, we were thankful that we all escaped injury and that my mother-in-law would stay with us until things were settled.

I guess things started to go wrong when my baby daughter cried. She was a fretful baby, and I must say she cried a lot. My husband and I were used to it, but it really seemed to irritate my mother-in-law. She often asked what the problem was with the child. She even tried many ways to stop the baby from crying. But it always ended up with me holding the baby and trying to force my breast on her.

I wasn't able to take an afternoon nap as I had been able to before. I became more and more fatigued and finally fell ill with influenza. At this point, my mother-in-law advised me to give up breast-feeding, and I weaned the baby.

"I'll look after the child," my mother-in-law said. So I took to my bed, where I could hear the baby screaming. "I have to hurry up and get better," I thought as I lay there. Soon, though, my mother-in-law scolded me, "You could at least come and see how things are going with the baby occasionally." Two or three days after the quake, calls began coming in from friends inquiring about our safety. My mother-in-law did not like

this either. "When it comes to the crunch, you can't count on others," she said.

I can understand her feeling and there is some truth in what she said. However, being told, "things are being neglected in the house while you are so preoccupied with your friends" really hurt.

It's true that housework is not my forte. I was often not able to keep up with tidying and cleaning. Just being a full-time housewife was tough for me. After having children and having to handle both housework and child-raising, I found it really depressing to be imprisoned at home day after day. To escape from this, I joined some hobby circles. Now, my mother-in-law would interpret my participation in these activities as "putting your own interests first and neglecting your husband and children." I felt she could easily say something like this to me.

Our electricity was reconnected on the day of the quake, but a major hardship was having no water. My mother-in-law took a major part in the chore of getting water. The first place in the neighborhood to get running water again was the local Chinese restaurant. As soon as our water container was empty, my mother-in-law would go out and refill it. She also helped by going to get water for the toilet from the river.

She is the most capable and energetic woman I know. Because she is such a character, she is able to see my faults. She must have really wondered why I was unable to do things as she did. However, when she corrected everything I did -- from how I hung my laundry to how I interacted with my kids -- I started to care less about any of her criticisms.

Inevitably, things came to a head when matters concerning my parents bothered my mother-in-law.

"Their daughter has just been through an earthquake, and they hardly ever call to see how she is. Nor do they come to see her."

With those words she began a tirade of criticism of everything from the time of our wedding to the present. Even so, she didn't directly criticize us, but she rather blamed us by implying.

I had always had a fairly uncomplicated relationship with my parents. However, I had always felt that our relationship was based on trust. My mother-in-law could not understand or believe this. Thinking about it, my mother-in-law had often asked about the relationship between my parents and me. But I had never before realized what her questions were driving at.

As the confrontation heated up, she must have been overly excited and let fly, "If I am going to ask you to leave, will you leave?"

The house was originally bought by my husband's father (who died two years

ago) and my husband and I pay rent to my mother-in-law. There's no doubt that we get it cheap and of course we didn't have to put down any key money. A lot of the furniture was also provided by my mother-in-law and sister-in-law.

As it turned out, I didn't leave the house and I still remain here. I remember how powerless I felt because of lack of money. I had previously been thinking of going back to work. Because of what happened, though, I got serious about looking for a job. And I was lucky enough to find one (one that would begin in May). In a sense, one could say that my mother-in-law helped me by giving me a push in the right direction.

When I think about it, my mother-in-law and I have known each other for less than five years. We are of different generations, we have a different set of values, and yet we had to live together. Moreover, the emotional damage she suffered from the earthquake was surely greater than mine. I believe I did my best to put up with the situation.

Even so, I would wake up in the morning to hear her muttering as she put a load of laundry, "Why is this house in such a mess?" I would get pains in my stomach. I wouldn't have minded if there was no one to help with the housework. I wanted just to be left alone to live life at my own pace. At the time, I couldn't think of anything else.

When I heard that the result of a structural assessment of my mother-in-law's house by a volunteer was that the house was "habitable," I felt a great sense of relief from the bottom of my heart. I'm ashamed to admit it, but it's true.

