

My Sweet Company

by

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INSTANTS

I have heard many stories about September 19; I could almost summarize all of them in one single word: apocalypse: the city covered by a gray cloud to the sound of ambulances and firetrucks. People screaming, bleeding, running; smell of gas and panic, a lot of panic. Memory was shaken before the body: “Not again, not again”, thousands of voices cried out in unison.

I went out without shoes; I thought about my children; I couldn't communicate; we couldn't leave the building. We should have rehearsed the drill appropriately; it was felt even in this area; I went out walking; the windows broke; we went out to the streets; I prayed; I filmed a video; there was no signal, thousands of stories... The first reactions, certainly common but unique, describe an endless and visible movement in different angles: the streets waving, the power cables stretching, the cars rocking. From one place to another it was easy to see tall buildings in constant movement while people went pouring out of offices or houses, all awkward reactions due to that damn memory awoken again.

I lived the other face of the catastrophe, inside a building that collapsed in seconds, in fifteen seconds... They say that the seism lasted an average of three minutes.

13:14:40

I felt that untimely and confusing movement; I didn't related it to any memory, but in seconds adrenaline lifted me off my chair with my cell phone in hand. My apocalypse came about in the dark; the only image that I recall is the roof collapsing over me after a constant and sudden oscillation that didn't let me react. The windows shook. I walked between obstacles and holding myself to whatever I could find on my way, until a complete gloominess shrouded me; the rest I had to sense it through touch and hearing. I lived inside there the panic of the streets, together with those who, like me, couldn't escape, scream or run. “This cannot be happening,” I thought.

13:14:56

I felt out of breath and a strong tightness in my chest. It wasn't only the dust that covered me and quickly entered my throat; it was a new sensation for my body and my soul; a gray tinted total emptiness.

The texture of my skin had changed: it was coarse, sticky, dry, rigid. I made a mental tour of my body, trying to get an image of it, and when I could light with the flashlight of my cell phone, I noticed that everything had lost its color: pink was no longer pink, black was neither black, and the brown of my hair and my skin were completely hidden. There were also stones of different sizes stick to me. I didn't doubt that my organs were the same or worse: my palate, my tongue, my throat, my trachea and my lungs wrapped in that cloud, maybe grayish, maybe whitish. It was as if I had inhaled a breath of cold air that erroneously went astray. I tried to breathe while my cough was raging. “If this keeps up, I'm going to die.”

How ironic to feel a void despite being surrounded, almost covered, with heavy concrete slabs.

13:14:58

—¡Isaac, Isaac! ¿Are you alright?
Hail, Mary, full you are of grace...

13:14:60

My legs were flabby and trembling, my mind was confused; my clumsy hands trying to use the cell phone, the adrenaline invading me. Bump, bump, bump! Take your cell phone and call for help. Bump, bump, bump! My breast exploded while my mind screamed: Try again! Bump, bump, bump! Write a message. Bump, bump, bump!

Bump, bump, bump! Bump, bump, bump! Bump, bump, bump! Bump, bump, bump! “My sister!” I thought.

13:15:00

My hope came back when I felt my cell phone tightly held in my left hand, the same one with which I had protected my head. I almost instinctively tried to regularize my breathing. I listened to my body wrapped in panic; however, it was determined to survive.

13:15:10

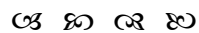
Having my eyes open or closed was practically the same, as the darkness was absolute. The sensation in my eyes was strange, they hurt me, so I closed them; I felt that I strained my eyesight. I had never seen such a darkness and the cell phone light was my means to counteract it. What I saw, I had never seen it before either: maybe it would have been better not to see it: a concrete slab at only centimeters from my face and all kinds of rubble around me; the back of a chair supporting part of the slab; a hole open on one side of the ceiling where I was able to see a pipe; maybe that saved my life.

My hands were the freest thing I had and I was able to explore that place. Maybe we can get out of here, suggested Isaac. Every time I looked at the apocalyptic panorama, it was as if a new element appeared. My neck had no support and I soon lost the sense of location. During that quick exploration I found my glasses. How ironic! I couldn't see. But there they were, almost intact, as if a building had not just collapsed over me; useful, then, to handle the cell phone. Perhaps it was a hint. Turn on, turn off, call. Call, call, call, call. Turn on, turn off, call. Call, call, call, call. Turn on, turn off, call. Call, call, call, call.

I saw Isaac, shoulder to shoulder

13:15:13

My guardian angel, my sweet company, don't abandon me, neither at night nor during the day; if you abandon me, what will happen to me? My guardian angel, pray God for me. We held hands after they found each other in the dark; we prayed again and again.



CONVERSATIONS

I decided to spend the whole weekend at my sister's with my nephew and my brother-in-law. The alleged reason was to celebrate September 15, Mexico's Independence Day, get along with them for a while and eat *pozole*. I didn't usually stay to sleep: between two big dogs and the snoring of my nephew I never have a good sleep. But they had just arrived from a long trip to Peru and I had missed them a lot. During their previous trips, I used to take care of my grandmother, but in this occasion, without her, I felt a lot of nostalgia. I confess that there was a day when I felt a tightness in my chest and I thought: What would happen to me if something happened to my sister? We drank *pisco*, we talked; she gave me a gift from Peru. I had a great time; I felt my heart glad to be among family.

On Monday I barely made up the time; I had a couple of appointments away from home. I closed a business that had me worried. Although I hadn't attend my yoga classes with the frequency I used to, I decided to attend class and start the week with my right foot. I made a handstand; that's a position that I don't like to do during the whole class, but inevitably the instructor requests it. The substitute instructor of that night began with a gentle rhythm that she kept accelerating and, before the mid-time of the class, she was suggesting us that dreaded position. Once standing on my head, I always appreciate being there and seeing the world upside down, even for a moment. I enjoy thinking what happens inside my body: blood running in the opposite direction by the mere ruse of the body to the sound of the mind's will. I left happy, with hunger and hurry, because I still had to make a couple of phone calls.

