

Several Destinies, Mexico City

September 19, 2017

by

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*For Diego and Samantha.
I'll bring this story and you the ice creams and the chocolates.*

TLALPAN, MEXICO CITY

Tuesday, September 19, 2017

It's three or five o'clock in the morning. I don't remember at what time the alarm-clock rang because at a night-guard job in a veterinarian hospital hours are just numbers with instructions from the doctors to take care of the 'patients'. They both rely on the "guardians", as the boss has named us. It dawns and the first reddish clouds due to the sun rays always look encouraging because they herald that the night shift has ended and now starts the morning shift, although we've already stolen a few hours of sleep. That's it, sleep that's worth interrupting to continue dreaming and also to drive to the next job.

At the university it's earthquake-drill day. As the class I teach started at nine in the morning, I went to drink a large mug of coffee and I told the students that we were going to finish the class fifteen minutes before eleven so they could get prepared and, at the time of the drill, they could be ready.

I went to the courtyard, close to the meeting point and, right on time, the seismic alert sounded. We were just a few steps away from the National Seismological Institute and the evacuation coordination of seven buildings by the brigade personnel was impeccable. The speakers announced the effectiveness of the exercise and expressed thanks for the cooperation, although, of course, there were also some of us who looked at our cell phones to see when we could carry on with our agenda.

My great friend is a brigade member at building 2 which has several laboratories and classrooms. For a long time we wanted to have a coffee together and, finally, that Tuesday we both could; she just told me that I would have to wait for her until the end of the drill. "Of course, pal, I'll wait for you, I'll be also there." So we did it and the promised coffee was fulfilled in her office because she had some matters pending and so she could look at them at the same time. We talked for a long time about almost everything and nothing at the same time. "What have you done? ¿How's the family? ¿And your dogs and cats? ¿And your jobs?"

Everything came out during our talk and, after several machine-coffees, and seeing that hours were passing by, I decided that I would leave at one o'clock in the afternoon. I had to go to the veterinarian clinic that I had opened four years ago to see if something urgent was needed. Considering the traffic, I could get there at two o'clock, although I wouldn't have time enough to buy myself something to eat, but I remembered that there were some highly caloric reserves out there.

But I didn't say goodbye at one o'clock and I kept stealing a few minutes more from my friend. Her student turned on her computer near we were and started typing. She was the one who first felt the strong movement that shook the building, and said: "Is it shaking?" Yes. "Get out of here, get out," my friend began screaming loudly as we left in panic and hurry; it's difficult to describe the feeling produced by an earthquake when you swing from side to side down a seemingly endless staircase, and especially when the foundations are a lava ground.

During our student and academic years, earthquakes were not "felt" on the volcanic rock that we have under our feet, and we found out about the earthquakes when the family, desperate, tried to contact us to know if we were alright. Now it was the other way around. With terror displayed by my trembling hands, I saw that there was no telephone signal. One of my friend's students asked me: "Are you okay?" I know that my face spoke more than me, because inside of me I knew it was bad, that something very big had happened, and that, while others waited, they let us pass to continue with our activities, I was afraid.

Fortunately, social networks were still working and at home they answered quickly that they were all fine, that some glass items had broken and that the dogs had been very scared. Only my sister hadn't answer yet. She never leaves her phone, but, what if she had left in a hurry and had forgotten it? We were informed through the loudspeakers that we could only go back inside to pick up our belongings and that we should leave the premises because the activities were cancelled so the buildings could be

checked. The chaos to leave was the start; helicopters and ambulances could be heard around.

I had on the radio of the car to listen to the news that little by little informed of collapsed buildings. I was startled to hear a familiar name: Rebsamen. We lived for seven years a few steps from the Rebsamen School, and every day I passed in front of it; what I didn't know was that it was such a big school with so many students and teachers. The street façade of Las Brujas Avenue was short compared to that of Píomo Ranch Street.

My sister hadn't answer yet. As I could not move forward, I left the car parked and went to buy something to eat. The subway had been closed and people were walking around in search for another transportation option, which seemed difficult. Two or three hours went by, until I decided to move because my cell phone battery could run flat.

I don't know if it was bad or a good idea, but I had to get to my house. I didn't want to be away any longer, no matter if it took me five hours to get there. I saw how those people on foot began to mobilize with buckets and shovels on Tlalpan Avenue close to the Azteca Stadium. When I turned the corner before arriving home, the neighbors were loading water jugs in their cars.

