

ZERO ZONE: 286

Carmen Nozal

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*In memory of those who could not get out.
In memory of all those who helped.*

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For those who helped, eternal gratitude, tribute.
How to forget—unknown young girl, anonymous guy,
retired elder, mother of all, nameless heroes—
that you went, from the first minute of fright,
to stop death with the blood
of your hands and your tears;
with the consciousness
that the other one is me, I am the other one;
and your pain, my distant neighbor,
is my deepest suffering.
For all of you, perennial thanksgiving
because if the world did not collapsed
in its entirety over Mexico
it was because you took over
on your back you
all of you, men and women, plural heroes,
honor of the human race, unique pride
of what is still standing just for you.

José Emilio Pacheco

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UNDERGROUND SNAKE

To sleep or not to sleep: that's the dilemma I had after the September 7 earthquake that shook Mexico City. I had just hang up after receiving a call from my son Rumi telling me that the dinner with karaoke at an Insurgentes Avenue restaurant was over and that he was on his way back with his classmates from the second year of high school at the Universidad Londres, when the seismic warning alarm sounded. As the previous night it had also sounded but had been a false alarm, unlike other times I didn't shout, "It's trembling!", but I simply opened the door of my son Jassin room, who calmly told me: "Let's go, ma", while I was putting the leash on *Ozzy*, our dog.

Barefoot and with my cell phone in hand, we went down three floors of stairs. Convinced that in five minutes we would be going up again, I leaned against the building façade to watch how Lucio flipped a *gordita*¹ at his *garnachas*² stand. "It's shaking really hard. Let's go to the ridge, mom," said Jassin, while I, feeling nothing, was still enraptured in the art of kneading a *tortilla*.

¹ Thick corn *tortilla* stuffed with meat, cheese and/or other ingredients.

² According to Mexico City inhabitants, it is any food that is sold on the streets, *tacos* and *gorditas* included.

We were three steps away from reaching the other side of the street when some kind of underground serpent shook us. Literally, we saw the pavement swirling. I looked back and saw our building swinging; we hurried, while we heard the music of the restaurants and watched the residents of the Roma neighborhood leave their houses in terror. *Ozzy* howled uneasy when we heard the explosions of the electric transformers. My phone rang again. "I'm walking through Tonalá Street, but I see very strange lights in the sky and a high-voltage cable is falling down. What do I do, mom?" "Run! Run!" I managed to scream when, after an intense explosion, the neighborhood was left in completely darkness and the communication was cut off.

My mouth went dry instantly and my heart began beating like a knocker on my chest. "Your brother! Your brother!" I repeated like a mantra. "Take it easy, mom. I'm going to meet him now," said Jassin, hugging me. "You have a real fast tachycardia. I'll go look for my brother and then I'll take you to the hospital." My mind split. I froze. I wanted my son to go meet his brother and, at the same time, I didn't want him to take any risks.

A piece of glass got embedded in the sole of my left foot and the pain made me react. "No, please, don't go," I was merely able to say, while, limping, I managed to sit on a bench. While Jassin held the cell phone with the flashlight on, I succeeded to take out the glass sliver. Today I know that there are practical pains and useless pains. That one, no doubt, was among the former because it helped me out of the panic crisis, forcing me to pay attention, suddenly and fully, to my foot.

After the operation, the mantra returned like a train in the middle of the night: "Your brother, your brother!" Desperately, I tried to contact him on the phone when I saw him walking in front of the Banamex bank branch in Alvaro Obregon Street, and my saliva came back, as an incipient rain. "Rumi, we're here," I shouted him, while *Ozzy*, by my side, wagged his tail.

We stayed on the ridge until three o'clock in the morning and, after going up home and turn on the computer, on the Internet we found a message from President Peña Nieto where he instructed the population to be attentive for possible aftershocks and where he mentioned that they expected another seven-degree earthquake to come. From that moment on I couldn't fall asleep as usual. I was very worried about falling asleep and not listening to the alert.

On the night of September 18, a patient asked me for an emergency therapy. I received him. When he was saying goodbye, he told me that I looked tired. After explaining why, he looked at me with great compassion. "Take it easy. As a survivor of the 85 earthquake, I can tell you with certainty that if on September 7 we had an 8.2 degrees earthquake, it will not tremble again in thirty years, because earth released its energy with no devastation. So relax, doctor, and sleep soundly. I can tell you: I was left homeless in 85." As I had not experienced that one, I believed him as if it were the word of God.

So, on September 19, after writing, peacefully, all night long, I took a shower and with a cup of hot lime tea I went to bed at five in the morning. As if I was counting sheep, I fell asleep while repeating: "It will not shake in thirty years. It will not shake in thirty years. It will not shake in thirty years. It will not shake in thirty..."

I had in mind the issue of the drill. And I had also very clear that I wouldn't do it, since in the twenty-five years that I have lived on Alvaro Obregon Avenue, if I have become an expert in anything it's in the art of running down the stairs and overtaking any of my neighbors that I find, telling them: "Sorry, sorry, sorry." So I considered reasonable to have the right to avoid myself that annoyance, and, when the alert sounded, I comfortably turned around and cuddled up hugging one of my pillows.

I was dreaming about a meadow full of flowers, where redheaded cows grazed happily. Yellow butterflies with large wings fluttered around their ears. Sublime haystacks looked at me, while I breathed the pure air. I had my eyes set on the immense blue sky, which was spreading a mighty peace. It was one of those times I was so totally relaxed that drool came out of the corner of my mouth and at that very moment the shaking of my bed, abruptly, took me out of my dream.

I heard a sound similar to that of a machine gun. "They're drilling in the street," I thought, as the redheaded cows of my dream got mixed up with the workers I had seen on the avenue the day before.

“Seismic alert, seismic alert,” I heard suddenly. I jumped out of bed and, finally, I had no doubts: it was a trepidatory earthquake that barely allowed me to be standing up. As I could, I reached the kitchen door frame that is in the middle of my apartment. I stayed there and tried to make a decision: should I leave or stay. When I realized that, far from running, I couldn’t even keep my balance, I realized that the best was to stay there. I lost my peripheral vision right away, but I heard the sound of objects falling to the floor of my apartment.

I thought that my building was going to collapse. “I’ll get close to the windows so they can find me sooner,” I told myself. And I placed myself next to a column that separated the large windows, in a fetal position in a desperate attempt to find the famous ‘triangle of life’ that I had seen so many times in Internet videos. So, at one meter from the column, between an armchair and a table that held a large pot with an avocado plant, I cuddled while listening to the creaking of the wooden floor. The noises were increasingly loud. “What follows is the roof,” I told myself. I was sure I was going to die. The only thing I thought was: “My God, may your will be done. I love you all. How good it is that my children are not here.” My mind was at peace.

Completely devoted to death, I realized that I was well prepared to die, but not to live with this trauma. Instead of the roof collapsing, earth stopped its movement for a second, and before the oscillatory movement could start, my body rose and I strode out. *Ozzy* appeared in the hall looking at me with eyes of horror; I kicked him and he ran away before me down the stairs that were rolling as a boat on high seas. When I reached the last step, I heard a several cracks. “You should have stayed at home,” I scolded myself as if what I had just done was wrong. I didn’t thought I could reach the door, but once again reality surpassed my beliefs. Upon seeing me at the main entry, two men ran towards me. One of them picked up *Ozzy* and the two of them pulled me by the arms until we reached the ridge, which was already crowded.

Wearing a pink summer pajama pants with white polka dots and a gray winter pajama shirt with dogs, barefoot and with my hair disheveled, I showed up at one twenty in the afternoon in the middle of the avenue to look, together with my neighbors, at the building, as if it were television.

Today I know that when terror seizes me I cannot think of anyone else. Each sound is perceptible; each movement acquires a meaning, and my attention gets only focused on my own survival. At the moment of the tremor it seemed that only I had feel it, as if earth had only moved under my feet. My mind was unable to recognize that the earthquake was being experienced by thousands of people at that same moment. It’s obvious that my mind has a lot of work to do.

THE SCRUNCHIE

Jassin arrived immediately. Gobsnacked, he looked at me from top to bottom and asked: “You are okay, right?” We hugged each other and, without saying a word, he ran up to pick up my sneakers, the emergency backpack that was hanging on the exit door and that I never saw, my black leather bag and *Ozzy*’s strap.