Tuesday is the day I come back home at the end of the day and find it like new, all thanks to Mary. That Tuesday I got up to open her the door and to get ready. I put on my new pink blouse to combine with those flower leggings of the same color that I could barely wear once before. My sister had just

returned it to me saying in a tone of mockery: “Now that you're skinny it will fit you. I hope you don't tear them as the last one.” I also put on the tennis shoes she half gave me. She insisted on buying them because they were from Don King Kong, but they ended being too big for her: “We have to share them; if I put them on with an insole, they'll fit me.” I felt beautiful with that color and, despite having to endure a tedious process at the bank, I was in a good mood.

—Good morning, Mary, I'm going to the bank. I left you the usual and my white tennis shoes. They recommended me to wash them with toothpaste to remove the yellow stain. Don't leave them in the sun, better near the window or in the bathroom. I'll be back and I'll surely find you here.

I left the branch after undergoing the cumbersome process that complicated my day unexpectedly. I went to the ATM for money, because I remembered that that evening I would have to pay for my writing course.

Seismic alarm...

—It's the drill, isn't it? I commented to the lady next to me.

—Yes, she said with a puzzled expression on her face, the same that I probably had, as we recalled that the date was September 19. We both expressed some relief.

—They already have us skittish, right?

I walked home through closed streets where cops were guiding the persons who had left their offices. The cars, a little more awkward than usual, travelled among people or through more accessible routes.

—I'm back, Mary. Did the alarm scared you?

—No, ma'am, I was upstairs washing clothes and I recalled that it was drill-day.

—Very well, Mary, we don't want any more shocks.

—I called you the day it trembled at night, but I couldn't contact you.

—Did you feel it at your place?

—Yes. I was about to fall asleep and I felt the bed moving. Did you feel it?

—Yes. Luckily, I wasn't alone. My family from Chihuahua had come and we were having dinner at La Condesa.

I realized that I was late and I still had to print the writing project that I would present that evening. I recalled that I had cooked chicken brochettes with beef and I packed them up to take away; I made my coffee and prepared everything to go to the *coworking*. I wondered if it wouldn't be better to stay at home to work so as not to carry so much things. The truth is that everything was ready. I thought about a way to lighten my load and I decided to leave the book we used as a guide at the workshop. I hesitated to bring coffee, I hesitated to print the project; I hesitated if I would have time to finish the work. It was a day with many pending matters. Awkwardly, as when I leave in a hurry, I took my things.

—Mary, I'm almost gone. I think I won't see you tonight, I'll be back late. Your money is on the table.

—Good bye, ma'am.

13:15:23

A woman was screaming inconsolably, perhaps in shock. “Keep calm lady!” She screamed again. I even thought that it could be more than one. I told her to take a deep breath, which was what I was trying to do, even though the *cloud of the building* had already penetrated my system. I heard sighs and other sounds from at least two other persons struggling. A ragged breath made me shudder. It was a chaos of moans of pain.

13:15:40

My legs couldn't get at ease, nor my trunk. I got rid of some obstacles in quest of comfort; it was difficult to find it for my legs; I touched something that kept me from moving. Isaac avoided to tell me, until I asked him. It was a soul that had transcended to eternity; that had been extinguished untimely (at least I wanted to think so). The light was already needless; why seeing that: feeling it was already enough. That kept my body contracted for hours and disturbed my heart constantly.

13:15:45

I was hunched over and I feared to keep breathing with difficulty. I told Isaac and he helped me remove debris from my back so I could straighten up. I felt relief and then I realized that I was not in danger; air flowed better. We both felt the same sensation in the throat and we only had to wait. He was face down. Groping we did what we could and in that attempt he managed to free his leg although he lost his shoe.

13:15:55

What might have happened in Mexico? I imagined my house collapsed, the Angel of Independence fallen, chaos everywhere. With my mind, I ran over every place of the Roma neighborhood that I frequent and every person who lives there. I feared for my family. I knew that their house was not in a danger zone; even so, I assumed that my nephew was at school, Joaquin at his job in Coyoacan, my sister at the school. My suffering increased when I realized that every second that I spent there, was a second of agony for them. The vacuum in my chest increased.

13:15:58

I obsessively looked over my reaction after the quake. The awkward reaction, the fear I felt when I saw the stairs of the building, the woman with her computer in hand, when I found Isaac. Thousands of “What if...”

13:16:00

My dear sister, my dear sister. I can't do this to her; I have to get out of here; she cannot be living this.
Deep silence, deafening.



SHE

Cristina, my sister, is the kind of person who's hard to understand at first. I've known her for thirty-six years and I still have to ask her things about her way of being that I don't understand. She doesn't usually express her emotions and rather shows a harsh part of her. She smokes, smokes, smokes, and perhaps in that same way she's stubborn, both family hallmarks. I tell her that every day she looks more like Mom and she doesn't accept it. Mom left more than fifteen years ago, but Cristina is her living portrait. Then she gets angry and she highlights my Zamora inheritance, and she tells me that I'm just like dad. He left fourteen years ago and I make sure that my sister doesn't forget him either.

Since we were little girls we were accomplices, she very much in her role as elder sister and I in that of the youngest, with a need for protection to which she always responded, although without exaggerating her emotions. She hated that Mom would buy us the same clothes and she used to get angry, but if I came to her classroom asking for help with a problem, she would solve it without thinking. When leaving the school, she reassumed her role as a high school girl and, with her friend Hector, she mocked me for my way of eating bananas. She says that I took it with both hands, sitting in the shade and devouring it. “At that time in the afternoon, the banana was already brown and even so you ate it very funny,” she remembers jokingly.

We always played together and I followed her instructions: she was the leader. She decided the games, its rules and my role. I was never the leading doll, nor the leading singer; I was assigned the yellow color instead of the pink one; I was the one who counted to ten while the other kids ran to hide.

She called the shots, and for me that was admirable; it was hard work that I couldn't have done. When she wasn't present, I didn't feel right.