My brother came out to meet me and told me that there was no electricity; he confirmed that my sister had not called because her little dog had escaped during the quake and they had been looking for her. She lives in the Coapa neighborhood and, as they were searching for her dog on bikes, they saw all the collapsed buildings: the Rebsamen School, Walmart, Suburbia, Coapa Galleries, the Girasoles building and the taekwondo gymnasium. My brother had come back because they couldn't find the dog and many streets were closed. They expected that she had taken refuge somewhere or that someone had picked her up because she is docile and had her dog tag with data. At midnight, someone knocked at the door to deliver her. The young guys who had found her terrified under a car told us that they hadn't come before because there were no telephone lines. Calmness returned somewhat because pets are part of our family.

The earthquake that had shaken Mexico City at dawn a few days before was crushing because I woke up when it was already trembling, besides the fact that the seismic alert was sounding very loudly. I only managed to pick up one of the little dogs that sleeps with me and I went downstairs. When I reached the door, I tried to sit down to comfort the dogs but the movement threw me to the floor. My parents panicked because we saw lights in the sky; they shouted, they prayed and, besides, the animals kept howling for minutes. It was terrifying to wake up suddenly and realize how vulnerable we are from one moment to the next.

Back to Tuesday 19th, when we were able to watch television, the news were discouraging and confirmed why I had suffered that fear after the quake. Mexico City was in crisis: there were collapsed buildings everywhere. They mentioned another familiar place, San Gregorio Atlapulco in Xochimilco. Seven years ago we moved the family to "the seeder of flowers", that is, Xochimilco in Nahuatl. Far from our Coapa neighborhood, it has been difficult for us to get adapted to a town-city. Everything is far from home: the university, the jobs, the cinemas, the shopping malls. The beautiful traditions and the street closures can get exasperating.

We followed very closely what was happening at the Rebsamen School, and it was only when we were overcome by fatigue that we left on hold the rescue of Frida Sofia, hoping that in the morning it would have been achieved. It had been a very difficult day, but at that moment we hadn't yet assess it in its true dimension.



XOCHIMILCO, MEXICO CITY

Wednesday, September 20, 2017

At daybreak, we turned on the television but nothing was informed about the Rebsamen Schoolgirl. Information about the disastrous earthquake effects in Oaxaca and Morelos began to flow. There were new groups in the social networks to which I was added. “Veterinarians at the Earthquake” was the first I saw, because a brigade was being organized to be transferred to where it was needed, but they had agree to meet very early and couldn’t reach them anymore. My brother and I wanted to make a veterinary brigade to San Gregorio, but we couldn’t pass: the road was overflowing with supplies in trucks and even on bikes, and after trying a detour, we turn back. We marked the car with a sign that said “Veterinary Support Vehicle” and which in the end I found very difficult to remove due to the sentimental value it acquired later.



TLALPAN MULTIFAMILY HOUSING UNIT, MEXICO CITY

Thursday, September 21, 2017

The group “Veterinarians at the Earthquake” requested a veterinary relay for the Tlalpan multifamily housing unit; it had to arrive early because the doctor had been there for 48 hours and she needed to go home. I knew her and I called her. She asked me, if I could, to go at that moment because she preferred to be replaced by someone she knew.

Carrying only one suitcase with medicines and a T-shirt, I took the light rail to the Azteca Stadium where they got us down, and I took a minibus that left me still far away. To get to where I was going, I asked for help to police officers who were diverting the traffic on the bridge of the North Division avenue extension, but they ignored me: they told me to walk. From the bridge hung a hand-written banner saying “collapsed building”. I asked for a ride and, fortunately, a biker stopped, because I would have never arrived on foot.

The first checkpoint was impassable, until the doctor I was going to replace came out to talk to them. They gave me a white helmet and a blue vest to enter, because there was no need for volunteers anymore and there were many guys expecting to go through. The doctor looked very tired, but she explained to me that each rescue dog had its own veterinarian and that we only provided them medical attention if they requested so. She would leave medications and two volunteers in case I needed something. A day earlier, the doctor had attended an exhausted dog that appeared on TV. Its handler would only talk to her, but she would try to tell him that she was leaving because she had to organize a brigade in the State of Morelos.

As we walked and I approached ground zero, I saw myself in reality, one that I didn’t know and that I will never forget. I had passed many times in front of the Tlalpan multifamily housing unit, of those buildings with balconies covered with tin plates that had withstood the 1985 earthquake. I didn’t even know that such was the name of that huge complex, but I remembered the building that had collapsed.

The veterinarian camp was well organized. It had tarpaulins, blankets, medicines and two rescue dogs in their pet carriers, waiting patiently. The dog *Frida* was already a celebrity, but hadn’t been brought to Tlalpan. It was a world of persons: rescuers, Topo rescue team members, doctors, nurses, journalists, volunteers, marines, militaries, etc., who came and went like ants carrying things, talking on the phone, giving instructions, waiting to enter.