While he was coming back, my mind split up again: on the one hand, I realized that it could tremble again with my son inside the building and, on the other, I thought about my other son of whom I didn’t know his whereabouts. I started to suffocate and two young fellows sat me on a bench. They repeated: “Take it easy, ma’am, breathe. Take it easy, ma’am, breathe.” And I relaxed when I saw Jassin in front of me.

I put on my sneakers, and already with his leash on, we ran with *Ozzy* down the Tonalá Street looking for Rumi. We stopped when we saw the cornice of a building collapse on four cars parked in a row that, fortunately, were empty.

Although the earthquake was over, windowpanes continued to explode and stones from the cracked buildings fell in our path. While we walked, our friends who lived there came to my mind. Sandra’s

house, my hairdresser; Julian's business, the orthopedist; Francesca's apartment, the Italian teacher. I wanted to know how they were, but my priority was to look for my son.

As we could, we reached San Luis Potosi Avenue. Jassin left me with *Ozzy* at the corner of Yucatan Avenue. I felt safe: there were no buildings around.

While I was waiting, a small and modest monument caught my attention. As I came close to it, I read a commemorative plaque to those killed during the 1985 earthquake: "In recognition of the tenacious struggle of women and men who, with their worthy effort, made possible the reconstruction of our city devastated by the September 19 and 20 earthquakes. We do not forget." I learned that the place was called Edith Sanchez square in honor of the act of solidarity that this woman accomplished to obtain a dignified dwelling for the benefit of the victims of the 1985 earthquakes.

Although I've been living in Mexico City for thirty-two years, until that moment I truly understood that I was living in a highly seismic ground, where at any moment anything could disappear without warning. "No wonder there's no construction here," I told myself.

In the distance I could see the Universidad Londres and, in front of it, many students inside a fenced area. Jassin was running down the street in search of his brother. I caught sight of him in the crowd. The two of them came back to my side and we hugged each other while *Ozzy* ran around our legs. Rumi insisted on going into the university building to pick up his schoolbag, because the next day he would have an exam. As none of us had any notion of the magnitude of what happened, he went to the school.

Meanwhile, I asked a woman passing by on the street: "Please, could you help me?" "Whatever you need, ma'am. What can I do for you?" she replied, eager to do whatever I asked her. "Do you have, by chance, a scrunchie so I can wear a little bun?" While she was taking it out of her purse to hand it over to me, her face looked disappointed. Eager to carry out a great action, instead she was requested something she considered irrelevant. "Thank you very much," I told her. And she left with her head down. I imagine she'll never know how important that scrunchie was for me at that moment. It was not a banal matter: for me it was essential to lessen the terrible feeling of dispossession and indigence I had. I felt much more respectable after putting on my scrunchie, and I was able to keep on walking, but with my head held high.

With my two sons and *Ozzy*, I looked for a restaurant after seeing Jassin's face without any blood. "I feel really bad, mom. I must eat something," he said, amid the noise of helicopters and ambulance sirens. Once again, when we were walking down the avenue, we were dragged by a crowd that ran disoriented, shouting: "Gas leak, don't light a fire, don't light cigarettes. Let's get out of here." Stunned, we tried to move forward while listening to anonymous voices talking about the Rebsamen school: "There are children buried." "So there are buildings collapsed," I thought, stopping automatically, as if the pavement was nailed to my feet, to listen with total attention to the pounding of my heart.

Among the chaos, my neighbor Carmen appeared. Pale and out of her wits, she told us that she had just witnessed the collapse of the laboratories on Puebla Street; that the Roma neighborhood had not exploded thanks to a survivor who, before jumping out of a window and cling to a tree branch, had managed to close the gas valve; that her stress was in the rise and she still didn't have any news about her daughter. I lent her my cell phone but there was no signal. "I feel very bad, Mom," said Jassin who was soaked in cold sweat, we hurry to reach Jalapa Street.

I approached the owner of the *tamales* restaurant: "Please, could you feed my children? I don't have money, but I'll leave you a passport and tomorrow I'll pay you." "Don't worry, ma'am. What's important is for your kids to eat," she replied with a smile and, without hesitation, she brought them the menu.

Sitting at the table, my children watched *Ozzy* lick the water that this kind woman poured him on a bowl, while the smell of *mole* with chicken brought back some color to their cheeks.

I went immediately to look for my companions at the House of the Poet 'Ramon Lopez Velarde'. As I walked, I wondered if the construction would have resisted. In my wake I saw numerous doctors and nurses from the Alvaro Obregon Hospital who were evacuating the patients. The avenue middle ridge got filled with stretchers, serums, medicines, blankets, relatives and, amid the chaos, I saw *Cantinflas*

crying, trying to get out of his statue. In the background, I recognized my friends... distorted but alive!

It was really nice to know that after the earthquake they ran to my house to make sure my building was still standing. Maricarmen, the director, commented how well they had performed the drill hours before. "We all left in order, in a short time, without losing our composure. But when it started to tremble for real, ¿what can I say? Nothing similar to the drill. Nothing even close... We closed the House that, fortunately, endured another earthquake and we said goodbye each other.

My friends, Claudia and Rafa, came to the restaurant where my children, already fed, now were carrying pots with stew that the owners had decided to donate to the patients of the hospital, who had been evacuated to the avenue ridge, as well as to their relatives and the medical personnel. While this was going on, some neighbors told us that we had to evacuate: "Civil Protection must come to inspect the building." All of a sudden I understood that what we were living would be a while and that it was just beginning.

Amazingly, my cell phone received a call: my aunt Isabel, from Barcelona, was confirming that we were all alive. Right away, a *whats* said: "Earthquake in Mexico." From Spain, my brother wrote desperately: "Please, tell me you're fine." I was about to answer him when we saw a wall collapse. To our side came a family of Venezuelans; through them we learned that both the Tlalpan apartment complex and the Chimalpopoca Avenue building had collapsed, while we were eating a fish that seemed tasteless for us.

Before evacuating, my children went up to the building to pick out some things and to lock the house door. Across the street of Jalapa we suddenly saw a bunch of people running on the avenue. They carried picks, shovels, helmets. We didn't understand what was happening until we heard that a building had just collapsed on Alvaro Obregon Avenue. I was only able to hear number six. I thought it was ours: 186. And my children were inside. Rafa, my friend's husband, hold both of us by our arms. I couldn't walk; my legs were numbed, my mouth was dry. I had tachycardia and my head resounded. When we reached the street corner I could see with my own eyes that it wasn't ours. Then I recovered mobility and once my children came out we got lost amongst the crowd.

AN INVISIBLE DAGGER

We found Lazaro, our neighbor architect with whom Jassin worked, sitting in underwear at a fountain on the avenue. "I feel really bad. I can't stop shivering. It was terrible," he whispered at us as we said him goodbye and continue walking like zombies.

At the end of the ridge, neighbors of the Roma neighborhood were organizing the first aid-stand. A woman with a loudspeaker asked: "Prepared food, blankets, electrolytes, water, buckets, flashlights."

The dust cloud of collapsed building at number 286 was settling down when we entered through Cacahuamilpa Street. At the corner of Amsterdam Avenue we saw the first bodies being removed. A very elegant woman in high heels, miniskirt and fancy jacket, bathed in dirt, was leaning at a corner with bloody knees and torn stockings. She pulled a cell phone off her bag, out of which erupted a cascade of dust. "Do you want us to take you to a hospital, ma'am?" asked her Rafa. The immobile woman managed to shake her head saying no, while trying to dial a number.

We arrived at the Citlaltépetl traffic circle while my friend Claudia mentioned me that, luckily, her daughter was abroad. "Moreover, look how well the building looks. It was built on hydraulic piles." Rafa entered the lobby with the intention of going up to check the apartment. His screams frightened us. Claudia looked inside and when she saw that several walls had collapsed she suffered a crisis and began to cry, "just thinking that my daughter could have been here". From the lobby came out a couple of Germans, totally dust-covered, carrying two pillows.

Rafa invited us to stay in a house where he would spend the night with Claudia. "Where do you say it is?" I asked. "In Coyoacán, but it's uninhabited. We'll have to buy some mats."

I realized that since the earthquake I had lived solving the moment. There was neither future nor past, only the present. I felt totally lost and disoriented; my mind wasn't working with its usual lucidity: it was slow and clumsy. For brief periods I noticed that I had mental lapses.