Like any other couple of sisters, we quarreled, we accused each other and we reconciled. We had a word of honor to not betray each other. After one of our strongest fights, with blows and shoves, we kept silent despite Mom's interrogation. We shared a room for a long time and, at night, we secreted ourselves

to sleep. Always accomplices of all that is not told to parents or of what we didn't like about them. Mom always said: "Be good sisters, you only have each other."

Once our parents left us, things changed, each of us understanding their departure in her own way, living alone and taking care of our lives: Chris already graduated, and I in my first year of college; she, working, and I with an orphan's grant (Mom was a doctor).

When my mother died, I even reproached her for not telling me the seriousness. "You never wanted to see reality." "Maybe, but I didn't know the details either." The night before her death, she and Dad stayed awake watching her. The next day I had a breakfast at the school and they didn't tell me anything; I received the bad news before I even had coffee. "I should have been with you that night," I reproached her.

Camila (our dog) arrived the same year dad left us. She was our doggy angel for thirteen years. When *Cami* died, she called me at five in the morning and told me without further ado while she cried inconsolably (I rarely heard her like that). Later she confessed: "I wondered if I should call you at that time, but I did it so you wouldn't say that I hide things from you."

She never agreed with my engagement, nor with my departure to Chihuahua, and even less when I got married. At my divorce, she was about to tell me, "I told you," but very much in her style, instead she said: "I will always be there for you, but look for your own way." We had to make mature decisions without being adults, and that brought us problems; it was a difficult period. The passage of time and the union with my grandparents brought us back some kind of normality. We rearrange things and we accepted that others might not be the same.

But she is my little sister, despite all the things I have problems to understand about her. She, accepting my freedom, I her forms, her decisions.

Many more things unite us: those jokes that only she and I understand, anecdotes, stories of the four of us. She gave me the best gift that can be given to a sister: be the aunt of Jose Manuel.

13:17

I took my cell phone and I tried to communicate in other ways. I started sending messages, first to Jonathan, director of the company, and then to colleagues who were always on the first floor, but I had no luck. Then it was the turn to write to my sister. I asked myself what I could tell her, because I didn't want to alarm her or to sound catastrophic: "How are you all after the tremor? I am under rubble, but well, I think. I hope help is on the way. Answer me."

I was hoping that the message would be transmitted and so she would be at ease knowing I was well; my search would start on time and it would not be long to get out of there.

13:20

I reviewed with Isaac who was on the third floor. For me, he was the one who knew everything and perhaps I took advantage of it. "So, Martha wasn't there, right?" He barely answered when I insisted with another question. "Are you sure? How far is Jon's office? It's close, right? Did you see if someone managed to get down?" I listened to him, but soon I interrupted him saying: "You'll see that Jonathan is striving to find us." Maybe I said all that more for me than for him.

13:28

I thought about those guys on the first floor and in the course I had just given them a few days before. Would they have managed to get out?

13:40

I felt comforted thinking that if I was there it was because maybe my house was worse. What if I had lost everything? I'll be fine; at least for a while I will not have to deal with a rent and the complications of living alone.

13:59

Damn! Mary! I recalled that she was at home.

14:06

Isaac, do you think we're near the staircase we were going?

14:22

Why am I here? What drove me to spend more and more time in this building? Why did I return to an office when I had already created my own at home and at such a high cost? I experienced more than a collapse: I felt that my whole life was crumbling down.

14:40

God, I don't understand you. Why me? This is the last straw. I'm going to leave Mexico!
Commiseration, anger, hope, will to live ... everything.

14:46

That first light came and made me feel something magical, a whisper, a feeling, I don't know. If you are alive and, despite of being buried between concrete slabs, you are OK, it must be due to something.

Buried, surrounded by broken glass, stones, dust, pipes and metal plates; I noticed how little I still had and that was enough: my voice, my will, my faith and Isaac.



AN ORDINARY TUESDAY

I arrived at the office and sat down in my usual place. Although it was not a long walk, I arrived panting and needed a few minutes before I could start working. Martha (Jonathan's partner) wasn't there but I noticed that her belongings were there. It was becoming more and more common for me to work there, even though I also used to work at home or even in a coffee shop: I liked the idea of seeing more people and I felt welcomed by the owners who were already my friends. When I went to the kitchen to store my food, I heard Isaac say that his boss—Martha—would arrive later. I sat down and, coffee in hand, I started to address a long list of pending issues.

It was one of those days when you work a lot but feel that you don't progress; I still felt the frustration of having started late to work on my pending issues due to the obligatory visit to the bank. I saw Isaac coming in and carrying some bags of groceries along with a woman. "What did you bring me?" I asked him jokingly. I knew that soon the work center would be open to the public (*coworking*) and would offer some food that she was going to prepare. I saw him pass by a couple of times more, which was not unusual, because he was always everywhere.

Jose Manuel was always between the lobby and the area where I sat; he was the jack-of-all-trades of *coworking*. He's one of the few guys who, even though he's studying, he also works hard, and part of my job was to work with him on content development. We reviewed some pending issues and I asked him to go down to the first floor to request some changes to the website. Restless as always, I saw that he got up and came back asking: "What did you ask me to do?"

Diana, one of the few enterprising co-workers who inhabited the place, approached me. When I got up to greet her, we both noticed the difference in height, especially because of her high heels, which also exposed that I had choose to wear tennis shoes that day. We joked and she went on her way. Alex came up and, as he greeted me, we commented once more that Martha wasn't there. I always told him that he should be more time in the third floor and not so on the first one; he was in charge of the operation of the place. He went on his way and I noticed that he also greeted Diana and told her that she looked very pretty. I thought to myself: 'He didn't tell me that.'

Alex and Jose Manuel were talking about work. Many times I stopped at their workplace to review

pending issues: the inauguration would be soon. They went down to the lobby, but I decided to keep working. I lost sight of them. I opened Facebook trying not to distract myself and I wrote: ‘Can someone recommend me a page where to sell the tickets for my *Storytelling* course?’ It was 13:13, a minute and a fraction later I got up suddenly without any apparent reason. My session stayed open, showing that I was still there. “Lucy, Lucy, answer. We’re looking for you. Are you okay?”