It was close to seven o’clock in the evening, because it was already dark, when they asked for the veterinarian who had took care of the dog *Titan* the day before; as my partner wasn’t present and there were more doctors, we approached the barrier and the person who had called. There were *Titan* and his owner. The dog was impressive: brown and black, with a collar and a strong harness. His trainer held him tightly, and with a curt voice he addressed us: “I will not talk to everyone, just to one person. As yesterday’s doctor is gone, give me a name so I can talk to just one person.” He wrote one of my colleague’s name on a piece of paper, left the dog in charge of her and went away.

After some time, we gave food and water to *Titan* who pulled his leash to where the collapse was. After a while we heard that my colleague was being called because they needed the dog. Both disappeared when they went into the disaster zone. As it was past nine or ten at night, the volunteers had to go and they left me the belongings of the doctor who had carried the dog, while her cell phone didn’t stop receiving messages. After an hour, she came out and told me she had to leave, but that she would come back the next day. She had entered under the roof of the building next to the collapse and her face denoted a great impression.

I think that the true story begins to be written here, when for the first time I took *Titan*’s leash, tireless soul and teacher of life. He was pulling very hard towards the collapsed building and I tried to distract him so he could rest a little. At that time I didn’t know that he had been at the collapse site since the first

day and that he had located more than twenty-five people, many of whom were rescued alive. The point out work that he had made together with his trainer had been recognized by the Japan and Israel brigades. While other dogs had become very tense when entering the collapse site, *Titan* continued to track and wanting to return to work with its owner. How could I know that he didn't have a private veterinarian, like all other animals, given his high esteem?

It didn't take long for its owner to come out and tell me that he was going to rest for a while and that the dog would stay there with us. Away from its owner, the animal began to get restless, so I asked the volunteers to get a pet carrier so I could put him to sleep. The girl at the tool store that had been extemporized close to the light rail tracks asked me where I came from. I told her that I was a veterinarian at the camp, and her answer was: "Oh, yes. You are the *Paw Patrol*, that's how we identify you," and in less than an hour two pet carriers arrived to finally put the dog to rest and, by the way, us too. She took care of providing me with everything I needed for the dog's care; whatever it was, she kindly obtained it. That night was very cold and, of course, we slept very little, almost nothing.



TLALPAN MULTIFAMILY HOUSING UNIT, MEXICO CITY

Saturday, September 23, 2017

It was close to six o'clock in the morning when the cold and the jitters put an end to our scarce sleeping period. We went in pairs to the restroom and the day was already dawning. A little coffee brought us back to reality.

Collapsed building 1C displayed its worst face when, at 7:15 a.m., the seismic alarm started to sound. There were people sleeping and *Titan* was in his cage, although we had already taken him for a walk. Panic spread in seconds and we had just managed to awaken those still sleeping when we heard warning calls: "Stay away from the buildings."

I wanted to take the dog out, but a Civil Protection guard casted me aside: "You can't be here, go away." The minutes passed but the announced tremor wasn't noticeable for me. What was impressive was the sound of the seismic warning along with the collective psychosis. We went back to see the dog and we took him out for a walk and to feed and water him; the vet who was with him the first day had returned to see him.

Soon after, an unexpected event occurred for those of us who know nothing of a disaster situation. All rescuers were asked to leave the collapsed building because it was no longer safe after the tremor. In a few minutes, the anthill got empty. At 9:15 a.m. the rescue activities cessation was declared and the Mexican national anthem was heard, never sadder. However, nobody moved or left.

The Japanese brigade left first and we all applauded them in appreciation. But they were the only one. Shouts and claims were barely heard because the area was barricaded. "We're not leaving." "We're going to go up again." "You cannot stop us." The atmosphere began to get very tense. Law enforcement personnel arrived, but the rescue squads were already organizing themselves to go back to the building. We didn't know what to do, so we decided not to leave and wait.

In that moment, the rescue groups agreed to integrate an international community to support each other in disaster situations, such as in Mexico. They managed to return because they didn't leave the site and because the relatives of the trapped persons brought a lawyer who processed an injunction to prevent the entry of heavy machinery, which was already parked in front of the building. Only a few rescuers would enter, but they would continue working. Some of them had experienced the earthquake inside the collapsed building, immersed in the thirty by thirty centimeters tunnels that they had dug. One of their phrases was recorded in my mind: "At the time of the tremor inside the collapse, nobody is an atheist." Although many hours had passed, hope was still present. At the end of the day, the owner of the dog came back and with a firm voice he said: "I'm moving to another place." At that moment and without much thought, I told him: "I am going with you." I didn't know where, how, or how many days. I took a few things from the camp for the dog and we left. Once on our way, the guy told me that we were going to San Gregorio in Xochimilco. A volunteer who provided transportation service took us in his van, together with the dog's pet carrier and the small group of rescuers that had been formed in Tlalpan. They had been together since the first day of the collapse; they had shared many hours, working shoulder to shoulder all the time.