Once again, my cell phone vibrated. The signal entered and got lost unexpectedly. My aunt Isabel from Barcelona was connected to my heart. In a *whats* she wrote: "Go to Laura's. She's waiting for you." Although I had not been able to communicate with my *comadre*, I never had any doubt that she was safe. "That's impossible," I thought. "How are we going to get there?" And again my cell phone vibrated: "Go walking slowly and very carefully," wrote Isabel, as if reading my thoughts. "She's right," I said to myself, and the mattresses issue seemed very complicated. I thanked Rafa heartily for his offer and set out on the road to the Veronica Anzures neighborhood.

When we left our friends, my helplessness expanded like a hot air balloon. There, at the Citlaltépetl Circle, I found my beloved Benjamín with no blood on his face and his eyes bulging: He was walking hurriedly. The previous night, we had dined together at the Taquitos Frontera restaurant; we had talked about culture and art. Now he told me desperately: "I cannot find Lety; I don't know anything about her. She doesn't turn up. I'm going to look for her." A chill is an invisible dagger; it pierces you but you don't bleed. I couldn't speak. I only saw Benjamin's black silhouette under his hat, disappearing amidst the crowd, while a tiny voice whispered inside me: "Lety, Lety, Lety." I wanted to go find her, but my mind had an obsession of its own: to put my children in a safe place before nightfall.

Amongst the catastrophe, we walked along Amsterdam Avenue and we saw the building at number 107 that was collapsed. In those moments, my children and I didn't exchange one single word; we only communicate with our eyes more open than ever, as if we were looking at the world for the first time.

In the middle of the *shock*, I noticed that all the streets were cordoned off. We had reach Insurgentes Avenue. Before going through one of the confined areas, several soldiers came to meet us. "The victims must come with us. We will lodge you in a refuge." At that moment I realized that they were talking to me and my children. "Thanks, but we will not stay at any refuge. We're leaving this area," I assured him resolutely. "But you cannot pass," said the soldier, as I lifted the tapes to go into the street that would take us to Insurgentes Avenue. "Ma'am: it's very dangerous. Come back. You cannot pass. If there's a collapse, it's your responsibility." "I'll take care of it," I said, and as if I was Rambo, I start running with Ozzy and my children.

Insurgentes Avenue was the apocalypse. An immobile car traffic backup shone under the harsh sun. That afternoon the sunlight didn't have any filter: it was burning as if it had nothing else to do. Soldiers, sailors, ambulances, policemen, firemen and helicopters occupied the stage. There were neither taxis nor buses. The only option for people was to walk amidst the cracked asphalt and broken glass. People came and went in all directions: it looked like an exodus scene.

Without thinking, and looking at building at number 286, I heard myself raise my voice and repeat: "Om tare tutare turé soha, om tare tutare turé soha, om tare tutare turé soha." I recalled my lama saying: "The Green Tara mantra helps to overcome fear." As I repeated it, I did it for those who were trapped under the rubble, but, somehow, those not trapped we were also buried in horror, impotence, anguish, anxiety and hysteria. "Om tare tutare turé soha" for everyone! Indeed, the quake was also internal. And under its effects, we arrived to the Angel of Independence traffic circle.

Rumi turned pale: "Wait, please. I can't go on. I feel I'm going to faint." I looked at him in the eyes and ordered him: "You're not fainting here! You wait until we get to your godmother's, ok?" And taking advantage of a military truck passing by, I stopped it and asked the soldiers for some bottles of water. Rumi was dehydrated. After replacing one backpack in front of him and the other at his back, he got a second wind and we kept on walking.

Suddenly, I realized that it was impossible to follow the route we usually took by car. I stopped without knowing how to continue. Surprisingly, Jassin said: "We're going this way. Follow me." From that moment on, he went in front of the group, followed by his brother, setting the pace. When I saw my two children in front of me, walking ahead, tall, firm and confident, I realized that they were perfectly

capable of taking care of themselves and that, in my eagerness to protect them, I was minimizing their potential, while my mother's ego enlarged surreptitiously. "You have to change," I swore to myself, and as soon as I let go that control my adrenaline waned.

We went up the overpass at the Interior Circuit viaduct. For the first time I realized that, indeed, nothing is completely safe. Halfway through the bridge we saw a crack. Then I said to myself: "And if this doesn't hold out, will we fall, included the bridge, over the cars?"

Things I used to do automatically now had taken on supernatural importance. Each step was a miraculous act. My attention was totally focused on surviving. While I walked, I recalled dad telling me: "Take it easy. Everything will be solved." The day he threw me to the sea when I was a child and a wave passed over me came to my mind. "You see? Nothing happened," my father told me. And holding his hand in my mind, we arrived at Chachalacas Bay Street in the Veronica Anzures neighborhood.

My son's godmother welcomed us as usual: with open arms. "I was waiting for you. Thank God you've arrived." Although we had been in that house hundreds of times, this time it was different: my eyes scanned the construction: I checked the closets; I looked behind the curtains; I examined the load-bearing walls, the corners where ceilings and the walls meet. No crack. And I felt safe, at home, with my family, while we listened to a loudspeaker giving advices: "Don't go out if you don't need to. Don't turn on the gas. Keep a radio at hand. Remain informed. Make sure you have water."

It seemed we were in the middle of a war and there was a curfew. I remembered my family in Spain and I said to myself: "If they survived the Civil War, we can take from them the strength we need to continue in life."

My son's godmother told us that the Veronica Anzures neighborhood had suffered minor damages. That she hadn't been able to locate us because her cell phone had no signal; that she had learned from her sister in Barcelona that we were fine. Meanwhile, my phone was coming back to life: messages from different places came through Facebook and *Whats* asking how we were doing. I was able to answer more than 450 messages from several parts of the world with two syllables: "Alive."

I would never have thought that so many people cared so much about my children and me. And gratitude became immense.

INCONTINENCE AND FLOUNCES

While I was taking a hot bath, I felt my throat: it was full of dust. "We are light but also dirt," I told myself, thinking of all the people who were trapped in that very moment.

Wearing a pajama that my *comadre* lent me, and with my stomach all in a knot, I sat down in the living room ready to communicate with my friends and neighbors. In a natural way, I started posting on Facebook the first of more than a hundred messages, replicating the help I was receiving, putting people in contact with others and making lists of the requirements for the places having suffered collapses.

It was through social networks that I learned about my friend Lety. While Benjamin was looking for her, she was standing in front of my building shouting my name.

My *comadre* was crying: "I can't stand thinking about the children of the Rebsamen School and their mothers." I only felt my tears trapped inside my lungs. And, unable to control myself, I lighted a cigarette and I started smoking again.

My exhaustion took me by the hand to bed and, while I tried to sleep, all the images I had seen during the day came back clearly, but disorganized, without following a logical sequence: the woman with the torn stockings, the patients evacuated on the ridge, the lady of the scrunchie, the soldiers, the gas leak, the collapse of building at number 286, Lázaro in his underpants. Both the city and my mind were the same chaos.

After two hours of sleep, I got up determined to help. I took a shower and put on the clothes that my *comadre* was kind enough to lend me: lemon-green trousers barely reaching my ankles, a wine-colored

t-shirt with silk flounces, my green tennis shoes for the gym and my black-leather bag.

Before heading to the Roma neighborhood, unknowing when we would be able to return home, I took *Ozzy* out for a walk. We walked a few streets and, as so many other times, my dog stopped to poop. At that moment I recalled the persons trapped under the collapsed buildings and I imagined that, indeed, they would have also relieved themselves. And, for the first time in my life, I experienced incontinence. I could differentiate terror from panic and concern from fear. I was still in the terror phase, and terror had lodged in my guts. It began to come out in the form of excrement—putrid and dark—while I experienced some relief. Embarrassed and dirty, I went up the stairs and into the bathroom, while I heard my *comadre* tell my children: “Poor your mother. She doesn’t seem to be quite sane after the earthquake; she doesn’t even remember that she already took a shower some minutes ago.”

Rumi and I took a taxi that left us near Chapultepec Avenue. We saw Salamanca Street cordoned off due to the building that had collapsed there. Firemen, ambulances and hundreds of people had already organized aid stands. I was still in shock and thus unable to be helpful for anyone. Scared, I could only walk to Alvaro Obregon Avenue. We had to enter our apartment to see in what conditions it was. Frightened, I went upstairs. I opened the door of my home and when I saw for the first time what I hadn’t been able to see—but I heard—the day of the earthquake, I went crazy.

