



Edgard Garrido/Reuters

Hugo José Suárez*

Aftershocks

The Night of September 7

It's almost midnight. I'm trying to sleep; I have class tomorrow and my little girls have to get up early. My wife tells me, sleepily, "There's an earthquake." I don't take it too seriously: I live in Mexico City where this is an everyday occurrence. I just pay attention, waiting to see what happens. But it doesn't stop; it gets stronger. I get up and go to my little girls' room where they're fast asleep. I wake them up, trying not to alarm them, and we start the evacuation.

As we go down the hallway, the hanging flower pots in the living room—one red and the other blue—swing and crash into each other; the pieces of the mobile near the

front door that sometimes chimes in the breeze clang together. The shelves in the wooden furniture creak, threatening to eject the photographs. In a matter of seconds, as I walk toward the door, my very intimate space is threatened.

We get down to the parking lot, which is already full of neighbors. Once I get to the ground floor, I see that my daughters have come out without their shoes and I have left my cell phone on the night stand; I also forgot my ID and the keys to the house—and I remember now that we left the door open. In short, I didn't follow the security protocols.

The next Monday, the UNAM's official gazette publishes a frightening scientific statement on its front page: "On permanent alert. Mexico, highly seismic. Impossible to predict earthquakes. Recommendation: remain alert."¹

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Zazilha Lotz, Jantelco Brigade.

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Tuesday, September 19

This is a special day. The whole city is preparing for the earthquake drill slated for 11 a.m. My class is precisely from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., so I meet the students a few minutes before class time in the esplanade of the UNAM School of Political and Social Sciences. Everything goes as planned: the brigades, the people in charge of security, the announcements, the siren.

As soon as my class is over, I go to my cubicle. I turn on the computer, take out my notes, and suddenly everything starts moving. It's not a gradually ascending movement; it's like a bolt of lightning, a whip that makes no concession. I take my cell phone and my wallet and I go out into the hallway with lots of other people. The building is moving and the beautiful bay window where you can enjoy the sunset creaks and shudders as we move toward the garden.

Once there, I get a call from my wife, who's terrified; she tells me she's all right and she'll go to my children's school. From that very moment, I start frantically calling my daughter and the telephone number of the place where she studies. No one answers. I keep trying, but to no avail; this only makes me worry even more. Up until now, without any news, I take refuge in the certainty—later dramatically refuted—that Coyoacán, where my apartment and the school are, is a safe place. That illusion will last only a few hours more, when I discover that the earthquake caused nearby buildings to collapse. As soon as I arrive at the apartment, my older daughter takes me through it, pointing out the evidence that the earthquake has been here. The paintings are crooked, the drawers open, ornaments are on the floor, books are spilled out

of the bookcases. The papier-mâché giraffe that watches my dreams in the shelves above the bed is lying on the floor. Later I realize that what happened at our house is insignificant compared to the losses suffered by others.

In the afternoon I go out with my family to look at the surrounding area and I look at Internet every time I get even a weak signal. Hundreds of dead, dozens of buildings damaged and collapsed. The stories are chilling; a friend was on a fifth floor in the Condesa neighborhood, one of the hardest hit, holding on to a column asking herself if the building would withstand the shaking. It's terror. We're all afraid; I don't want to separate from my loved ones, as though I would be able to do anything if there are aftershocks. I go into my room and I feel unsafe; I don't sleep well anymore; I constantly have the impression that it's shaking; I confuse any dizziness with an aftershock. As soon as I hear a siren, I mix it up with the seismic alarm system set up throughout the city.

The days go by and day-to-day existence timidly peeks through the window. The enormous solidarity that reigned in the city is gradually replaced by the city's usual aggressiveness. Wretchedness explodes in our faces: it comes to light that several of the collapsed buildings were new, that they hadn't complied with existing official building requirements, that there had been corruption, and that there will be civil suits and trials and, they say, guilty parties. The authorities announce that they will be offering a very small compensation and help to the victims. It's increasingly clear that, in addition to a natural disaster, what we have lived through is the result of human and political decline, lack of attention, cheating, and negligence.

I live I fear. This isn't over; the drama of living in Mexico City continues and will continue. ■■■

Notes

1 *Gaceta UNAM* no. 4902, September 11, 2017, <http://www.gaceta.unam.mx/20170911/>. [Editor's Note.]