

7.9 Earthquake

August 15th, 2007

In memory of those who did not survive

It was a pretty apartment on the 10th floor, a bit noisy with the traffic of Camino Real, but had a magnificent view of the lush, green course of the San Isidro Golf Club. It was about 6:30 p.m., and I had just gotten back from my yoga class, so I was wearing a sweatshirt, exercise pants, and sneakers. I unlocked my apartment door as the deep smell of onion mixed with squash tickled my nose. It was winter in Peru, and Elenita had made a delicious *calabasa* soup. I looked at the soup and thought: I need to go out and buy ham and cheese for hubby's morning sandwich. Then, a second thought crossed my mind: shall I go now or after I have a bowl of soup? I walked over and saw it was still warm. So, I decided: Soup first!

After serving myself a bowl, I went into the small TV room and started channel-surfing. I slurped a big spoonful, licked my lips, leaned back, and looked out the window at the bright lights. Then I heard it. The deep, rumbling sound. Maybe it was a big truck that had just driven by? Sometimes the windows shook because of the traffic below, but the noise sounded different. It was deeper, darker, almost incestuous—too connected. I realized it came from the belly of the earth. Within two seconds, logic registered: it was an earthquake. A BIG one. I was on the 10th floor. And I was alone.

I jumped up. My body swayed a bit as if I had drunk a few too many glasses of wine. My hands were shaking. But it was the sound that I can still hear in my ears today. A gurgling noise, a scratching noise—our building and the one beside us were built together. Stuck at the seams. And now they wanted to dance by the beat of their own drum. It was as if they were Siamese twins, trying to finally separate from one another.

Ignoring the sounds, I ran through the living room, ready to open the door. My heart was beating wildly as if to the rhythm of some tribal beat, but then again, it may not have been beating at all. Time was frozen as I saw my cell phone on the coffee table, five meters away from me. I hesitated. I needed to get to my phone. If I survived this thing, my husband would be worried and would inevitably try and call. I needed my phone! But then I stopped. If I turned and went back for the phone, would those be the five seconds with which I could have gotten out of the building alive? Just to retrieve my phone, was I foolishly choosing to be buried under rubble when the building collapsed? And when it collapsed, would I be trapped under slabs of concrete with a silly piece of technology in my grip?

I went back anyway. I grabbed the phone, the house keys; my body was rocking back and forth. Things were falling—short, sharp sounds; a series of crashes—someone's TV? Someone's porcelain? Then a long, heavy rumble . . . my God, someone's building? I was still thinking. Thinking rationally, that is. I had to get out of there: yes! Down the stairs! Just the week before, I had seen Nicholas Cage in the movie World Trade Center. The words of Sergeant McLoughlin reverberated in my head: "The stairwell is the strongest part of the building." I needed to make it down the stairs. Get out of the building.

I was running, fast; my heart was on fire. BUT STOP! There was a man. Another human being. He was standing in the frame of his door holding a dog. A grey, kinda ugly thing. He was young-ish (the man). Thirty-something? I had seen him before. He had an array of sexy-slutty women pass through his apartment regularly. He was sort of handsome in the rugged "I haven't shaved for a month" kind of way. But I didn't think any of this. All I thought was My God, another human. I wasn't going to die alone. I heard the rumble again. I lost my balance while running past him, but managed to say in my fractured Spanish: "¡VAMOS A BAJAR!" (Let's go down!) He looked at me. Then he stretched out his hand—WHOOOOOOSSSH. He grabbed me. "NO!" he screamed. He said something in Spanish, but I didn't understand. Suddenly, I found myself hugging this man like he was the last person on earth, accepting his invitation with alacrity. His one arm was wrapped around his dog, and I wrapped myself around his other arm. I had my eyes closed, my face tucked into his bicep, my back pressed against a moving wall. He kept repeating, "*Tranquilízate, va a pasar*" (calm down, it will pass). Later, he told me that I was saying, "We're going to die, we're going to die." I remember none of this.

For 2 minutes and 43 interminable seconds the earth rocked. I remember thinking: *when will it stop? And what a way to go.* I pictured myself again under sheets of metal and piles of debris, my arm sticking up through a crack, my fingers twined around a cell phone—but this time there was a DOG in the picture, and he was chewing on my bloody hand! Then I saw my mother down on knees wailing, my husband with his face hidden in his oh-so manly hands, shielding his tears from the rest of the family. Suddenly, I pictured a cruise I wanted

to go on; then, the little island in Greece where my husband and I had been the summer before; my mother's face reappeared again. After that, there were no more pictures in my head. It was over. And I was still standing. And I hadn't died.

With disheveled hair and spirit, I quickly pulled away from the stranger and said: "*Gracias!*" Running down the ten flights of stairs, I left him standing there with his dog.

I have told this story many times to family, friends, students, loved ones, anyone who would listen. I guess I thought I was going to die, and I needed to process it. But what I needed to process was nothing in comparison to the people of Pisco, Ica, Chincha and San Vincinte de Canete. In Lima, we were very lucky. For others, it was disastrous. In Pisco about 85% of the structures were leveled, and throughout the region, 519 people were left dead; 1,366 wounded. Of course, these numbers are relatively low in comparison to other natural disasters, but one death is always too many. Just "1" represents someone's mother, brother, aunt, sibling, child, or spouse.

About two months later, my husband and I were in the elevator, and a rugged man walked in. He had two dogs now and smiled sheepishly at us. I felt awkward. This was a person with whom I had spent two very intense minutes, and yet now, I didn't know what to say. Normally quite loquacious, an unnatural reticence made me avert my eyes. My husband, stuck out his hand, grabbed the man's shoulder, and thanked him for supporting his wife through a traumatic event. That's when our neighbor told us that I kept repeating, "We are going to die!" He said it was not exactly what he wanted to hear during those crucial moments. We all laughed and bid adieu.

The next day, my husband and I decided to start looking for a little house (close to the ground) to live. Too many memories in this place.