Six windowpanes were broken. Flowerpots, earth, paintings, glasses, diches, cups, bottles of sauce, clay pots, vases, souvenirs, a plasma screen, chairs, broken lamps, my Mac, the keyboard, were all shattered in different places. A photo of my children looked at me from a shattered-glass frame. The house already smelled empty. The colors were bitter. I ran to my room as if it were going to tremble again and my throat suddenly dried up. I took a dossier with documents, a bag of clothes and two umbrellas: one yellow and the other with rainbow colors that I had bought at the gay march, and I fled the building while Rumi shouted: “What happens, mom? Why are you running?” Without stopping, I went to the House of the Poet. While I walked, I met neighbors who carried suitcases and backpacks. We greeted each other with our eyes and making a small gesture with our heads.

With my heart jumping out of my chest, I arrived at my office. I went to inform my boss who immediately organized all my colleagues to help me take my things out of my apartment. My mind collapsed: “If it trembles again and my house falls down, will I stay in this world with only a pajama that doesn’t even match?”

On the way, I met a couple of friends who didn’t hesitate to join the brigade. Full of determination, all of them went up to my apartment. They cleaned up all the mess, set upright the bookshelves, stacked the things still useful, threw away the broken things, and in a couple of minutes they left with my jewelry, my clothes and my documents all mixed up inside jumbo garbage bags to keep them at the Casa del Poeta, while the first civil engineer that one of my neighbors had contacted arrived to check the building structure. In the middle of a deathly silence and under the penetrating gaze of a dozen people who examined every single wall of my apartment, he said in a low voice: “I think it’s fit to live in.” “Do you think or are you sure?” I asked him, scrutinizing him to the core. “Sure, ma’am, it has nothing wrong... but let’s say that if I were you, I would stay to sleep somewhere else, at least until the next earthquake,” and he laughed; but as no one else joined him, he pretended to cough to erase the smile of his mouth. Paco, the concierge, suggested us that, in any case, it was better to wait until Friday to come back, taking into consideration the aftershocks and also to the lack of gas.

With a key and distrust we closed the door. On the street, Susan, a friend of Jassin, informed us that her apartment had been damaged. My son put her up in our house and, wearing their bike helmets, they left immediately to become part of one of the brigades of the Del Valle neighborhood. “I’m going to Veronica Anzures to take care of my godmother,” said Rumi. And I went walking to the Casa del Poeta with the intention of putting on clothes of my own, but a message stopped me: “All your things are already locked up, so now you can relax. We closed the office and we’ll meet, God willing, on Monday. Hugs, Maricarmen.” I looked at my tennis shoes, the green trousers and the t-shirt with flounces, and I realized that I would have to stay dressed like that until Monday. “No way,” I said to myself and, turning

around, I began to walk towards building number 286, while I received messages from my Roma neighbors asking me where I was.

NO BIRDS

Not even five minutes had passed when I was given a loudspeaker and the assignment of going to Plaza de La Cibeles, along with a fleet of twenty bikers, to collect and bring back a list of supplies. All of a sudden, I was converted into a forewoman: “Oxygen cylinders, lamps, batteries, hacksaws, ropes, and power saws to cut concrete are urgently needed. No! Not urgently: on the double!”

The Plaza de la Cibeles collection center arose spontaneously with the help of all the residents of the Roma and Condesa neighborhoods, who came out to the streets and, right away, started giving the best they had. A display of tents, trucks with food and clothes appeared out of nowhere, and in a few hours it became a perfectly organized and supplied collection center fulfilling the needs of different parts of the city. Thousands of volunteers came to help: some of them classified tools, other medicines; groups of young people carried the food packs of the trucks. Human lines carried the stews that other people had cooked. Cartons of sandwiches, fruits, water bottles, juices, serums, diapers, baby milk, safety boots, blankets and mallets appeared and multiplied among hundreds of hands that suddenly became one.

After five hours of comes and goes, I sat down on the edge of the sidewalk and questioned myself: “Let’s see, why you are doing all this? Due to genuine altruism and compassion? Due to selfless generosity? Due to your love for others? From where are you doing what you do?” Honestly, for me it was very clear that although it was true that there was a bit of all that, above all I was doing it to escape from myself, to break away from the inner terror and madness I was feeling. For me it was easier to help others than to tackle my own trauma.

Having that awareness helped me not to deem myself Mother Teresa of Calcutta at any time, but instead a terrified woman with many scarcities and character shortcomings and, above all, with zero temperance; but also with a real and deep desire that all beings would be free of suffering.

And thus, realizing that my intention wasn’t utterly pure, so to speak, but was contaminated by my own afflictions, feeling much more authentic I got up from my sidewalk seat and said to myself: “So are things! What the heck! Let’s go on.”

The requirements changed from one moment to another and initially the ways of fulfilling them became chaotic. Help requests were conveyed through social networks, but when the brigade members arrived, they found that the information had been false or that the requirement had already been fulfilled.

Thus happened, for instance, when, in full work of debris removal at number 286, a group of youngsters came with loudspeakers asking for urgent help to remove the rubble at the Medical Center. Believing that it had really collapsed—as it had happened during the 1985 earthquake—many of the rescue team members left that site and went to a compound that had not suffered any damage at all. Due to that case, and to make the work efficient, it was decided that all Internet messages should be authenticated with name, place and time. Initially, the requests were made through loudspeakers. Less than forty-eight hours later they were transmitted through a video that was broadcast massively, or, the needs were written on cardboards and through a photo they became viral immediately. Thousands of text messages circulated on social networks with lists of the names of people rescued and transferred to hospitals in Mexico City.

Some funeral homes offered their services for free. Groups of lawyers came out as volunteers to give legal advice and services to families who had lost their homes.

The Mexico square had no birds. It was full of tents where the affected residents of the Roma and Condesa neighborhoods were staying temporarily. The urine smell mixed amidst the trees. The latrines, so necessary, stank, at that place where days before we ate corn and drank *atole*; where my children, when babies, met the ducks; where they learned to walk, to fall and to get up; where they wanted to

return every Sunday to get on the jumpers, believing that with a jump they would be able to touch the clouds; there, between the sweetest childhood, fear had established its seat.

And there's where we also learned, through a neighbor, that the Superama market of La Condesa neighborhood had collapsed; that the Dormimundo store at Medellin Avenue, where I had bought the beds of my children last Christmas, no longer existed; that an hour after the earthquake, some kids went up to their apartment and, when they were inside, the building collapsed.

Stories and news continued to be disseminated in every corner of the neighborhood. Without having to watch television, we learned of Frida's existence and we felt anguished; then we found out that such a pet didn't exist, we got pissed and took revenge focusing our helplessness on insulting Televisa network.

LOVE IS A PORK RIND IN GREEN SAUCE

The next day, in front of building at number 286 of Alvaro Obregon Avenue, relatives of the persons still trapped under the debris made their first settlements while the rescue works were being carried out.

With her back towards the building and sitting on the curb, a woman looked at me. Her eyes seemed two endless wounds. I stopped listening to the sounds, I approached her and sat down next to her. We kept there in silence. Spontaneously, I started doing *tonglen*, a Buddhist practice that lying in breathing with the purpose of absorbing 'somebody else's' pain and in exhaling the desire of peace for the heart.

At one point, she spoke and only said: "My son is in there and I am out here." Without thinking it twice, as if I were a rescuer, I went inside myself and searched for a prayer, a phrase, in my throat, something with a meaning to tell her, but I couldn't find one single word to give her. And I stayed there, at her side, empty-handed, helpless, inhaling and exhaling, not knowing for sure where my shoulder ended and where hers started; without distinguishing what was inside or outside; experiencing the non-separation; just sitting and feeling the infinite, while they began to install the tents on the sidewalk.

Cameramen from different parts of the world had gathered to report on the situation of the trapped persons. Thousands of young people had literally taken the city; those who were here took turns in human lines to pass from hand to hand vests, harnesses, masks, spare parts for power saws, drill bits, leather gloves, fire extinguishers, extension cords, ropes, fluorescent lamps, power drills, head lamps, flat rope fittings and slings for rappel.