15:16

I noticed that lunchtime had already passed. I felt resigned and I preferred not to listen to my stomachs rumbling. I felt some kind of tranquility, compared to the first minutes.

“I don’t hear ambulances,” said Isaac. “What’s going to happen? Will they come for us?”

Now I had to give him answers and I only suggested vaguely that maybe they were already looking for us. At least we could hear helicopters.

15:37

The presumed comfort quickly became a pain, or a cramp or discomfort for the body. Countless times I changed position. I thought it was more painful for him, as he was face down. “Are you OK?” we asked each other from time to time.

15:40

Inhale during seven seconds, hold your breath, exhale during seven seconds, rest and start again; feel how air goes through your whole body. I loose count and I started again.

16:00

I wrote Joaquin, my brother-law, in a moment of despair:

‘I’m at 286 Alvaro Obregon Avenue. The building fell down, I’m under rubble, but without injuries. We’ve been here three hours and we don’t hear help coming.’

16:32

The little toes of my left foot had gone to sleep: I felt how my tennis shoe was oppressing them. At times I leaned against Isaac, but soon my body noticed that it wasn’t him. Whatever I gained in comfort, I sacrificed it due to the indescribable feeling of knowing that she, who had just returned from the market and was getting ready to work, now was laying at my feet, lifeless.

‘You are alive; something great expects you; you’re strong, accept it, accept it.’

17:00

We evaluated once more if there was an exit. Somehow, that hole that seemed distant was closer to me. Now my whole arm fitted in it. For me it was a distant possibility, but in the face of doubt, silence and the fear of dying there, I watched at it again and explored it with my arms. Neither a ray of light came through it, no matter how much I tried to stretch myself and explore it a little more, it was impossible.

17:25

I was wearing my pink agate bracelet; it invoked the power of nature by rubbing it. It was the ‘sisters bracelet’: she had one identical.

17:40

I felt a pain in my right side, more and more unbearable. Between the containment of my body and a metal that hindered me, it was difficult to ensconce myself. My pants got stuck and I was afraid to cut myself if I made a strong movement; moreover, my hip was almost immobile, thus complicating everything. If I could move it, I might get enough rest from that pain. With my hand I passed a piece of rubble from one place to another, and at times I turned on my cell phone light to better discern my progress. I barely had moved and rested, when one new obstruction sent me back to total discomfort.

I felt something bigger and I pulled it out; it was a piece of cardboard quite firm and, when I removed it, it gave me mobility: finally I freed my hip. I felt a great relief; Isaac asked me if I was fine. I enjoyed that space and I felt like a small battle won. I realized that no matter how long my stay there might last, it would be a matter of small achievements.

17:48

‘You never imagined this, right? Well, here you are, buried. At least acknowledge that you have company; that you’re not alone as you always claim to be. Nevertheless, you look at yourself, isolated from the world, in a destroyed city you may never know for sure what happened to it, how is your sister, your family, your home. Maybe you already have nothing left and that’s why it may not be worth going out of here.

Remember those voices and sighs, listen now, nothing remains anymore. At your feet came Death; one more step and it would be you. If you had been cleverer, you wouldn’t be here. You should have run down the stairs or, better yet, you shouldn’t have come today. Dumb, dumb. By this time, you would be at home watching the news and working in your studio, the one in which you invested so much. You were here because you say you have friends and because you were bored of working so lonely; but, once again, nothing turned out as expected. Come on, talk to the only person you have left, you’ll see if you find comfort.

Breathe, Lucy, breath. Believe in yourself.’

17:56

When she was twenty years old, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. Despite a long illness, I didn’t believe that she would die, I thought that if that happened, I would die too. It didn’t happen that way and I had to keep going. The university granted me a scholarship, and my dad, my sister and I began looking to start over. When everything was taking shape, my dad left with her.

I began to relate to Isaac the hardest part of my life, the one that has cost me so much to overcome. He listened attentively and nodded without commenting much. I wanted him to know a little more about me, to share my story with him, to open a new channel of trust after a communication that had only happened in a survival mode. I was more tranquil and saw everything with a little more perspective, unlike him, who I felt already exhausted.

I had the good fortune of having two dads and two moms. Although my sister and I lived alone, my grandparents always looked out for us. Since we were little girls we were very close to them and, in the absence of my parents, even more.

Then came the part where I confessed, still in pain, the recent death of my grandmother and of *Camila*. “I had to learn to bring them to my present, instead of living in the past,” I said to my attentive listener. “It has been a difficult and constant path. You know, Isaac? I’m sure they’re looking after us.”

18:09

I felt that voice of love once more; I struggled to feel if it was my grandmother or dad or mom. I concentrated on just feeling. Something changed in me and I remembered the words that Isaac had just pronounced after I told him my story: “You’re very strong, dear friend.”

18:18

Silence prevailed, as well as the total lack of evidence of help. But then we heard a voice asking for help.

“Who are you?” we shouted together.

“Paulina.”

“Where do you work?”

“Human Resources.”

I confirmed with Isaac that we didn’t know any Paulina, and least in that department. We told her our names and that we were from the third floor.

“Third floor? Are you sure?”

“Yes, from the *co-working*. How are you?”

“More calm now, but I hurt a foot. So, on what floor are we?”

We didn’t understand very well her question and shouting she explained us:

“I’m from the fourth floor. I fell. Pee.”



TALK TO THEM

Why believe that our dead relatives listen to us? Why not? I devised my own method for bringing them to my present when I got frustrated by my constant visits to the past, always laden with longing, with ‘what ifs’, with reproaches to a God that I wanted to believe He was bad. I distorted the truth in whatever way convenient for me and I reinforced my role as victim in life. That way I alleviated momentarily the heavy trace of death in which neither them, the doctor, or destiny were the culprits, but God.