Ten days later, she went back to her own house. Three weeks had passed since the earthquake.

My extended family and myself

By H.K., 30s, Akashi

I was born and brought up in an age of comfort and affluence. I had my own home and was a mother. Although my life had its small ups and downs, my life was peaceful and stable.

January 17 was the day of the great disaster that changed my view of life forever – not only mine, but that of many others. I'm sure I'll never forget the day as long as I live.

Both my husband and I were born in the city of Kobe and grew up in the inner city. The image of our dear old birth place was not "the mountainside where I chased rabbits and the riverbed where I fished for carp" of the well-known Japanese folksong. Our childhood memories were of scribbling with chalkstone and playing in narrow lanes that were filled with smells of the city and the sounds of voices coming from the market.

For less than a minute the power of nature was unleashed. As this power brought terror, it destroyed precious lives and properties, and my beloved town. In the midst of all the misfortune arising out of the disaster, there was only one consolation: all my family had survived. Among our relatives, three families lost their homes and suffered injuries. But we didn't lose any lives. Many were victims of the disaster. Because we had been lucky enough to be spared, I made a resolution not to complain under any circumstances and I held firm to my resolution.

Immediately after the disaster, my husband was deeply involved in his work. Regardless, his parents and other relatives who had suffered hardships took refuge at our place, and we instantly became a large, extended family. My husband's parents, in accordance with their age, seemed to have suffered quite a profound psychological shock. While we were rejoicing in our safety, I was inspired with my mission to do my utmost to look after everyone, heal their emotional wounds and become their protector.

While basic utilities were out, I did my best to provide nutritious meals for all, taking everyone's likes and dislikes into consideration. I also managed to secure places for them at the public baths and helped clean damaged houses.

When I had extra time, I contributed my services as a volunteer to help distribute water, food and other necessities. Whenever I saw news of the disaster on television or in the newspaper, I was moved to tear. "If we are alive, we can do anything." I thought, and that kept me going.

Within two months, most of the relatives found places to live and only my mother-in-law remained with us. Until the quake, she had been a woman who could do anything by herself. After the disaster, though, she seemed to have completely lost the energy to do anything.

Not long after everyone moved out, I came down with influenza. I had a high fever and wasn't able to get up. I had a faint hope that my mother-in-law would use this opportunity to get herself going again, but my hope was crushed. I pushed myself too far and came down with pneumonia, which stayed with me a long time. After that, an injury from a previous car accident began to flare up and my health broke down.

It was frantic during those three months. Now I feel like a new flower bud in spring and what happened seems like a dream. Nevertheless, it was real.

At the time, I felt fear. I felt sad. I couldn't sleep. I suffered a severe shock. I often felt like screaming.

After my illness, I felt the tension leave my shoulders at last. There were times when I felt guilty about not having suffered as much damage as the others in the disaster. However, I have my life. If we dashed too fast, we surely get out of breath. For

three months I dash too fast – then at last I understood.

Dutiful daughter-in-law

By Y.K., 40s, Kobe

It's been almost three months since the Great Hanshin Earthquake. When the terrible movement began on that day, I had just finished nursing my youngest child and gone back to bed. I immediately threw myself on top of the baby and waited for the tremor to stop.

After everything had calmed down, I opened the window and noticed what a strange color the sky was. Black ash was whirling outside and I could see black smoke rising from behind the mountains. I heard people shouting and making a lot of noise. I knew a terrible disaster had occurred. As time passed, I began to worry about my parents and I turned the radio on.

The news I heard was that Nagata Ward was severely damaged. My husband went out to see what was happening and didn't return for four hours. He came back with tears in his eyes and said, "The house burned down." The house where he was born and brought up meant more to him than I could have imagined. Fortunately it was only the house that was damaged and his parents were unhurt. My husband soon decided that he would immediately bring his parents to live with us.

The next day, my parents and my three nieces, fearing it was dangerous to stay where they were, also turned up. Altogether, 11 people were taking shelter in our home.