At one point, in front of the high pile of rubble, the rescuers raised their fists asking everybody to keep silence so they could listen between the cracks. All of us remain silent and filled ourselves with hope. As small bunches we clustered as close as we could to the area that was cordoned off. In the midst of that silence, one could clearly hear the same thought: "Let's hope they bring out someone alive." After a few minutes, a rescuer emerged between the stone blocks. We saw how he put his arms inside the mouth of a tunnel and how he pulled something out of it. There was hope of life. We never imagined seeing what he took out: an immense oil painting of Merlin the wizard, perfectly framed and without a single scratch. Although no one had a fist raised anymore, we all remain silent. Frozen. Without understanding anything. Because nothing had to be said nor was there anything to understand.

Atop the rubble, five workers admired the painting. My mind beat itself up thinking about the horror that had been to bring out that vapid picture instead of a human body. I talked to Jassin on the phone. I told him what we had witnessed. "Oh, mom, don't you realize that only art remains? Besides, the rescuers were really cool taking the trouble to safeguard that work, to give it value, to remember that it was made by a human being." Over my amazement, I received more amazement.

And after such revulsion, beauty appeared before my eyes. My neighbors carried trays of freshly prepared food that they offered to those who were there. The pork rind in green sauce with black beans tasted like glory. Sitting on a wooden crate, I ate the first taco while watching endless groups of bikers and cyclists carrying boxes. I, who all my life had grumbled due to the rumble of bikes when starting

out, now I was grateful for their existence. But I began to feel uncomfortable due to the presence of so many soldiers. Why were they there doing nothing, I wondered, while I looked at them with disdain and annoyance.

All of a sudden, a structural engineer stopped before me and offered his services which I gladly accepted, but for my neighbor Sonia who, some hours before, had told me that her apartment had some cracks. She invited us to enter. At that very moment I realized that I had become mentally incapable of climbing the stairs, so I preferred to stay in the street, sitting on the sidewalk edge. Then a van with nuns and priests stopped to give me a bag containing a ham sandwich, an apple and a mango juice soda. They told me they would pray for me.

I hadn't been aware of my dreadful look until the director of the Universidad Londres appeared with an architect and several students and asked me if I was Rumi's mother. As I got up, by chance I saw myself in a mirror that was inside a store: I didn't recognize myself.

We walked back to my house and I told them that if they wanted to check my apartment they could do it without restraint, but that they would have to excuse me because I wouldn't go up in any way. So I gave them the keys and, while I waited for them down in the street, the structural engineer who had checked Sonia's apartment walls came back to me. "I think it's fit to live in," he told me, and I avoided the question, "You think or you are sure?" And while the architect who had gone up with the director to my house came down, I took the engineer to Sandra's business so he could do us the favor of also checking it. When the architect finally came back, he gave me a second appraisal: "I think it's inhabitable." I felt terribly upset to hear again that "I think", because it was like listening to my patient telling me that it would tremble again, but in thirty years. Then I understood that one thing is the visual inspection of a building and another quite different is a thorough checkup of its structure. As I know my neighbors, I realized at once that we would be left without such a checkup because, except for three of them, all the rest always came up with excuses every time there was some trinket to be paid for.

Resigned to those, "I believe in God Almighty Father" and "I'd better believe that it won't tremble again," I accompanied them to Sandra's business, who said goodbye to the engineer and now led the architect and the director to her apartment so that they could examine the cracks on the ceiling.

THE POPOCATEPETL VOLCANO FUMAROLE

Night was falling. In front of the Alvaro Obregon collapsed building, people had multiplied as if they were loaves of bread. On the ridge, several modules had been installed to provide assistance to the victims. I was interested in one that said: "Vision altered by the earthquake." There, they explained to me that when you live a 'near-death experience', your eyesight only focuses on those things that can save your life and you stop seeing the rest. And gratitude ran through my blood when I linked myself with that wonder that is the human body.

Sitting on the motorcycle of a tattooed driver, I returned with the loudspeaker and the fleet to the La Cibeles traffic circle. We loaded up the requirements and we carried them to number 286. We entered with the motorcycles inside the cordoned off area greeted by the applause of the companions. Six trips later, I was drained. Pancho, the tattooed biker, saw my exhaustion and told me: "Relax, *doñita*. I'll take you home right now." With the helmet on my head, I managed to nod and, embracing him, I released a lot of stress as we flew through the city. In five minutes we arrived at the Veronica Anzures neighborhood. "More tomorrow," I said to Pancho. Inside the house, I began to charge my cell phone so I could continue posting on Facebook the requirements that came to me through friends and a chat group called, 'Aid for the Mexico City earthquake.'

Before going to bed, my cell phone rang. A Banco Invex employee was calling me to inform me that I owed them 4,500 pesos that I had to pay the next morning. "Do you live in Mexico City?" I asked him. "Of course," he answered me. "Aren't you aware about the earthquake?" "Madam," he replied, "the

earthquake has nothing to do with your debt.” Like the child of *The Exorcist*, my head began to twirl around while I shouted at him seven times in a row to go f... himself at hell and stay there until the last corpse was removed from the rubble. After hanging the handset with a blow, I sighed.

Another call came in straightaway: My mother wanted to know about us. I was just going to explain her the situation, when she interrupted me: “Wait, wait, I’m looking at it right now in the news. Oh, my! It seems you are in Syria! Look, I’m here having dinner and watching TV, and what can I say... I’m going to send you some euros because the truth is that I really want to help, but it will be next week because I don’t want to miss the reports and now I have to leave you because they’re going to show the Popo’s fumarole. Take care, come on; good luck sweetheart.” And when I hung the phone, to my mind came her sharp image: sitting with her blue Austro-Hungarian style robe on her sofa easily convertible into a *chaise longue* with its remote control, with her silver tray, eating a plate of *jabugo* ham, a *cantimpalo* hard pork sausage, a loaf of durum wheat bread and her glass of white wine, while the rescuers of the painting, the nuns, the priest, the Universidad Londres director, the collapsed building, the sandwich, Merlin, and the wounded-eyed woman on the sidewalk crossed my mind at the same time.

The next day, Rumi told me: “Mom, I also want to help.” And so he went with me to number 286. He tried to enroll in one of the brigades that were created at the Parque España, but he wasn’t accepted. Disheartened, he decided to look for his friends with whom he formed a brigade. From 9 a.m. until 2 a.m. next day I didn’t know anything about him. When he finally contacted me, he said: “Today was the happiest day of my whole life, ma.” He explained me that they had gone to collect toys; that they had asked for a lift and a van had taken them to the Tlalpan district. That they had delivered the toys. That they went to a shelter to look after disabled children. That his assignment was to describe the shape of several animals to a seven-year-old blind girl. That she, with a marker, kept drawing those animals on a piece of paper according to the indications she was listening to. That he cried. That he laughed out loud. That, when they left the shelter at dawn, they met an old man who was drunk, that they help him to walk and who on the way invited them a few shots of tequila; that they said goodbye to the old man; that they ran down the street with the tequila heat in their stomach and the fresh air on their faces. “And where are you now?” I shouted nervously, while a pair of hands closed my eyes. “Here, ma; here.” Turning around to look at him, I realized that my son, whom I had always seen as a child, had suddenly become a man.

We were walking together at night, once again towards the Veronica Anzures neighborhood, when a taxi driver stopped and offered to take us for free. Once inside the taxi, I realized that, since the earthquake, I had not only lived without money, but had not even thought about it. My feeling of indigence was enormous, but was starting to get mixed with the word gratitude, when the taxi driver said: “Poor people who didn’t make it, but we have to thank God because nothing happened to us.”

Once again, anger made my head fume mad, my eyes blaze and my bitterness turn into words: “What God are you talking to me?” I questioned him. “Come on, ma!” my son interrupted me. “We do have to thank Him because nothing happened to us. What must we give Him for everything that happened to those people who are trapped?” “Take it easy, ma!” said my son again and again, while I wanted to keep on talking as if I were Mao Tse Tung, and while the taxi driver, who was kindly driving us home, hadn’t receive a single word of thanks from me.

My mood was explosive and unstable. It didn’t enjoy the most elementary moderation. Anything maddened me. I felt totally ungovernable. I was undergoing a post-traumatic stress and I hadn’t even noticed it.