I began to talk to them, to tell them things about my life; to remember them with gladness and acceptance, rather than with anger and denial. “They are in another plane and you can believe whatever you want,” whispered me that wise voice that surges from time to time. Maybe it’s them or perhaps a higher voice, or perhaps only me who can hear those messages when I’m in peace. I decided that they would always be with me.

I came to this conclusion after thousands of therapies; after I stopped blaming the world; after accepting that my parents’ death was some part of my story that I couldn’t get rid of. For the first time in years, I took control of my life, of my own emotions, even of my thoughts. Enough codependence on a man, my sister or my grandparents! I started to fly by myself. I had to forgive myself and reconfigure those false ideas backed by the world but put into practice by me.

It took me time to get acquainted with my new ego, to accept myself as a good employee, to see myself autonomous in life, and I realized that it was an endless effort followed by a wonderful time of self-knowledge and reconfiguration of my beliefs and my values.

I had found the path to freedom.

19:34

- The girl we talked to, Paulina, was she the one who shouted so loud?
- I’m not sure.
- I think she was.
- But each time fewer voices are heard.
- Maybe we’re just the three of us still alive.

20:06

“Do you really think they could still come for you? You don’t want to accept it and you’ve turned off your cell phone, but it is already night. Even if you pretend to lose track of time, you know it’s running, and that scares you. Accept that days or weeks may pass. How long can a person live in these conditions? Take a look, you foul, take a look at the minimum space you are in: it is as if you were buried alive; what you have seen in a movie can become reality; besides, you share the space with this man. You’re grateful for having him, but maybe it’s not so good, unless you expect to survive. Maybe sleep will help you forget, although you’ve never been good at that, and the insomnia you had been enduring may appear today as well. If he falls asleep you’ll remain completely alone and in silence.”

21:38

I heard clearer noises. Machinery and voices. We shouted in unison and we recovered hope. I shouted to Paulina what I was hearing and I wanted her confirmation. At close range I said to Isaac: “Listen,

listen, it's as if they were giving instructions to someone." Convinced of it, we shouted as loud as we could. I started crying like someone who finds something very precious, like when an athlete reaches the finish line and explodes with emotion. Little sister, little sister, I'm fine, and there's less time before we see each other again. Little sister, I want to see you now, I'm fine, I'm fine, be patient. God help us! I broke down in tears and anxiety until I noticed that I was getting flustered. I thought I could become dehydrated and that if I was so close I had to calm down, control myself. Isaac reassured me with his solidary hand and we continued to scream.

23:00

The noise gradually receded, but hope didn't. I corroborated that Paulina was fine and we continued shouting louder: Help!

Help! Help! Help! Help!

23:16

Complete silence!

00:00

I heard Isaac snoring and I envied him.

00:56

I suggested that we should be vigilant if someone came back for us. I didn't have much response and, instead, Isaac commented that there would hardly be people at night. I remembered those rescue groups called Moles or Topos that come from all over the world in these events. He nodded, but soon went back to sleep.

1:48

I felt angry at that false alarm and I wanted to keep screaming, to stay active, not to give up. Everything achieved so far was diluted. I had trouble keeping positive thoughts, a deep breathing, my spirits up, conviction.

Why God? Why does this happen to me? I don't understand you anymore. What must I do? I don't understand anything since my grandmother died. I was barely recovering and I had found a place that today is destroyed. I don't understand you, God.

3:00

My body was not so contracted anymore, but that didn't mean comfort at all. My glasses and my cell phone became my precious objects that I dedicated myself to care for, although they occasionally disturbed me. Wearing the glasses was absurd and, besides, they weighed on my nasal septum. That hole with the crossed pipe that I believed was part of my salvation became the little cave where I stored my belongings. I put my glasses and my cell phone in a place that was accessible and close at hand in case I needed them.

3:26

I made a new attempt to make a call: maybe the network had already been re-established. I turned on the cell phone and its intense light hurt my eyes. I searched blindly my glasses in my little cave and avoided see the time; I focused on checking if there was a signal. I tried all the options: calls, messages, WhatsApp, emergency number, social networks.

Nothing. I checked the battery and although I had it in saving mode, it was running out. I made more attempts and ended up desperate. I repeated my sister's number again and again to memorize it: it was plan B in case the battery ran out.

4:00

“Accept your strength, Lucy. What else do you need! This proves your physical and mental strength; look at what you’ve achieved. Don’t negate it anymore. People don’t say it as a compliment, they say it because you convey that and because your emotional strength—after so many losses—has shaped you as you are: a great woman who, even in this circumstance, brings out her best and keeps fighting, remains optimistic, gives her hand to the guy next to her. Hug yourself, love yourself, acknowledge yourself.”

I felt a hug and I smiled.

4:39

I opened my eyes somewhat alarmed: it was Pau asking if everything was the same. I probably dozed for a moment. I had visualized the encounter with my sister. Everything happened in a foggy environment where I went out and nothing had been so serious: there were no other collapses, or ambulances, or marines. I just went out and my only concern was to call her. I did it with the naturalness of who calls to report in.

5:28

—Isaac, I haven’t been able to pee.

—My friend, you must make an attempt; you might get sick.

I regretted that, despite having swallowed my shame, my attempts had been unsuccessful. I had been holding it in for so long, that now I couldn’t pee. The position of my body didn’t help either: I had to make a great effort. I didn’t want to throw away my achievements and that, because I couldn’t pee, the situation got more complicated. His brief words encouraged me to try again.

6:00

—Isaac, you do know that my name is Lucy, right?

I felt a light smile, but he didn’t answer.

—It’s because you always call me friend, and when we finally leave this place you will not know my name. What if the rescuers ask us?

—Yes. You’re Lucy.

6:15

I dozed again and I felt myself shrugging my arms, trying to cover myself. It wasn’t an unbearable cold, but I felt a stream of air.