To have two sets of parents living under one roof is difficult. Which should be my priority -- to be a daughter-in-law to my husband's parents or a daughter to my own parents? I was busy all day making meals, washing, taking people back and forth to the hospital and looking after my own children. However, what was most nerve-wrecking for me was my role. I could see that both sets of parents couldn't relax with each other around and somehow a day seemed very long.

After two weeks of living like this, it was decided that my parents would go home. From then on, we shared our home with my parents-in-law. I no longer had to suffer the strain of divided loyalties, but in other ways problems began to arise.

Even though my parents-in-law had their house burn down, we were glad to see them alive after the disaster and didn't think about where they would live in the future. But as the shock of the disaster dissipated, the difference in our lifestyles became apparent, and they began to find faults even in the least significant of things. Everything from my way of washing dishes to using the toilet and basin became a problem, but I put up with it.

What got on my nerves the most was my mother-in-law's sighing. When she first came to stay, I had been so busy that I never noticed the sighing. After a while, whenever I had some time to spare, her sighing would reach my ears. I supposed she sighed a lot because she had lost her home and ended up in her current lifestyle. I was sure it would take some time for the sighing to stop.

The Great Hanshin Earthquake caused my parents-in-law and me to suddenly live together, and it also gradually changed the customs at our house. I'm sure that this is the case not only for our family but also for many other families. Even though I didn't suffer physical damage from the earthquake, I and other wives in the same situation are, in a sense, victims of the quake.

Off to a new start

By Junko N., formerly know as Junko M., 30s, Kobe

Before dawn on the 17th. Assaulted by that tremendous shake. This is not a minor event. What is it? What the hell is happening? Where is it happening?

I lived in east Nada Ward, the epicenter of the quake, and these were the thoughts that first passed through my mind. I can laugh at it now, but then...Before we had any information on what had happened, I was glad from the bottom of my heart that the four of us in my family had survived.

The first night after the quake, we spent a cold night camping in the grounds of Mikage High School. The next morning we heard news of gas leak from a gas tank. The idea of leaving my neighborhood and my neighbors who had always been so supportive seemed like a betrayal and escape. I felt emotionally attached to the place and people, but I knew that our lives were our own and we had to look after ourselves. So we set off in our car with smashed windows for my parents' place in Okayama Prefecture.

We were lucky to get to Okayama in six hours the day after the quake on January 18. Warm beds, warm food and hot baths were waiting for us there. While an ordinary life in the Hanshin area had suddenly become extraordinary, a day-to-day life in Okayama continued unchanged. Though it wasn't easy to reconcile the difference between the two realities, we began to feel settled in the new circumstance.

My husband, who had been off work since the quake, was to go back to his company on January 25. He would need to go back to the house, so I decided to go with him and clean up the place.

Trains had not yet been restored in my places, and it took more than half a day to get home. The presence of a friend who had kindly offered to come and help with the cleaning was immensely reassuring. On the way back home to Kobe, I began to feel

emotionally vulnerable.

The next day, I saw with my own eyes the damages to Mikage, which I had missed during the two days after the disaster. I had never experienced this kind of a shock before. I was shaking uncontrollably. All I could do was to keep standing.

I had been living in Mikage for six years. Every single house on both sides of the street where I used to ride with my son on a bicycle was totally destroyed. The pharmacy run by a very kind woman was also gone. The bakery where the elderly couple baked delicious bread every day disappeared. I felt the blood drain out of my body. It was an emotional crisis for me.

I managed to drag myself home, where I fell into wailing. That was when I came to realize. I didn't need my husband. I wanted to be dependent on someone, and I wanted someone to help and support me, but it was not him.

I had agonized about my husband for several years. He's not a bad person. Compared to other men, he's helped a lot with housework and the children, particularly, over the last couple of years. And he let me do what I wanted to without complaining. Naturally, there were plenty of small problems, but he never stood in my way. It goes without saying that he was never violent or unfaithful to me. But – there is a big but. I never liked him.