At 10 a.m. of next day, the cameramen who were recording the rescue activities at number 286 had proliferated as cockroaches. I was interviewed by several international television networks. I imagine that I told them many nonsenses, and during my last interview by a German young woman, I remember that I got upset and told her: “If you don’t come to help, don’t come to make questions.” And, after sending them also to hell, I went to look for the lady with the injured eyes. “Everything’s the same,” she told me. “Thanks for everything, but my family has already arrived.” Sitting among her relatives, next to the tent, she was still waiting for her son to be found alive.

At the nearby little store, a lady was very angry. She also had relatives trapped below the rubble. She told me that she was fed up with the journalists because, mainly at night, they approached her when nobody saw them to ask her: “How do you feel, knowing that your son and your husband are in there?” She considered unbearable having to put up with the cameramen who wanted to film her when she hadn’t had the chance to take a shower, she told me, while she continued saying that one thing was to inform and quite another to take advantage of the suffering of others to produce pathetic reports aimed at increase the television audience rating.

Messages kept coming into my phone. “They say they are going to bring and use machinery. That the military are there for that. We already have a protest march all set up. Confirm the information so we can get it under way.”

I gave Rumi the megaphone, so that he took care of that day requirements list at La Cibeles square, and I proceeded to find out what else they were requesting me. I spoke to more than twenty militaries who exhibited an impeccable attitude at all times, enduring invectives—totally unjustified from my point of view—of people who suddenly, like me, lost patience for whatever reason and insulted them. They made me clear that they were there so they could hold back some despaired relatives who would want to enter the building, because any unplanned movement carried out at number 286 was highly dangerous and could even bring about a greater catastrophe, since the building next to it was also very damaged. I loved them.

I also spoke with a rescuer who had come from Israel and was cooperating in the work. With his sight full of love and pain, he told me that a slab had collapsed and was preventing the access to the lower floors; that he hadn’t rescued anyone yet; that if from outside it seemed that the progress was very slow, we had to recall that everything that was done was similar to a surgical operation, because any movement not anticipated could bring about a debacle; that he was willing to work while there were some life expectancy and, of course, there was; that he had experience, because he had worked in other catastrophes and that, on one occasion, he had been able to rescue a living person after nine days buried. But that the government had the final say, and that he would comply with the instructions he would receive. And after drinking a bottle of electrolytes in one gulp, he went back to the building and disappeared amidst the stones.

I also inquired about those machines a Spanish engineer who directed the workers with great leadership, and he gave me his word of honor that it was a rumor, and not a fact. Finally, relatives of the trapped persons requested not to divulge false rumors, because far from helping them to keep up hope, they sunk them in terror and depression.

After corroborating that, I decided to write a summary of the facts on Facebook to avoid a protest march, and I recalled the importance of the written word and the commitment that one has with it.

CIELITO LINDO

It started raining. I had never hated rain before, but that day I loathed it. When it rained, rescue work stopped and, regrettably, I went mad. But every time my mind became cloudy, someone appeared at my side and filled it with light. My friend Alvaro took my hand and said: “What worries me is the thirst of those who are buried in there. I ask God that they can drink some of this rain, even if only a little bit.”

We ran to cover ourselves under an awning that had been improvised next to the Parque España. In no time, they set up three tables and even covered them with food. With a passionflower tea cup in one hand and a plate with hot black beans in the other, we watched the downpour. And through the rain filtered the images of thousands of people helping to get harnesses, alpinists, power-tracers; dedicated to remove debris, escorting the injured, looking for clean clothes for the rescuers, preparing food, distributing medicines, and in that very moment I understood what “the precious human life” means for Buddhism. That deployment of thousands persons working tirelessly was a clear example of what one

single life is worth. And I thought that, despite being in front of terror, I was living what I had always dreamed, because for a few days Mexico became a fully enlightened society, where we all help each other, where money was not necessary to live, where no one doubted that love, generosity and a spirit of solidarity also came out from the rubble to show us the heart purity of this land, to tell us that the deaths of our compatriots were not in vain, but rather that, through them, Mexicans were able to become truly human beings.

And while the downpour intensified and the mood seemed to be waning, a little boy shouted: “Viva Mexico”, and he began to pronounce the Cry of Independence, but with some changes: “Viva the rescuers! Viva the brigade members! Viva the medics! Viva the *topos*! Viva the trapped ones! Viva Mexico; Viva Mexico; Viva Mexico.” And that said, we all sang the National Anthem and the *Cielito lindo*.

After getting a second wind, we went back to number 286, knowing that even in the midst of a tragedy life can also be beautiful.

By Friday, discontent was on the rise in the avenue. One of the relatives of number 286 told me that he had noticed irregularities; that he disliked the secrecy with which they were proceeding; that nobody had informed them of anything; that there was no transparency; that, without notifying anyone, they had pull out a body whose relatives, many hours later, had found at the Forensic Medic Service; that, in spite of not having left the place even for a moment, he hadn't seen a corpse being pulled out; that, despite the days of work, practically no progress was perceived; that vital hours had been lost because the building had revealed irregularities in its construction; that the mass of concrete hadn't decreased; that he didn't understand why they had brought rescuers from Israel, Spain, the United States; that he trusted much more his fellow countrymen, the Mexicans, the *topos*.

In front of the families of the trapped ones, the assistance stands continued to proliferate: psychologists, therapists, masseurs, orthopedists, reiki practitioners, nurses with stethoscopes to check tachycardia, white-coated doctors offering free blood pressure screening.

I went looking for the lady with the eyes like endless wounds and I found her, now comfortably seated in a country chair, receiving a therapy, while a nurse took her pulse. Surrounded by a greater number of relatives who had come from different parts of the Republic to accompany her, she was still waiting. “Everyone has come except him,” she said, while the nurse gave her a pill and a glass of water.

Under the tents came a group of young guys who offered their services: finally you could charge your cell phone; they had cables for all kinds of phones. I was impressed to see how even the smallest need was detected and fulfilled immediately. Many of the brigade members lived in neighborhoods far from the Ro-ma one, so they stayed there overnight. Upon realizing that situation, several neighbors opened their houses to offer them bed and bathroom.

A SIXPACK

It was getting dark and the time to evacuate was over for us. I had to go upstairs to my house. Sitting on a bench, I looked at my building. “Must I go there again?” I asked myself, while I made calculations with the intention of moving to a small one-floor house in God knows what neighborhood, but my totals were never enough: the high school tuition, the Conamat, the rent, the brackets, the food, the electricity, the water, the gas, the telephone, the cell phones, the gym, the outings, the veterinarian, the credit card debt. “Don't mess up things,” I told myself. Those were my thoughts when Jassin sat next to me: “Mom, you cannot go on like this. You must go up. You must cook again. You must sleep in your own bed. You must water the plants. You must understand that, if this moment you leave your apartment, people would queue up as far as to Insurgentes Avenue and beyond to rent it. Tell me at which neighborhood would you like to move to? We have lived here for the last twenty-five years. Here everyone knows you; even the criminals protect you. Do you know how difficult it is for me and my brother to be men in this city, without a father to protect us? Having a dead father has no solution; but there's a solution for you to stop

being in the street and to discard your idea to move to another neighborhood: you just have to go up to your house and confirm personally that the roof didn't fall, that neither my brother, nor me, nor *Ozzy* are under the rubble, and that, angry or not, you have to be grateful." And, lifting me up from the bench, he grabbed my arm and took me to the Oxxo store. "Now you're going to do what I say: you buy yourself a *sixpack* of beers, we go up, you drink two of them and leave me the rest." And as if he had hypnotized me, I suddenly saw myself in my living room, having guzzled the second beer, and starting to drink a cup of seven lemon blossoms tea while I looked, absolutely devoid of energy, at the place where I had remained in a fetal position the day of the earthquake. Then I said to myself: "I'm going to get rid of all the plants I have here because the avocado pot was about to fall on my head, and dying from a flowerpot hit doesn't seem very heroic."

And, that matter settled, relaxed and grateful, I fell into a heavy sleep, despite the ambulance sirens that didn't stop crossing the neighborhood.

Suddenly, I opened my eyes. Before me, Rumi was shaking me in my bed and shouting, "It's trembling", while, without believing it, we heard the seismic alert once again. In a hurry, we ran down wearing our pajamas and barefoot, once more, to the ridge. Looking at the buildings and expecting the worst, we met all the neighbors: the second floor lady with her head soaped and wrapped in a ripped towel; her mother kneeling, looking at the sky and praying to the Virgin of Guadalupe; the first floor tenant in underpants, with his hands clasped holding a toothbrush; Jassin taking off his T-shirt to give it to his girlfriend who was wearing a transparent T-shirt; Rumi in his blue plush pajamas, and I in a red pajama pants with exotic summer flowers and, again, the gray winter top with dogs. In the middle of that chaos, I promised myself to buy three decent pajamas and not to mix them again, while I watched a nude couple wrapped in a bedsheet leave a store.