It was long drive and it was already night. We went through the Coapa collapse area, on the Canal de Miramontes avenue, where we were all impressed to see the buildings that we knew and had once visited, such as the Coapa Galleries and the taekwondo gym, ruined. I have practiced taekwondo for more than ten years, and when I went to that *doyang* (school), that had very nice facilities, to ask about their monthly fee, it was out of my budget. It was my brother who told me that, when he was looking for the lost little dog, he saw that the gym had collapsed. Next to it was a hardware store that provided all their material to rescue the persons trapped in the Girasoles building that was behind.

SAN GREGORIO, XOCHIMILCO, MEXICO CITY

Saturday, September 23, 2017

We arrived at the village late at night. The road was in very bad conditions, but the stories of the rescuers made the trip more bearable. San Gregorio was a pitch black due to the prevailing darkness; the only light was that of the cars headlights. There was no more light than that of a big power generator plant that made a lot of noise and provided intermittent electricity to the houses. The rescuers got down the van and people offered us food or hot drinks. I used the opportunity to rest while I waited with the dog. The car doors opened and, when I thought we were going to go down, it wasn't that way. The brigade was denied the access because the area was under the army command and no help was required. Faced with that situation, we went back to our homes, without a plan for the next day.

It was Sunday and everything was quiet. There was no water in our neighborhood. On television there were fewer news broadcasts and more regular programs. In the daily practice of veterinary medicine there is an expression among the doctors: "the following patient syndrome", that is, when you have a complicated patient and you are already waiting for the next one.

The need to keep doing something, or whatever it was, didn't let me stay at home to see the reports. I started looking in the social networks where I could go or who to contact to join a brigade, a collecting center, to carry food, whatever. In some places, many more than I would have liked, they said that volunteers were no longer required. Fortunately, I managed to contact the doctor who had been with *Titan* and who was about to go to the State of Morelos. She told me that they needed watch relief in Tlalpan, but that it would be for the night because nobody wanted to stay. Of course I could and I wanted to go. I went back to the multifamily housing unit that already exhibited another face. We arrived at night and the checkpoints had almost disappeared, so we went in without problems. There were no rescue dogs anymore, only one person remained at the veterinary camp in case of finding a pet among the debris, as had happened with a Schnauzer dog that afternoon. My colleagues could not take care of it, because it was taken by another brigade that wasn't a vet one. The image of two Japanese rescuers carrying the puppy quickly went around the Internet.



**TLALPAN MULTIFAMILY HOUSING UNIT,
MEXICO CITY**

Sunday, September 24, 2017

I waited for daylight to appear and I spotted fewer people. A girl was carrying breakfasts and we helped her to distribute them among the uniformed personnel who was the most numerous. The day shift replacements arrived, but I decided to stay. At one point a voice was heard shouting through the gate: "Do you have kibbles for Titan?". I filled a bag and handed it asking him, "Is he here?" "No", he told me. "He's at the shelter," and he disappeared. I thought: "Well, what a luck to find them again," because I didn't have any contact phone number or anything of them. I could have lost track of them.

We kept distributing breakfast and, in a matter of minutes, I saw the dog pass by with his rescue trainer. I went after them. The only thing I managed to say when I reached them was, "Hello!" controlling the excitement of finding them. With a softer voice than the one I knew from the previous days, his answer was: "Oh, you came back too!" From that moment on I became Titan's shadow. I filled a bucket with bottles of water and his plates with kibbles. I followed him while they were waiting outside, I would walk him if his owner asked me so and, in a few words, I was behind them all the time.

Ground zero, the collapsed building, was a few meters away. The rescuer talked to the soldiers and they made plans while I was holding the dog, which kept calm if he was near or in sight to his owner. They were making the shelter in a church their operations center; there they rested and ate and, of course, I went with them too. The persons rescued or who had lost their homes already recognized them and thanked them for their help. That night they rested as they had not been able for days; the two of them slept together until they recovered some of the strength they needed for what was to come.



SHELTER AT THE SAINT JOSEPH PATRONAGE CHURCH, TALPAN, MEXICO CITY

Monday, September 25, 2017

Spend the night in the multipurpose room of the church, set up as a collection center and shelter, was a revitalizing balm. Feeling the protection of a great Christ visible from all sides of the gallery was like a sign that we are always in His hands, no matter what happens.