I know I'll be criticized for stating it so simply. Because he was such a decent person, I did try to make it work. If I tried, I would come to like him, I thought. However, emotions are not such simple things. I came to realize much later that I had made a mistake when I chose to marry him.

It will sound like making excuses. But to tell the truth, I told him on several occasions during our engagement that I wanted to break it off. However, I was pressured at the time by his intensity, and I rode along on a wave of emotion. I had other reasons to decide to marry him. From adolescence, I had not been able to get on well with my father. I did have other ways to get away from my father without marrying my husband. But at the age of 22, I didn't realize that. Unfortunately, the decision I made when I was still immature ended up hurting my husband. I made a mistake and I really wanted to apologize to him for that.

There is no doubt that I made the decision to marry. I don't want to be unfair and put the blame on anyone else. But after leaving the place where I had grown up and left my old friends behind, I was awakened to the fact that I had chosen a partner with whom I was not mentally or emotionally compatible. I tried in many ways to make our marriage work, first trying to bridge the gap between us, then trying just to accept our difference. My endeavors may not have been visible to an outsider, but it was all quite

stressful for me. So now, when I suddenly had this realization that I could do without my husband, I asked myself whether I should suppress this fact as I had before. My answer to myself was, "No."

I went back to Okayama Prefecture, but I didn't immediately decide on a divorce. I wanted to heed my true feelings that had surfaced during a severe emotional shock unlike any I had experienced before. At the same time, I felt reluctant to hurt him and my heart vacillated. There was another major reason why I couldn't come to a decision. Unlike me, family was something extremely precious to him. I thought that if he lost a family, he wouldn't be able to cope. He had an unhappy childhood and had tried to compensate for this by building his own ideal family. This ideal was his reason for living. I knew that to destroy this would be wrong. Even so, what finally made me arrive at my decision concerning him was an energy that bubbled up within me. It was stronger than any other concern. The energy came from the fact that "I was spared!" in the disaster.

When I saw my old neighborhood completely destroyed by the earthquake, I thought it wouldn't have been surprising had everyone there died. It seemed a miracle that I survived. I was spared – my life was given back to me. So I don't want to live based on a lie anymore. I want to treasure that I was spared and live with no more regrets. My husband's affairs are now his problem. I know I will be labeled a heartless woman, a devil, or a serpent. Once I made my decision, I was able to go forward and escape from guilt.

I moved quickly from there. After meeting and talking with my husband, our divorce came through officially on March 9. I was occupied with job-hunting and house-hunting after that. With the help of Ms. Ichiba from the Women's Center in Okayama Prefecture and many old friends, I was able to find both employment and a place to live. I originally intended to take refuge after the disaster only briefly at my parents' place, but it became a three-month stay. I then moved to a house where I am currently living as of April 6. It's old, but it has a garden. It's a free standing house and I was able to rent it very cheap. I start work on April 21. I was also fortunately here. I was able to take up the same work as I had before the quake as editor of a local magazine.

My new life in a new house with my two boys has gotten off to a good start. Having to leave friends and work mates who had been so precious to me for six years in Kobe was more painful than I imagined. I'm taking it easy and trying to live a relaxed lifestyle where I don't put too much pressure on myself. Moreover, I've come to understand many other things since my divorce. It was arrogance on my part to think

that my husband couldn't live without me.

In the eyes of the society, I'm a woman who has ditched her husband. But recognizing my arrogance, I can send a message to my ex-husband, living alone in the disaster-struck city. "As an individual, I'm cheering you on with all my heart."

A cue from rice balls

By O.R., 40s, Kobe

Part 1:

In the earthquake, some women had husbands risk their life and limb to save their wives. Some grew closer in the aftermath of the disaster and once again found peace of mind together. In other cases, the disaster caused character flaws to surface.