Ten minutes later, Paco, the concierge of our building, who was just arriving from a party, brought out a bottle and disposable glasses, and told us: "Let's guzzle up a *mezcalito* for the shock." We all had a fit of laughter through which we released a good deal of stress and, without thinking it twice, we drank the famous *mezcal*, which, incidentally, made us feel great. We looked like characters from a Fellini movie. But after one hour and a half we decided to go back up the stairs and return to reality. We were about to take a shower, when Maria, the concierge's wife, disposed our morning: "We've turn off the gas until further notice to prevent any leak." And resigned to smell like skunks, we got dressed in a jiffy and left to number 286.

There, they gave us oatmeal with milk and banana for breakfast. The cameramen continued to increase in number, thus avoiding pedestrians to pass. Without any right, they had taken the street. Through the neighborhood, groups of people marched displaying posters with positive slogans intended to mitigate the psychological impacts: "Mexico is standing", "You're not alone", "If you need, ask", "Sing and don't cry", "You did it well". For me, reading, "You did it well", was very helpful. Eventually, I said to myself: "Whatever happened, you're alive, right?" "Yes," I replied. "So, you did it well." A hint of peace suddenly reached my heart.

That night I did a relay in Alvaro Obregon 286. In the middle of the avenue appeared Lola, a dear neighbor of mine, wearing her brigade outfit, and accompanied by her son. She said: "Are you aware that it has already started to smell of death?" She offered me a mask. I took it but without knowing what to do with it, because, in some way, for me wearing it was to be resigned to the absence of life. Once again, devastation began to parade through my guts.

In front of me, a two-meter tall man caught my attention. He was a rescue officer wearing a lamp on his helmet, safety glasses, elbow and knee pads, and boots. Knives, pistols, small bombs were hanging from his chest. He reminded me of Mazingher Zeta. I watched him with total attention, and every time I looked at him, I saw him taller and I felt smaller. I listened to the thoughts that were going through my mind; they came from a girl who said: "Please, marry me, marry me, right now, and I'll do whatever you want. But, please, marry me now." The man did not even look at me. And I walked slowly along the ridge towards my house while asking myself: "What's happening to you? You've never been interested

in militaries and it's been over nine years that you haven't thought about marrying anyone. And now it turns out that you look at a military who is also like a mastodon. Hello?" At that moment I understood that that size were my defenselessness and my vulnerability.

I couldn't take it anymore and I went back thinking about the slogan that I had seen in the morning and that said: "If you need, ask." And I asked for psychological help at the first stand I found.

There were two male and one female psychologists. "You can choose with whom you want to take the therapy." I opted for the young girl who looked at me with a smile and with the serenity that I didn't have. "My name is Isa, what's yours?" After listening to me for an hour, when I was trying to tell her the Mazinger Zeta part, I stopped dead in my tracks. "What are you feeling now?" she asked me sweetly. "I must go to a restroom. I suffer incontinence." "She, running in front of me, and I, walking with my buttocks tight, we went to the restroom of one of the restaurants located in front of the Parque España. I took off my panties and threw them in the waste paper bin. Relief returned to my guts. Talking helped me get rid of my accumulated terror. I could feel it leaving my body like a rotten fruit. Exhibiting an ecstatic face, I left the restroom. "You look much better," the psychologist told me. "Yes," I replied, while thinking about the truth hidden in the well-known expression, "I'm scared shitless".

Full of courage, I went upstairs to my house. Instead of sleeping in pajamas, I put on my pants and tennis shoes. "We've lost her," said my resigned children. After what I had experienced and the last warning siren, it was impossible for me to think about going to bed in any other way. I remember that I asked myself: "Shall I be the only one?" And to get rid of doubts, I posted it on Facebook. In less than half an hour, fifty people replied: "I'm even with my jacket on"; "My daughters and I dressed, and not in bed but in the living room sofa"; "I, with my dog, in a couch next to the door"; "I said goodbye to my high heels: only tennis shoes day, afternoon and evening". And yes, I cleared things up: I wasn't the only one who wore tennis shoes in bed and unable to sleep at three in the morning. My body was rigid. Ambulances never stop passing on the street. I wondered how I could sleep knowing that, two blocks from my house, there were forty-nine people under the rubble. But once again, exhaustion closed my eyes and, embracing *Ozzy*, gradually my thoughts vanished.

NO TO THE TENNIS SHOES

We were at the edge of hope. One of the rescuers told me that the human-heat test had indicated life expectancy. Without showing the dark-days accumulated tiredness, the rescue work continued with a greater determination than ever. Under the tents, food, clothes, picks, shovels, helmets, electrolytes circulated. An atmosphere of excitement reigned on the avenue. Everyone was willing to give everything.

Suddenly, a huge cloud covered the last ray of light; black, fat and merciless, it spread across the entire neighborhood, and the wind began to whistle. About us, lightning and thunder. The blizzard began. The rain became more copious, until it became a storm. The infernal wind blew out the small tents temporarily inhabited by the relatives of the persons who were trapped. And far from seeing their loved ones come out of the rubble, they saw the canvases, the paper napkins and their hope fly away. All the effort got flooded, soaking wet the clothes we had collected, spoiling the food, while the time was flying. Torrents of rain fell on us to such an extent that it didn't even allow us to see each other. Rescue work had to be stopped and, incidentally, the hope of finding life.

At that moment I was caught in a fit of fury and despair. I left without saying goodbye to anyone. While I walked in the rain, I was in a fume and howled. Soaked and leaving behind me small puddles of helplessness, I entered my house, I took off my tennis shoes and threw them into the living room.

"What's wrong with you, Mom?" Rumi asked me. After telling him, I heard myself saying to myself: "And now, who I complain to?" "Time demands its tribute: the tribute of death", said Rumi. I opened the shower faucet and stayed under the hot water for an hour. Then I made myself a cup of Serena-Tea, I took the last Dalai pill and went to bed. I said to myself: "I refuse to continue living like this. I will

never again put my tennis shoes to sleep. I will never stop bathing. I will never get dressed in two minutes. I will never stay rigid at night, stretching the eardrum to distinguish between noises and the possible sound of the seismic alert. I refuse to live aghast. I'm going to sleep, and if I die that night, I'll die relaxed." And, for the first time since the earthquake, I could sleep eight hours in a row and rest.

The next day I felt splendid. I took a break and went out to walk *Ozzy*. Upon entering Orizaba Street, I was surprised to see a huge crenel of the Renacimiento college, a castle-shaped construction, that had fall over a white Porsche parked in the middle of the street and that was totally crushed.

Trying to find in my bag the Bach flowers of rescue remedy that my friend Eva had given me, I received a phone call from a girl who wanted to know how she could help. While I gave her options, a mastiff came out, abruptly, running through the Luis Cabrera square and threw himself at my dog's neck. Automatically, I screamed and covered my head with my hands while my body bowed as if expecting a collapse. I heard *Ozzy*'s moans. I was getting up when the owner arrived, who left me astonished: ignoring everything, he put the chain to his dog and ran towards the avenue leaving *Ozzy* bloodstained. I only managed to say a weak "stupid". I took *Ozzy* to the vet, bought him some antibiotics, and hugged him in my bed before going out again to number 286. "The devil is on the loose," said my neighbor, when I told her what had happened on the stairs of the building.

As I came back very sweaty, I entered the shower stall and found out that we didn't have a single drop of water. I spoke to the concierge and he informed me that, after the earthquake, in many buildings of the Roma neighborhood the tenants suffered the same situation. My children and I went down to buy 5-gallon water bottles. What seemed a short-term concern, went on dramatically until November 21, when workers of Mexico City water supply system finally arrived to drill the sidewalk and remove stones embedded in the pipes.