The earthquake had already been a week before. Since the university had restarted its activities, I had to go to work and so I did. I woke up very early and walked in the dark for a while towards the transportation. I counted the minutes to return. At noon I returned and I heard there were plans for a place to move the binomial. At that time, the owner of Titan was directing everyone's activities, as he had done in the collapse zone. "We are going to the Rome neighborhood, to Alvaro Obregon Avenue. We are waiting for transportation."

We gathered all our things to store them away and we climbed into a van that arrived quickly to a zone quite different from the Tlalpan Avenue.



**286 ALVARO OBREGON AVE., ROMA NORTE NEIBORHOOD,
MEXICO CITY**

Monday, September 25, 2017

There were many damaged buildings, fallen walls, windows without glasses, signs of 'Do not take pictures out of respect'; it looked like a ghost town. The damaged building was at 286 Alvaro Obregon Avenue. The camp looked like an inner city. Everything was organized, there were carpentry, doctors, journalists in one single area and many, but many militaries. The access was totally restricted; there was no way to approach the collapsed building. And I don't say it for us, the volunteers: the search brigade was denied the access.

The collapse was huge: a monster fully lit at night. It was impressive to see the magnitude of the collapsed building and how it had affected those adjacent. It seemed that a giant finger had compressed the construction from above, like a cake, because you could see the thick layers of concrete, one on top of the other. It was impossible to enter or approach it. At the express request of the relatives of the persons trapped inside to carry out a search with the dog, the answer was always no.

The camp was set up in a tent to be there during the night and let the rescuers and the dog rest a little. It rained like never before, and all the things we carried with us got wet. Cold and uncertainty: we would wait until dawn to make a new attempt.

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**286 ALVARO OBREGON AVE. ROMA NORTE NEIBORHOOD,
MEXICO CITY**

Tuesday, September 26, 2017

Early again, at about six o'clock in the morning, because no one sleeps or, rather, because no one can sleep, I heard a warm voice that offered me a delicious Oaxacan *tamal* with *atole*. "Miss, tell the cops to let us pass also tomorrow." I asked him where they came from and he told me that he was from Tlalnepantla. And I who considered that I was away from home!

The day and the wait began. I was still impressed by the level of organization of the camp. Everything tidy, clean, at hand.

We saw pass rescue brigades, mainly those foreign, some with dogs, and we kept waiting. I don't remember the time, but the order was: "Get your things ready because we're going in," and we did it quickly. Only one veterinarian was allowed to enter with a rescue dog, but in the end we entered two of us. There was no room to set up the tent again and the instruction was that the dog could not be near the food area. It was complicated, until they allowed us to enter with all the equipment to a bar that was set up as a command post, just in front of the building with number 286.

The hours passed and the uncertainty grew, because although we were there, so close, it was still far, long before we could access the collapse. The night was complicated because the light couldn't be turned off and we shared the shelter with many people.



**286 ALVARO OBREGON AVE. ROMA NORTE NEIBORHOOD,
MEXICO CITY**

Wednesday, September 27, 2017

I got up at six in the morning and, jumping over sleeping people, I left early to work. I didn't want to go through the checkpoint because I thought: "What if they don't let me in when I come back?" But it was obligatory. Just as I was dressed, I went to give my class; I think I had been wearing those same clothes for days.

I counted the minutes to return and I did it. To go out, with a marker they had writing on my hand a code with which I was allowed to enter again. When I returned, I arrived at the meeting room and I heard for the first time the identification name I would have within the group: "Maya, where were you?" asked me the voice of the leader and owner of Titan. "I went to the university," I replied. "Well, next time notify me, because I didn't see at what time you left." Although my colleagues knew where I had been and they informed him, I later realized that this was his way of taking care of each member of his team; that behind that authority figure was a person who valued everyone.



**286 ALVARO OBREGON AVE. ROMA NORTE NEIBORHOOD,
MEXICO CITY**

Thursday, September 28, 2017

The whole day waiting. A large image of the Virgin of Guadalupe had been placed just above the number 286 of the building; it could be seen from afar. It seemed like an entrance to the collapse. There were also wreaths of flowers. Another image of the Virgin of the Tepeyac was inside the tent improvised to hear mass, a few steps from where we were. At five in the afternoon, a priest with a foreign accent officiated.

The relatives looking for their children, brothers, husbands and wives arrived. It was impossible not to feel their pain and understand somehow what they were enduring. Being so close and not being able to do something, knowing that a very important person for us is trapped there. What a great desire to hug him again after work, to dine together, to talk, to tell him how much we miss him! He left in the morning to work and hasn't return; he doesn't answer his phone, he's not visiting someone.