On the morning of the quake, the man I lived with (no way do I want to call him my husband) left me and the kids and disappeared somewhere. He was concerned only about his own safety and did not even bother to ask us if we were alright. He didn't even intend to pull others out of the rubble. He couldn't think of anything or anyone but himself. When a friend sent us twelve rice balls, he started eating before we could get to them. He left us four rice balls. When the children and I went to eat them, he said, "Hey! How about giving one to me?" What an animal! Having eaten eight, he asked for more! Everyone was starving then.

Nothing that bastard did was even the least bit humane. Talk about disappointing! Rather than being sad, I was enraged. This earthquake has resulted in a lot of emotional damages to the children. However, I've been embraced by many friends who helped heal my emotional wounds and showed me a series of true friendship. I cried hot tears of gratitude. I have been touched by human love. I have been given back hope and a reason for living.

So to that stupid bastard – good riddance! I've decided to take another path in life – alone.

Part 2:

A mountain of things have happened.

I thought and thought about what to do and finally decided to leave home by myself. I found a part-time job and now I cook in the kitchen at a family restaurant.

During the first month, it was so tough I wanted to die. I had only ever been a homemaker before, who went to hobby courses at a community center. Until I actually experienced it myself, I hadn't known how lonely it would be to take on a job, to have to take criticism from others, to work in a whole new world I'd shed tears.

But at the same time, I began to make friends with others as I got accustomed to the work. I can now say I'm glad to have left home and sought my independence. If I hadn't realized how thoughtless my husband was at that rice ball incident, I would've still been married to that bastard, suffering emotionally and always complaining. I would've become an awful woman, I'm sure.

Now I'm completely confident that I can survive on my own if I want to. I'd like to make a toast to myself and say congratulations on leaving that bastard!
(October 1995)

I can do anything!

By Mie Yamamoto, 40s, Kobe

As well as the innate disadvantage I have as a woman, I've also experienced hardships as a divorcee. I also have experienced poverty. In fact, I am still experiencing it! However, I don't tell everyone because I don't need someone sympathizing. "This is how hard it is for me" is not what I want to say. I wanted to be as I am now. I wished for it and it came true. I made it come true. All sorts of people live in this world, and I think that those who want to complain should all get together. But I'll say it clearly -- I'm not interested in that.

When the earthquake came down on us with the vertical shakes – pow! pow! – I leapt up out of bed and flew into my mother's room next to mine. Just as the earth trembled horizontally, my body moved of its own accord without stopping to think. I'm the sort of person who can do things like that, and I'm proud of it.

Carrying a 20-liter water container up the stairs to the third floor was nothing to me. "What do you reckon? I can do this!" I thought. If you ask me, it all comes down to this' women who have men looking after them can be psychologically insecure or something.

We live in a 25-year-old apartment complex that houses eight families. During the first week after the earthquake, the residents all scattered like baby spiders to evacuation shelters and other places. My family was the only people remaining in the building. I remember thinking how all the others had no guts. Even men fled – I thought it was pathetic.

After the earthquake, we got running water back on February 12 and gas on March 21. I'll never forget those dates. Even without water and gas, I managed to live without ever eating meals provided at the shelters because we had electricity. I'm proud of the way my family survived after the quake. I'm very proud of the way we overcame and felt satisfied with our efforts.

Single means unfavorable

By Nobuko Kawauchi, 40s, Kobe

In talking about the earthquake, there has been a tendency to emphasize the role of family love. In my case, also, relatives whom I don't usually see were kind enough to help by bringing me clothes and food. But it was from friends that I experienced the greatest kindness. Because I escaped only with what I was wearing, I didn't even have a change of clothes. I had a vague memory of a friend's address in Hiroshima and I wrote to her. The letter managed to find her and she sent a large box full of underwear and clothes.

Before the box came from Hiroshima, a friend I had previously worked with also gave me underwear and clothes and, unexpectedly, some money to help me out. Another friend living in the northern suburbs said she felt bad because her own house hadn't been damaged. While transportation was difficult, she changed buses many times to get to my place to bring me a large bundle. Inside the bundle were a foot-warmer her mother had used, blankets and quilts. Because the weather had been cold and I had no bedding, I was really grateful.