THE SPARROW

On Sunday, September 24, number 286 was saturated with people. Help was excessive. The pork rind in green sauce with beans had been left behind. Now they offered us a choice between chicken with mole and rice, pork with purslane, broad beans soup with nopales, breaded-steak sandwiches, chilaquiles, various fruits and juices. There were toothpicks, salt, pepper, hot sauces, napkins, wet napkins on the tables. They even had obtained ice cubes for the refreshments. The boxes with the stock of food kept arriving along with huge bags of clothes in many sizes. On the ridge, also the attention modules grew in number and services: music therapy, Gestalt therapy, Bach flowers of rescue remedy, relaxation exercises.

I approached the woman who was waiting for her son and I saw her surrounded by a choir singing the *Angelus* while a group of clowns played with the children who were there. The cameramen were cashing in filming the parade of people and their various offers. At the end of the *Angelus*, a family man approached the director and, far from congratulating him, he asked him to leave and not come back because rather than cheering them up, it took away their hope. A group of Christians came to pray and, with their palms raised, they cried out to a living God for salvation, while in the street corner a priest gave mass to Catholic relatives of the trapped persons. My friend Lunita, who practices Sufism, began to feel uncomfortable, but that didn't affect me: not caring in the least what anyone could think about me, I joined the Christians and, with all the attitude, I also raised my hands, invoked the living God—who I never understood quite well where he was and I repented. I repented even on TV that filmed me shouting: "Forgive us and save us." And after having said that, I ran to the corner where they were giving the Catholic Mass and I even received Communion. Later, I joined the *concheros* and danced, discreetly, among the crowd, while the sun filtered through the cracks of number 286.

In one of the tents, another family placed between two poles a copy of the photo of a boy buried in the building, telling him how much they loved him. "We are here, in Zone Zero," someone said suddenly.

Zone Zero was the rating given to the Roma-Condesa corridor. I asked Jassin: “Son, do you know why they call us that way?” “Come on, Ma. It’s the translation of *Ground Zero*. It’s a name used since the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That’s how the *gringos* call the place where the towers fell in the 11s.” “And that’s why they call us Zone Zero? That’s nonsense!” “So, what do you expected? Yes, we are in the zone of the greatest devastation.” “And you are going to stay in this neighborhood?” asked us a journalist for the umpteenth time. “Yes: we’ve lived here and here we’ll stay. How about it?” Jassin told him, while staring at the Univision cameraman. “That’s my champ!” I thought to myself.

Realizing that nothing was needed at the time, I went to the ridge and sat on the bench in front of my building. Three brigade members, one clown, two rescuers, one Santa Claus passed in front of me, as well as a *copalera* who kindly invited me to submit myself to a cleaning session. Standing in the center of the ridge, incense smelling of copal ran all over my body while her companions danced around me with rattles and drums. A neighbor came out to put on the floor a circle of flowers and candles. Several tenants gathered together to perform the activity. The exercise consisted in that the twelve members would give thanks aloud for something positive that we had lived during the days of the earthquake.

On Monday, September 25, the city tried to return to normality and we reopened the Casa del Poeta. Being in low spirits, I walked along the ridge, thinking that maybe it would be good for me to go back to work. Before starting the activities, I went to my office and, after turning on the computer and going online, I read that my dear Lorna Martinez had died during the earthquake. I rewound immediately. On September 19, before leaving the cordoned off area, we passed through Amsterdam Avenue and Laredo Street. I walked in front of her collapsed house when she was inside. And I never realized it! Later, my friend Jose Antonio called me to tell me that before she died, she had become a writer with a book she made in his workshop. They even sang the National Anthem when they found her body; that I shouldn’t feel bad because Lorna had died in peace.

Before starting the activities, we asked for a minute of silence for the victims. Although the book presentation had nothing to do with the earthquake, all the comments revolved around the hecatomb, and at eight o'clock at night those present began to say goodbye. “In case it might tremble again,” we heard someone say, while we went out to the street.

The Roma neighborhood was a hunched back. It languished. The ‘street car-watchman’ came up to me: “Mistress, help me. Since the earthquake not a single car has parked around here.” And while he told me about the cracks in his house, we walked together along the ridge, missing the street musicians, the man selling hot tamales, the one who announced that he brings “at ten, at ten, at ten, at ten pesos the fig and the tangerine; at ten pesos the avocado, the tasty and delicious avocado for the taco, at ten, at ten, the woman who buys and shouts as if she is being strangled: “Maaaattresses, waaaashing machines, stoooooves, refrigeraaaators, or any old iron parts you might sell!” After saying goodbye, I sat on the bench in the ridge in front of my building. I didn’t want to go up. While I was killing time, my children came on a tricycle running on the avenue, I saw them on a skateboard, on a bike and also on roller skates. I saw them walking hand in hand with their girlfriends, carrying *sixpacks* of beers with their friends, smoking their first cigarettes in secret. I saw them driving cars, even *ubers*. And now I was looking at them with their bike helmets in their hands, arriving from the Tlalpan multifamily complex, wearing their brigade suits, looking at me inquisitively: “Here again? Go up now, Mom.” A phone call saved me. My friend Alvaro had opened his home in Amsterdam so that Alfredo Goldstein could give free trauma therapy to brigade members and to Zone Zero dwellers. “You must come now,” he told me, and without thinking it twice, I got up from the bench and started walking.

I entered again by Cacahuamilpa Street. In the midst of the darkness, I realized that the elegant lady, with her torn stockings and her knees covered with blood, was still leaning against the walls of my mind. And when I turned the corner, those walls cracked, melted, and, like a ghost, disappeared. In the Amsterdam Avenue ridge, several people offered *atole*, water and hot chocolate. When I took a bottle of water, I remembered that Álvaro’s place had stairs. I started to tremble and decided to go back to my house. But, when I turned around, Alvaro appeared: “I’m glad you came. We were waiting for you.”

And, taking my arm, he walked with me to the door. "I'm not going to climb those stairs, Alvarito," I said, as Alfredo took my hand and told me: "We will climb them together, one step at a time." And in a jiffy I was lying on the couch, answering their questions. "You're doing it very well, but tell me: when you realized that you couldn't leave your building, what did you feel? In which organs of your body?" The good Alfredo remained by my side for more than an hour, helping me until, at last, I could cry. And I cried while he, without departing from me, took my hand and dried my tears. And I cried without knowing that the meal I was planning to invite him to would never be carried out, without knowing that he would never follow me up, without knowing that it was the last time I would be with him, without knowing that a week later he would die due to a bronchopneumonia. And he departed, teaching me to live with the "I don't know".

Back at home, my cell phone rang. "Good night, Mrs. My name is Gustavo and I'm calling you from Invex Bank." "The same refrain, again! What the heck!" I managed to say when he interrupted me. "Please, ma'am, don't think I'm calling you to collect money. It's not that. We know that you live in the Roma neighborhood and I just wanted to ask you how are you today, if you need anything... How can I tell you this? I was also a brigade member at number 286 all these last days, but today, Monday, I had to join up my job and, well, they instructed me that I had to call you, but, please, don't you worry about any of this. It's just routine matters. Anyway, ma'am, I just wanted to say hello and wish you a good start to the week."

I don't know if it was thanks to Gustavo or Alfredo or both of them, but at last, after the earthquake, my face has smiled again. What I do know is that Mexico is a sacred and seismic land; that impermanence exists and that impermanence still scares me; that everything is interrelated; that I'm not alone; that, if I were trapped in a building, they would not leave me abandoned; that if I had the fate to die that way, I could do it knowing that I was loved. Today I know that a raised fist is not always a sign of anger: it's also a way of listening to life. I know that tattooed bikers are as compassionate as lamas and that the military personnel knows about dignity and respect. Today I'm aware of the fright and the beauty that springs from the hearts when some terrible thing happens; that the *millennials* are very numerous and really aces; that they took the city and that nobody wants them to release it. I know there are builders who use 'any-brand' materials so they can earn more money regardless of the safety of the tenants of their buildings. I know that nobody is obligated to understand the suffering caused by a telluric movement if he has not lived it. That judging others bury us inside ourselves. That an earthquake rakes up the stones of resentment. That my mom, in her way, loves me. That the cracks open so that imprisoned love can flow out. That with my hand on my heart I bow in reverence to earth.

Today I know that we all are the rescuer, the blind, the nun, the biker, the priest, the trapped, the soldier, the cook, the drunk, the homeless, the seaman, the brigade member, the eyes with endless wounds; that we are dust and dust in love. Today I know that a little bird appeared; that I saw it perch on a stone; that it ate a few bread crumbs; that it looked at me in my eyes; that it sang, opened its wings and flew away.