7:33

“Of course I miss you! You know it. I’ve always missed you! For years I wanted to be with you, but don’t you think that it will be now. That was years ago and it cost me a lot of therapy. I am sure that God has other plans for me, He told me so: I felt it. My life here is not coming to an end and I don’t want to see you soon. So much learning to bring you to my life, for what? So that suddenly now I may see you again and leave Cristina alone? No! I’m not leaving; rather, you come here and help me. Grandmother, where are you? Why I don’t feel you? I’ve been needing you for hours and I don’t feel you. Come, please, come!”

8:05

My mouth was much drier; swallowing saliva was getting harder and harder. My lips still had dust and I had that strange feeling of being covered, dry. I touched my face and I recall that that morning I had made up as usual. My eyelashes felt quite firm; my mascara withstands anything, I thought. But, rather, the dust had settled between this and each of my eyelashes. It felt like a kind of mud. It wasn’t annoying, but I thought it was not healthy to leave it that way. I kept myself entertained quite a long time removing that mixture and dissolving it with my fingers until I left my eyelashes as if I had not made up.

9:06

Migraine.



TIME TO PRAY

Since I was a child, my mother instilled Catholicism in us. Every Sunday, after several shouts and arguments, we arrived at the 2:00 o'clock mass. My dad managed to escape a few times. The priest was quite modern compared to many others we had heard before; Mom adored him. The small church was at the end of a group of houses and parks, very close to my beloved house of San Joaquin No. 8

Every night there was a voice that said: "Let's pray." Together we recited a long prayer composed by Mom, from Our Father and Hail Mary, to prayers to the saints, to the angels and to the child Jesus. The four of us blessed each other and they sent us to bed.

In my adolescence I was a missionary and member of a prayer and social action group. The mission part didn't please Dad at all; he said that I shouldn't do that because it was hazardous for his daughter, while Mom recalled that in her youth she did it more than once. It was not easy to get his permission, but Dad had to give in. The year that Mom got sick, I left during the Holy Week and it was hard, very challenging and spiritually difficult. She was not yet critically ill and she encouraged me to leave. It was until November of that year when she relapsed. She died on December 6. My relationship with God began to weaken; I began to doubt, to ask myself questions and to blame Him. "I gave you a week of my life that, instead, I could have spent with Mom," I reproached Him more than once.

Perhaps my grandmother was more believing than my mother, more traditional too. I always admired her unswerving faith. She knew all the saints, she recited the whole rosary and she always had small prayer books. Each Christmas we lulled the Child before midnight and she led a small ceremony. She asked me to reflect on my position towards God; she urged me on going back to church and pray.

I had to get rid of so much anger, rebuild my faith and not just stay with what they had instilled in me. I went in depth into the world of the angels and I realized that I was not far from what I already practiced. I studied the subject more in depth and I found it fascinating: it connected me again. I also approached meditation and Buddhism thanks to yoga. Everything began to make sense and I understood that every being could be summed up in a pair of words: love and compassion.

I devised my own conception of God and I realized that the word *religion* is one more label; my belief is in me and in those two magical words.

9:55

I had already questioned Isaac about his life and, curious, I inquired more details: "Tell me something else, I'm getting bored." We talked about those things we already had in common, such as the workplace and the owner of the company. He told me how he got there and I told him why I did it. We remembered some events at the office, such as when it was lunch time and he said: "Fatty is hungry." While Martha, with her peculiar Colombian accent, said: "That's serious, Fatty. You better go eat."

10:23

"God, God, God, I don't understand your language. I've discovered so many things here, but I still find difficult to understand this hard test. I can't stand anymore: I want to see my sister. Please help me. Listen, as soon as I get out of here I'll stop having sugar." At once I realized the banality of my promise and, besides, it's not my style. But I felt that He was listening to me, I felt peace and I kept talking. "God, when I get out of here, tell me clearly what you want from me, and I say clearly, because in fact I strive to understand your signals. Give me an answer, Lord, and I'll answer you as you guide me."

I told Him, I trusted Him.

11:19

Noise, a lot of noise. Uproar. Very distant voices, but machines constantly. Suddenly it was deafening, but I preferred that instead of the deep silence of the previous hours. Will they be close? Will they come for us? And if they leave again?

12:06

We spent more than an hour yelling every time there was a chance. When the machine causing that terrifying sound stopped, the ‘help’ screams started again.

12:46

Help! Help! Help! Help! Help! Help! Help! Help! Help!

13:14

I don’t have an iron will either, and the passing of hours was somewhat remarkable. I took my cell phone and I registered that 24 hours had passed. I took a deep breath and focused on how good it was to keep hearing the machines. “It’s a good sign,” I repeated to myself.

14:10

I noticed that my head no longer hurt; I was amazed. The breathing exercises had been useful and I had more strength to keep screaming.

14:29

The voice gave of itself, the weariness, the darkness irritated; the body bothered. Isaac suggested to make noise with whatever we could find around us. Paulina had a flower pot nearby, I had a pipe and he had a piece of metal. He handed me a large stone and we hit with all our strength.

15:16

Help! Help! Help! Help! Help! Help! Help! Help! Help!

15:36

We were losing strength as a team. I orchestrated our pleas saying to Isaac and Paulina that it would be better to yell together, so we added our voices. I started and they followed me. Isaac started with the noise and we followed him too. Pau encouraged us and we started again.

15:59

Complete silence.

I noticed that it was wet: my bladder had given way to so much effort. Even so, I felt pain and I wanted to continue peeing. Now I really felt weak and few minutes later I felt my head explode. The deep darkness began to get painted with yellow and white little lights, like spots I saw with my eyes open or closed. I began to despair and I feared to faint. I cried again. I prayed silently, now without saliva, without strength.