For about a month after the disaster I didn't feel like going back to my previous job. During the day, I stayed at the shelter. At night, it got cold there, so I would walk through dark streets for 20 minutes and go to my brother's place. I spent every day going back and forth. However, when I read in the newspaper about those who had their homes damaged or who lost their jobs, I realized that I should be thankful just to have a job. I also received good advice from an older friend, and after a month I went back to work.

Once I wanted to leave work, and I read an article in the newspaper about New Zealand inviting victims of the earthquake to come and stay for three months. I seriously considered going, and I even called the prefectural office to inquire about it. However, when I remembered how difficult it was to find work and how scarce the current employment opportunities are, I was worried whether I'd be able to get another job upon my return. I ended up giving up the idea.

The people I work with had also been worried about me. After I went back to work and saw them again, I was very happy. Several of my work mates gave me useful materials. Especially helpful was a pair of very comfortable sneakers, which I wear to work even now.

I don't get on well with my father. My parents and I would eat meals together but I lived separately in the house next door. It was last July that my relationship with

my father deteriorated. That's when I became independent. I was feeling comfortable at last in my lifestyle, but this lasted for a short time because of the earthquake. I went back to square one. I had just bought a new refrigerator and gas stove, had the exhaust fan replaced and bought all the kitchen utensils I needed – it was such a shame. I was attached to my own place, but I think there's very little chance of going back there. The house has now been demolished and the property is vacant, but there is a dispute with the next door neighbor over the boundary and it is not making any progress at all.

At last my name came up for temporary housing. At the moment, my mother and I are living together. I'm studying by correspondence, so sometimes I want to be alone. Recently I applied for subsidized government housing for low income residents, but I didn't get it because they give priority to the elderly. The current state of affairs is that a low-income single person like me is disadvantaged. I truly wish that the government would give better treatment to low income residents, especially disadvantaged women.

Complaints from a defacto wife

By Y.S., 30s, Ashiya

Because we haven't registered our marriage, the citizens' register shows that we belong to two separate families. To get a copy of our registration, we have to ask for it separately from our families or neither of us will be given one.

People whose homes were completely or partially destroyed in the earthquake were eligible for compensation money. We live in a rented flat that was damaged very little, but the building was classified as "partially destroyed." We were thereby eligible for compensation.

The first day that victims of the earthquake could claim compensation, my partner took time off work and went to file a claim. Because we were registered as two separate families, I had hope that we might be able to claim twice. So the next day I also went to file. But I couldn't get the second amount of compensation. I know it was brazen of me, but I thought I would at least find out why. I was told that if we had separate entrances and if our gas and electricity meters were separate, we would be recognized as two different households.

So then I asked my partner if he would give me half of the compensation money he received. He said he was the one who received it and so it was his. He wouldn't give me any.

Keeping a comfortable distance

By Harumi Shimizu, 40s, Kobe

Right after the earthquake, I had nothing worth throwing away, nothing worth keeping.

It had been a year since my divorce. It had been six months since I found a job I wanted, as an assistant nurse. My parents' home in the suburb of Hyogo Prefecture was completely destroyed, but my parents were unhurt. My children live in Akashi with my ex-husband. Even though the house was partially destroyed, they were all safe. My good friends and acquaintances were all safe and well. We had damages to our property, but we took comfort in having our lives spared.

My parents had taken shelter with my brother. A month after the quake, when all basic services were restored at my place, I decided to have them stay with me for a change of atmosphere. They arrived at my house with rice sent by relatives in the country and a bundle of clothes, clutching the quilt they had suddenly dived under when the quake hit.

They wept floods of tears as they complained bitterly of the shameful way they were treated at my brother's. They had countless complaints. They had felt a lack of understanding, staying with those who had suffered no damage whatsoever.

It wasn't easy for my 80-year-old father, who had been in charge of the senior citizens' club, to have to be looked after by others. For my 70-year-old visually impaired mother who had seen, with what eyesight is left with her, dead bodies and scenes of cruel destruction, the whole experience had been unbearable.