During the mass, it started to rain and my tears got mixed with the raindrops. How great a desire to tightly hug he who already takes care of us from heaven; to kiss he who didn't want to say goodbye because he knew we wouldn't let him go; to remember the star that went to shine in the highest; to miss the angel that God called back so soon and with whom a few days before I had talked to and asked him for help so I could find the meaning of my life!

That afternoon, to confirm that everything was in order, we took the rescue dog to be checked by a specialist in veterinarian orthopedics, a big-hearted good friend who took care of him in his hospital, free of charge.

Back in the operations center, there was more movement and enthusiasm. Members of the *topos* groups arrived and organized themselves for the next day. Apparently, the chance of entering the building was improving and they wanted to be prepared.



**286 ALVARO OBREGON AVE. ROMA NORTE NEIBORHOOD,
MEXICO CITY**

Friday, September 29, 2017

The day started very early, before dawn. We took the dog for a walk and went to have breakfast. An important brigade had already been integrated: they had sound and tracking equipment, and everything ready to go in. A small group went in, and when it came back, the next one followed.

I remember how *Titan* got excited when he noticed how his working tools were prepared, except that at that moment his owner didn't want to enter with the dog, because first he had to enter alone to make a diagnosis. They kept for themselves many impressions, but their faces showed sadness and frustration. "There's little that can be done," they explained. It was already many days later.



THE SHELTER AT THE SAINT JOSEPH PATRONAGE CHURCH, TLALPAN, MEXICO CITY

Friday, September 29, 2017

At two o'clock in the afternoon, the leader told us to break camp. We collected everything and stored it. We had to go to the Tlalpan shelter and, from there, everyone could go home. I offered my car, after all it had moved dogs and cats of all sizes and colors and would gladly take *Titan* anywhere.

I took several pictures of him in the car because it was transporting the hero while he was calm, as if he knew that he had achieved a great job. We crossed the city towards the south and went to the shelter of the church. There were the donations that people had kindly made for the rescue dog: there were small boots, kibbles and food cans showing his name and the word "donation".

During dinner outside the shelter, Titan's owner told me that he needed to check his dog's vaccinations, because just as he had lost his cell phone and some other things during those days, he was sure that the vaccination card was also strayed, as it no longer was in his backpack. I put at his disposal my veterinary office and whatever the dog might require; he could know our facilities and we would open a file to keep *Titan*'s immunization and deworming record. I had already carried out the task of making sure that my cell phone number was in his directory, because I was not willing to lose track of them again; that way I was certain that the register "Maya" matched my phone number.

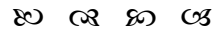
It was already past eleven o'clock at night when we headed south again, bounded to Xochimilco. During an informal chat, we found out that Titan's owner and I were neighbors in the area. After many days, they finally were back at home. His family was waiting for him anxiously because they only had news about them through the TV. They had left home just after the earthquake. The binomial had headed for San Gregorio before going to Tlalpan. He arrived quickly, which allowed him to coordinate the first rescues. Later they went to the Rebsamen School, but there were already many rescuers, so they went to the Tlalpan multifamily housing unit where they were able to work more than in the other places. They took control of the collapse and, for whole days, they helped without resting and without considering the time. There are very few records of their activities, only an interview and two reports that I have located on the Internet. The answer to why is that so is as simple as both are: because they were atop the wreckage all the time, working in the building; they brought them water and food because they couldn't waste a minute.

Titan's owner is an anonymous hero, volunteer, rescuer. Man of small size and old soul. Tireless. With a strong and clear voice. With military training, but friendly and protector. Nobody would believe his age when looking him at work and leading in the disaster areas. He walked a lot with his dog to go and help in what he could, according to his story; however, it was his time to help. Some of us could carry things, others remove debris, make food and bring water, go buy groceries, but he had the knowledge and the courage to deal with tragedy face to face.

The talent of the binomial can be described with just one word: "impressive". They arrived without search equipment, without technology, with no other tools but his hands and *Titan*'s sense of smell. In the dark, at the Tlalpan collapsed building, he organized the people to light up the debris and proceed to do the search and marking of places where the dog detected life. Once the spot was identified, concrete and slabs had to be broken to gain access through narrow tunnels; to brace fallen columns and beams and rescue those who once were its residents. At all times he recognized his newly formed team; he assigned a name to all of them, as he did with me. A thin and tall boy was his guide because he lived in the nearby building and knew them perfectly, he called him "Map".

When the rescue brigades from abroad arrived, they put themselves at their disposal, because that's how they began to work together, complementing each other with all the help they brought. On their arrival, the Japanese experts noticed the markings and asked who had made them. *Titan*'s owner answer

was: “We did”, pointing to the dog as well. They gave a respectful greeting to the animal, bowing their head, and if the story is moving, seeing it personally must have been unforgettable. At each mark point made by the two, a life signal was pinpointed with the modern devices. It was their destiny.