16:30

Outside, fists were raised. Alvaro Obregon Avenue painted itself with silence to perceive the least murmur. Anonymous heroes succeeded in silencing a city vibrant of solidarity, hordes of volunteers, relatives, youngsters, children, foreigners, with just that: the firm fist raised on top of a collapsed building. The silence I came to hate was the outside hope for listening to any life inside. It was the certainty of one more rescue. Fists up. The confidence of hundreds of families revived. The illusion of three brave young people was reborn. Raised fists. The absence of noise allowed us to hear that voice: “How many are you there? What are your names?” The absence of noise allowed our choked, exhausted, desperate voices to be heard. “We are three: Paulina Gomez, Isaac Ayala, Lucia Zamora.” Raised fists. “We’ll start the rescue work in a moment. Be patient.”

16:45

“Thank you, God,” we shouted, excited. “It’s almost over,” we encouraged each other. “I knew it,” I repeated, as I grabbed Isaac’s arm to celebrate. “We made it.”

16:50

I felt a hint of triumph, as if I was about to reach the finish line after a strenuous race; a kind of prize or reward that you’ve been expecting for a long time. I felt that I was closer to my sister while the voices from outside were getting nearer and nearer. I couldn’t figure out what they were saying, but I felt calmness. No more distressing silence!

17:35

The noisiness of the machines became deafening. The rescuers told us to shout loudly if we felt these too close. I started to feel afraid.

18:24

They told us that they would first try to reach Paulina. They worked for a long period of time with that objective. We noticed that the noise was moving away and we had to imagine what they were doing for rescuing us.

19:00

“Don’t claim victory. How do you think you’re going to get out of here? They may take days to achieve it. Any false move and you die. There’s tons of concrete around you. How are they supposed to get to you? Besides, remember that you are three, and it seems that you’ll not be the first one. Certainly, your sister has already lost hope; they think you’re dead.”

19:30

Eventually, they reached Paulina; they talked a lot with each other and it was not easy to understand what they said. They talked about the position of her body, what was around her; if she could see the light. There was much coming and going.

19:31

“It’s raining,” I heard in the distance.

19:32

—Put yourself in a fetal position and cover your head; we’re going to bring in machinery again.

My hands started to sweat and my heart began to throb. The headache appeared again and I felt myself with less strength. Isaac told me to cover myself with the cardboard that had cost me so much to remove from my side. It was very helpful.

—Cover yourself, my friend; I’m alright.

19:43

My rebelliousness against the clock was mounting. I didn’t want to confirm the passage of minutes. Everything was the same, except my calmness. I recalled my moments of impatience and imagined that perhaps this was my litmus test. How much more? How much more? I found it hard to calm down Isaac who was losing hope and shouted the rescuers to come for us too. The rescue team was concentrated in Paulina’s area and it was increasingly difficult to understand what was happening.

20:00

—Paulina, we must leave the building for a moment. Be patient.

—Tell them not to leave, —I pleaded to Paulina. But it was too late. They were gone. Absolute

silence.

20:10

“You see? It’s not so easy. Maybe it’s even impossible and they won’t come back.”

20:15

Uselessly, Isaac screamed, more and more desperate and angry. I tried not to listen to him. I was sick and tired of behaving strong and hopeful. The pain of my body had intensified. I could no longer stand having my head on stones or leaning on a pipe, I didn’t find a comfortable support.

20:18

—They had to evict us: there was an aftershock threat.

20:22

I shivered. What kind of joke was that! I couldn’t believe it! Between prayers that were diluted in my mouth for no longer having vigor, I called my sister back. I cried with despair because it seemed that instead of approaching the finishing line I was moving away of it. Because everything remained unchanged. Because I feared another aftershock, to die slowly; they could leave us again; to end up wounded. Because the people outside came and went, and their only advice for us was to have patience. Because Isaac had already lost it. Because the noise was unbearable, but the silence too. Because neither my body nor my mind resisted anymore: My will was weak, my body uncomfortable and my hope scarce.

20:30

They took pictures of the inside, still trying to decipher how to take Paulina out. They evaluated them, they returned and gave some indications, but without progresses. The three of us were still inside. A doctor had to enter to check her foot and avoid hurting it more when they took her out. She cried out in pain, though they tried to calm her down.

20:40

As a chain, they passed the word asking for a tool. The shout started inside and went away. I managed to understand that such a tool passed from hand to hand in both directions. They connected one of them with a very annoying noise.

—Short circuit, disconnect! All we need is for this to catch fire.

21:25

—We’ve got you, Pau; just resist a little more, resist.

She screamed again due to the pain in her foot as the rescuer told her that it was almost over.

—It’s better to take you out with your foot injured than not to take you out.

The first great moment of celebration was lived.

—Well done, well done, Pau, you’re a warrior.

21:30

—Isaac, Lucia, you’ll be next.

We held hands, prayed again and celebrated too. They told us that they would bring in the machines once again, and that they would do it with care. I had to cover my ears and let go of his hand. I tried not to think and sink in, feel my body and only listen to my interior, as when you cover your ears very hard. All of me was vibrating.

21:35

—We are going to throw a small stone; be attentive because I need you to tell me how close you hear it fall.

Almost interrupting him, Isaac said he had heard it very close and he began to move as trying to get out. They tried to calm him down without much success.

—I help you, I am already moving rubble.

—Keep calm and don't move. We are very close.

21:43

—Do you see the light?

I couldn't turn around, but Isaac saw it very near and celebrated it.

—My friend, I'm not going to leave you alone. You go out first.

—Calm down Isaac. Don't worry, let's wait for their instructions.

21:45

—Isaac, Lucia, I already pull you companion Paulina out, but I'm very tired. I'll start removing debris, but if it's necessary I'll be relieved.

He barely had said that when I could see the light of his flashlight very close. I heard how that human chain now was carrying buckets of concrete, glass and stones.

21:48

I heard them closer and closer. Their talk was one of encouragement and triumph; for a moment I forgot where I was.

—Lucia, you have a very nice smile, we found your I.D.

I remembered that it is not my best picture and we laugh.

21:55

Isaac moved his body forward while the rescuer gave him instructions. There was a lot of broken glass, but it was the only way out. They told me that after he came out, I would have to turn on my stomach and proceed the same as him.