I couldn't ease the horror my parents had been through. I couldn't do anything for them at all.

I was preoccupied with myself. In the badly destroyed hospital where I work, things were in the worst possible state. After getting off the night shift, I would often have to stand at the end of the queue to get water. The associate nurse examination was also coming up soon.

After a month, I went to see the house in the inner city where I was brought up. When I went inside the almost destroyed house, I found an old ruler and the pin cushion my mother loved. I found our old nameplate and a framed photograph of an uncle who had passed away.

With my backpack, running shoes and a cotton mask over my nose and mouth, I got back on the subway. A mere 15-minute ride took me back to a totally different world.

When I saw women walking around in high heels and beautiful coats, I felt I was as much a victim of the disaster as my parents. I had to cope with the stress and

lack of freedom living with my parents. The responsibility and stress of providing sympathy had passed from my brother to me.

To overcome the difficulties of living together in a small room, I thought it best if we all left each other alone and lived at our own pace as much as possible. I believed it was possible. However, I think my parents felt ashamed to stay with me. My mother's shingles also continued to trouble her up until they were able to move to temporary housing.

As for the rift between my brother's family and my parents, I believe time will heal it. There's no doubt about it. My brother and his family are also victims of the quake.

As for the relationship between myself and my parents, I am trying to work it out slowly. Being a struggling student nurse, I visit and have a meal with them sometimes when I'm not working. I have distanced myself from them a little. Because we are family, I've consciously established a comfortable distance between my parents and me. The pain of the disaster taught me that this is the best thing to do.

Women always send men off

By Akiko Sumida, 30s, Kobe

A month has passed since the earthquake. The company housing we lived in was completely destroyed, but all of our family was unhurt. My husband's company provided alternative housing for us and we were soon able to settle there. I really think we were very fortunate and I often said so to those who were kind enough to be concerned about us. Even so, as more time passed, I began to feel very unsettled. Feeling unhappy all the time, I couldn't look ahead and face the future.

In circumstances where I could easily have died, I survived. I have always had many fears, but the horror of death is particularly strong for me. It occurred to me that I had actually gone through an experience somewhat like death. Until now I had always wondered what death would be like. I had been afraid of suffering pain. I had looked at death from the perspective of life. Now I saw that a person could meet death at any time, and that made me wonder how one should live life. I changed my perspective. I became someone who perceived life and the way to live life by accepting death. I had previously sensed my uncertainty and lack of confidence concerning the future, but now my experience had given me a new strength. I came to think, "No matter what I do, I want to live staying true to myself."

On the other hand, I continued to feel full of sadness and was unable to get interested in doing anything. All that I had built up had been knocked down. I left my

area of Kobe, which had been both my physical and my psychological base. I wonder whether I will be able to build a life again.

Because I have moved away from the area of destruction, I've wallowed in my own feelings. At first, living far away, I couldn't help but feel guilty and vexed that I wasn't able to do anything. However, I realized that because I'm not in a position to be a volunteer at the disaster site, I just need to keep thinking what I can do from here.

There is one truly regrettable aspect of this experience. It is men who salvage furniture from destroyed houses, travel into the city from their evacuation sites to work and rebuild. It is women who stay at home or at evacuation sites, looking after children, cooking, washing and seeing men off. The divide was too obvious. My own relationship with my husband became restricted in this way and I couldn't stand it. However, there is also a part of me that is complying – I am ashamed of this side of myself.

A single mother I know is in a different situation from me. She immediately lost her job and her hope for the future, but also felt bad staying at her relatives' house. "At a time like this," she said to me, "I can't help think how much easier life would be if I had a husband." It is sad to hear but also made me keep quiet about our situation.

Husband-phobia

By M.K., 20s, Kobe

At the time of the earthquake I was alone with my six-year-old daughter. Although I personally didn't suffer any great damage, it was the most frightening experience I've ever had. It was also a precious experience because I felt people's warmth. A lot of people expressed concern for us and helped us. On the other hand, I also had experiences, which made me stop and think.