**TLALPAN MULTIFAMILY HOUSING UNIT,
MEXICO CITY**

Thursday, October 19, 2017

Memorial Day. It was only thirty days later, but it seemed that more time had passed. People was summoned to meet at the multifamily housing unit at 13:15 p.m. to attend a mass for the deceased and a recognition ceremony for the rescuers. There were many white shirts, hands holding balloons of that same color, and wreaths of flowers. The names now had faces in pictures that were placed on the wooden wall covering the collapse on Tlalpan Avenue. With paint on their hands, the victims left many handprints on that provisional wall, they lit candles and placed objects, such as toys and flowers. With the feeling of not having said goodbye, men, women, children, and a kitten were recalled with many tears and sadness. Rescuers met again, greeted and hugged each other. Those who were always there and those who only they know if they deserved such recognition. I took pictures with the camera of *Titan*'s owner, and since it was hot, I had small bottles of water for the puppy



MEXICO CITY

Sometime after September 19, 2017

Trying to return to our customary lives, we went back to work, school, home. *Titan*'s owner brought him to my office for his vaccines and deworming. Much to my surprise, he told me that they both have phobia of injections! And how strong he was that, when he felt the prick, several things went flying! "I told you," I heard, as we recovered ourselves from the tremendous shove.

Thus began the second part of the story. Our leader was considering me as a potential member of the search and rescue brigade he was barely integrating. I had been thinking of forming a non-for-profit association that would financially support the rescue work and that could transport the binomial to any part of the world. When I told him about it, he thought it was excellent.

What really made my heart happy was when he asked me about my dog, *Gustavo*, a one-year-old, large-sized, crossbred German shepherd, rescued from the street a few weeks after he was born. Would I accept to do some tests to see if he is a potential candidate for a search and rescue training? I couldn't believe it. One of those days of long wait in Alvaro Obregon 286, I had shown him the picture of my dog that I have as wallpaper on my cell phone. I accepted immediately and I promised to take him wherever he asked me. However, I was a little concerned about the dominant character of *Titan*, but since conflicts are almost always between humans, the dogs got along wonderfully.

The initial tests consisted of going to a nearby hill to see how my dog behaved in landslide areas. I think the one that needed training was me, because I came back with a twisted ankle.

The few bricks that have been placed to form the rescue team and the association seem to have a strong foundation. Maybe we are few, only a handful, because the rest of the Tlalpan brigade decided to form their own association taking the name that our leader had defined for the group. Everyone will be where they want to be.

Now we have something to do with a goal to move forward: Take the September 19, 2017 lesson, integrate it and make the most of it. As it stands on the faults of tectonic plates, Mexico is a country at seismic risk. We should have already learned how to deal with earthquakes, but sometimes the lesson must be repeated twice to learn it. For example, in countries where each year it snows and the temperature drops to – 40 degrees, people know how to deal with those conditions and are adapted to them. In our country, although every year there are natural disasters, people keep building houses in bed of rivers, and in areas of high risk of earthquakes there are many tall buildings devoid of anti-seismic technology.

No one knows when another tragedy will occur that requires a rescue brigade and the mobilization of the entire country. Our team has already started to buy helmets, backpacks, boots, ropes and lamps, among other devices, to be somehow prepared in case we need to go out and accompany the binomial.

To carry on with his follow-up task, *Titan*'s owner used to go to the Tlalpan multifamily unit shelter, and on one occasion I accompanied him because some dogs of the victims had to be checked. They had rescued a stray boxer that they had called *Terremoto*, that is, 'earthquake', who had health problems, and the leader asked me to go see him because the dog worried him. He was right, his condition was very bad, bony and with skin wounds. We began to give him treatment, but we noticed that he was improving very little. We agree to go for him some days to bathe and vaccinate him, and it was easier; it's a very noble animal that is now sterilized. The other dogs have a bad time due to the lack of space and the cold of nights. Although we have tried to give them up for adoption, I am not quite sure that their owners will agree to let them go; after all, they are part of their families and that is respectable. I can't imagine the misfortune of losing my house and having to get separated from my dogs and cats. As I said above—when my sister's dog escaped due to the earthquake—they are family and, without the intention of considering them as children, they have earned a place in our hearts and deserve a good life as long as we have them borrowed.