—Do you think I can?

—Hey, of course my friend. I'm fatty and if I fit, you'll get ahead more easily. We're already out.

They handed us a bottle of water. Isaac and I shared it, as we had already shared time, space, moment and emotion. After the first swig, I said: "Thank you, God."



WELCOME

I crawled as hard as I could until I grabbed the hand of an angel wearing a helmet and a harness. "My hair's a mess," I replied when he asked me about my condition, while he pulled me up with strength. "You look very well, Lucia; you're a warrior, you're already out. You're out!" He helped me, giving me a push through the first stretch they had dug: it was like an L. While he was pushing me up by my legs, I tried to reach his partner's hand. With a troubled heart, I approached him until he grabbed my hand and, with a pull, I was moved forward to the second opening: the upper part of the deep pit they had made to rescue us. I saw the light at the top; there were many faces anxiously waiting for me and encouraging me. "I did it, now I did it." They put a harness on me and, among shouts and instructions, they made movements to pull me out. "Easy, Lucia, you're almost out." I had to climb while they pulled me up. I repeated that my hair was a mess; they said that I looked very well. "Thank you for helping me; may God bless you." "Welcome, Lucia," they called out.

I walked confused; there was a lot of light, a lot of people. I drank more water. I gave my name I don't know how many times; they wrapped me. I asked thousands of questions: "Did the whole building collapsed? Was there any damage in the State of Mexico? Where's Isaac?"

I went out to the street through a building next to Alvaro Obregon 286, the place I had already felt like mine and of which nothing remained standing. Then I heard my name; it was not the first time, because it was called out constantly, but that voice, that shout, were different: they came from a great heart. I reacted immediately. We hugged each other with all our strength. I cried outside for the first time. “Your sister is going to the Red Cross hospital,” said my brother-in-law.



SURREAL

What’s your name? Do you know where you are? Do you know what happened in Mexico? Oxygen. Fix her neck. Cover her well. Check her arms, her hands. Something hurts you? Let's go, let's go! Check levels, pressure, saturation, oxygenation. Do you feel the oxygen, Lucia?

The light of the ambulance penetrated my pupils and hurt me. I had spent thirty-six hours in total darkness. I felt hundreds of hands trying to take care of me awkwardly, placing strange gadgets on my body. I could intuit the traffic chaos due to the way the ambulance was travelling, which made me fear for my integrity again. I remembered that I had never been there; it seemed like a dream, a movie, unreal. I corroborated that they were taking me to the Red Cross hospital, and I realized that I would have to be even more patient before I could see my sister, but I felt light and confident as I had struggled so hard just for that. I was going towards that awaited encounter, but now without slabs, without demons; now with peace.



MY SMILE

They say it was around ten o’clock at night; they say that I came out smiling; they say that I brought back hope to many other people...

I gave all the credit to the anonymous heroes who encouraged me, who called out my name, and who welcomed me with joy. But I started accepting the credit of that smile when I opened my arms to receive, to deserve that and many other compliments; when I noticed again and again the viral smile and my smile in private; when I recognized that that gesture reflected my craving to live. In thirty-six hours I understood the lessons of a lifetime and I fought like never before and I cried like never before and my soul vibrated, also like never before, to come out like this, triumphant, smiling, full of light, full of love, full of life.

I emerged from Earth, she brought me back to life, she led me to transmute my pain and to accept my strength; in her core I understood life at last. She orchestrated her earthly and celestial warriors to meet again with mine, to see the light, to feel sparks of rain falling from an immense blue sky. I was born again; my arrival was celebrated as who waits nine months.

Darkness does not exist, it is only absence of light.
Einstein



ALWAYS TOGETHER

“I moved heaven, sea and earth to find you; I didn’t stop; I did everything that was in my power. I called everyone, I went to look for you, I phoned all the hospitals. Oh, Lucy! I thought I would never see you again.” Her cold, thin hands roamed my body and my face with strength. She touched me, she looked at

me, she hugged me. She sighed and sobbed with tears. “Oh, Lucy, little sister! Ow, ow, ow!”

We recognized each other after more than forty long hours of anxiety. I didn’t understand why she was wearing a phosphorescent orange vest and I wanted to ask her a thousand questions. I rather hugged her. I threw the water they had just brought me and I removed the bed rail. There was my sister who, although she is almost three years older than me, is very small, very tender, very fragile: my little sister; the one I visualized so much, for whom I cried, for whom I feared, for whom I prayed, for whom I fought, for whom I came out. I didn’t shed tears either, but I cried from my heart, from my whole being, of joy, I don’t know, of everything, for everything. “Little sister, little sister,” I told her on and on.

Her expression always harsh was only of love, of relief. Both of us, still incredulous, we talked about everything and nothing. As if it was normal to say that she had carried debris; that she had shouted at me from outside the building so that I could know that she was waiting for me; that she made a *trending topic* of me; that she thought she would be left alone. She shuddered when knowing that I had passed all that time in total darkness, and I showed her my hands full of bumps and scratches. We laughed because I told her that the biggest wound was in my butt.

It seemed like we were narrating a movie, but it was our life: always loaded down with surrealism, now we were falling into the ridiculous of the raw and utter reality.

She gave me a handkerchief, she took out wet towels and she wet my lips. She grabbed me by my head, I curled up.

—I thought you wanted to go with dad and mom, but I didn’t want to stay alone. I wouldn’t have stand it, but I know you’ve always wanted to be with them. I lit a candle for you; you say that it works, it was a yellow one.

—Do you know what tennis shoes I was wearing? The Don King Kong ones. And the earrings that you brought me from Peru, I took care of them, and that’s how I recalled you; also our sisters’ bracelet, the one with a pink agate that Joaquin bought us. You see? The stones do have power: I’m here.

We said a thousand things

—Sister, never, I never thought about going with dad and mom.

The nurse and a couple of doctors came in. They gave me more serum, they checked the medicines. They brought me dinner: jelly, bread and a banana.