People who work at the city and local government are also victims of the quake, and I realize they were having a hard time. But when you call, you're transferred from one section to another and asked to keep your inquiry brief. I wonder why the government wouldn't allow every section to answer questions. I wonder why they can't be slightly more sincere in their dealings with people. I wish they could be more conscious of giving service to the public.

I also had another experience that made me wonder. Following the earthquake my six-year-old daughter became unusually fearful. Everyone said, "The mother's psychological condition affects the child." When I hear a male professor from some university saying, "A mother should do such and such...: I want to protest and ask, "Do you really understand what mothers' feelings are?" During that terrifying experience, my daughter and I felt absolutely desperate. As a mother, I thought there could be

nothing worse. Seeing my terrified daughter, even my husband says things like, “It must be lack of affection from her mother.” Why does everyone seem to want to blame it on the mother?

Because the building where my husband worked was destroyed, he didn’t go to work for a while. At first, it was comforting to have him at home because of the frightening aftershocks and the difficulties of daily life. But as time passed, I began to develop an obsessive hatred of having him around because of his criticism of my relationship with my daughter. Now, at last, his company has found new premises and he is back at work. Now I have peace. (Can I call it peace?)

The other day, at a Women’s Net Kobe meeting, things were said like, “What was felt at that time was only natural,” and “Those who had physical damages were not the only victims.” When I heard them, I felt somewhat relieved to go home.

Miss Mi – protector of the house

By Rie Yanagikawa, 40s, Himeji

On January 17, the names of the deceased scrolled on and on over the television screen. As the names were read out, I thought they were all unrelated to me. Suddenly, I heard familiar names -- Tagako Furuta and Michiko Furuta -- the names of my aunt and cousin. Surely there couldn’t be anybody else with the same names? The address was theirs. I leapt to the phone but it wasn’t working. Wherever I called, I couldn’t get through. I grabbed my purse and ran out to find a public phone.

My aunt’s family had served as mayors of the village through generations. The house had been standing for 300 years. It had been chosen as one of the hundred famous traditional houses of Hyogo Prefecture. It was also classified as a city’s historical site. The main house was completely destroyed, though the entrance gate, storage areas, the other houses and the garden survived. Of the four people in the family, my aunt and cousin died instantly. My cousin’s husband and son survived unscathed.

You, man, why couldn’t you rescue your wife and mother-in-law?

The wake was on the 18th. We stocked up on packed lunches at Himeji Station, bought supplies of drinking water and ramen noodles, and filled a car with gasoline. With my husband driving, we left home in the afternoon. At 8 p.m. we reached Sannomiya and gave up trying to go any further east. Sannomiya was ruined and in total darkness.

The funeral was on the 19th. We left Himeji at 8 a.m. and arrived at Amagasaki at 2 p.m. The quarter-acre, gracious house had been flattened. It seemed amazing that there had been survivors. The main pillar of the house had fallen in one piece onto the

entrance gate. The bodies looked like Egyptian mummies, completely wrapped in white cloth. My cousin's beauty was gone.

At the age of 20, my aunt married a professional soldier before the war. She had her daughter at 21 or 22. Her husband was killed in the war when she was 23. Before he left for the battlefield for the last time, he secretly disinherited himself and had all the property put in the name of his baby daughter. Perhaps he was worried about his young wife and child's future, or possibly he wanted to protect his family property. When my aunt was widowed, she couldn't take her daughter and go back to her family. Her father-in-law had her take a second husband into the family of her dead husband. At the age of 3, my cousin became mistress of the estate. It was only natural that when she was old enough to marry, she also had her husband marry into the family. It was an arranged marriage. She had only one meeting with him before the marriage. She didn't experience any other love relationship.

"If I went out to work, I couldn't even earn enough money to pay the gardener," she used to complain, stroking an old pine tree. She was a protector of the old house and in the end she was crushed to death by it. Her last nickname was "House Protector Miss Mi." Rest in peace, dear Mi.