That has been my job, but the leader has in mind other tasks for me that I didn't even imagine. During that time I had to strengthen my will and challenge what I had almost chiseled in stone: that my only function would be to take care of the dogs' health. I have to respect the indications, because just as our leader values my work as a veterinarian, I will fulfill his orders. For me, who have been such an independent person, it was odd to have to tell him where I was going or at what time I was coming back. My role in the brigade has been multifaceted, from handling the social networks, look for budgets, get advice for the formation of the association, finance priorities, buy groceries and be the hand behind the new rescue dog, mine. We must go out to practices to which, definitely, I was not used to, because the burning sun and the wild territory are not what I endure every day. We have to reinvent ourselves to keep moving forward. I had forgotten the sweet smell of a forest, of wet earth, and the peace of nature. I have learned to light a fire, to cut wood, to make knots, to see in the dark, to ration water, to fill a backpack with what's necessary; to follow, to listen, to observe; to avoid complaining, to adapt myself, to share, to take a hand, to hear a story. Thus a new world opened before my eyes.

I designed a logo for the brigade with a Mexican flag, the silhouette of a German shepherd, of a rescuer, a stethoscope and a dove of peace. It will be for the uniforms, along with the veterinary office logo and our embroidered names: not the real ones, but those of the group.

Before the end of 2017, an opportunity to conduct a search in a forest popped up. As the best recommendation is the word of mouth, so came the call by a friend who had been at the Tlalpan multifamily housing unit and who asked me if the binomial could join a search service for a missing person. When we were already in the mountain, and before a complete lack of organization, dog and man began to work on a trail. With that same natural talent that amazes, they managed to find information in a few hours. However, time ran out and we had to return to the city at the request of the applicants. We already looked as a real rescue team and we remained at their service in case they needed our support again.



NEXT DESTINY: PLANET EARTH

2018 onwards

As the days go by and we remember what happened on September 19, 2017 in our capital city, new details always come up; the same stories, but with different tones, moments that remain photographed in everyone's mind. They're like a warehouse that's taking shape but that sometimes becomes disordered again just like pieces of a puzzle that in the end fit together perfectly. We have cried and laughed, both of fear and of happiness. We have rebuilt ourselves. Endless talks in sleepless nights that we could link with post-traumatic stress. Many plans and dreams; scarce cents, as grandparents used to say. We went back together, even with Titan, to the shelters of the church and the sports fields, to the median strip of Tlalpan Avenue, to the zone of building 1C, on Christmas and New Year, so as they neither forget us nor they feel forgotten.

The dynamic is different, because the situation is tough. There's no reconstruction solution yet, but in the end we believe that some part of *Titan*, one of his binomial and one of mine stayed there, atop of the collapsed building, near where the Mexican flag still waves, in the space that we occupied for a few days.

A bit of our heart, as a seed, will have to overcome the darkness in the midst of the debris and break itself to germinate like a plant. Maybe it will need a lot of sunlight, fresh air and fresh water to get stronger and, one beautiful day, to bloom. It might face huge stones desirous to stop or divert it, to darken its surroundings, and then it will have to display the strength of its roots. It will hear voices of discouragement from weeds that have only crawled in the dust and that, for not having succeeded, will shout at it that it won't either. Strong winds will come, endless rains, persistent hail, burning sun and a lot of cold. It may think that it has already given everything and that it's time to say goodbye, to give up. How does it occur to it to bloom amid debris? "That's right," your inner voice will say, "you were given a single opportunity to occupy a fragment of this planet and to overcome your own fears and paradigms to grow, evolve, and leave a better environment for other seeds that, with your example, will want to bloom as well and that will see you, proudly, follow the sunlight as sunflowers do."

It will be our inner voice that shows us the way to where destiny wishes to take us, because we know that, deep down, life will grant us again the great opportunity of helping and of feeling blessed in doing so.

May our hands serve peace as well as our fellow travelers in this Universe. The seismic alarm will notify us when it is time to leave home, without knowing when we will be back; to organize ourselves and meet up; to hold a hand to touch a soul; to follow the teachings of our animal teachers on Earth and of those who have already transcended; to know the true meaning of the word *solidarity*; to convert our fear into adrenaline and our doubts into faith; to erase borders and draw new maps; to fly with new wings and thus honor those who, from the sky, observe us so that they can be proud of us, and confident that one day we will tell them our stories while we eat ice cream and chocolates; to know that we are in the hands of God and that we are only an instrument, and that of all the gifts that He gave us at birth, He will call us for accounts with interest.

We must have the conviction that we can grab a pick, a shovel, a bucket, put on a helmet, a vest and boots. To be in eternal debt to those who came into our lives to give us an opportunity, like the owner of *Titan* and his dog. Learn to illuminate the most challenging darkness. Expect the brightest and most beautiful dawn.

We must ask for help when our forces have exceeded what is humanly possible. Remember and cry to feel better afterwards. That just as other houses collapsed, they could be ours. Be sure that our Mexico is going to rise. Let's continue writing the story, with new pens and many colored sheets, because the best chapters are yet to come.

So be it.