

SEPTEMBER 19—7:19 A.M.

Lalo Miranda dangled his feet over the side of the unmade bed, rubbed his eyes, and stared at his shoes. How many customers would he have today in his living room barbershop?

Nieves was out in the kitchen, preparing breakfast for the three boys and contemplating the *comida corrida* menu for the off-the-books lunchtime restaurant she ran out of the cramped dining nook.

Lalo picked up his watch. It was exactly 7:19 a.m., September 19, 1985. Suddenly Lalo's shoes began to dance of their own volition.

The bedroom swooned off its axis and pogoed up and down for a full, terrifying minute. There was a loud, almost human groan, and the old *vecindad* at Regina #39 in the Centro Histórico settled back on its haunches three meters south. The ceiling dropped nearly a foot, and the walls webbed with cracks through which the sunlight shone in.

Lalo grabbed his shoes, Nieves swooped up the three boys and Perla, the toy cinnamon poodle cowering under the sink, and they dashed out into the patio as tiles smashed to earth all around them. Things were never the same after that, Nieves remembers.

Once safely outside on the crunched-up sidewalk, Lalo counted noses. There were 14 apartments in the *vecindad*, which due to its 100-year longevity had earned the title of a "historic monument." Some of the tenants were missing. Maybe they hadn't come home last night. Maybe they were trapped in their rooms. Lalo dashed back into Regina #39, frantically knocking on doors. Doña Epifania, the upstairs neighbor in the front, was balled up under her sewing table moaning softly, and he helped the old woman to her feet. Together they inched down the collapsed hallway, crept down the stairs which seemed to be anchored to nothing, and pushed through the front gate just as a loud crack broke from the back of the building.

The 8.1 quake was the most devastating ever to rip through the Monstruo's innards. The Terremoto or Ollín (earth movement in Nahuatl) or Sismo or Temblor—as people call it without any other identifying features—began with the crunching of tectonic plates in the Cocos subduction zone out in the Pacific Ocean off Playa Azul, Michoacán. Shock waves zigzagged through that large western state toppling church towers (the ancient 1530 country church where my godchild had just been baptized was a victim), before barging into the capital at exactly 7:19. Workers were just punching in for the day. Others were on the way.

The Centro is the heart of Mexico City's garment industry, and a four-story structure that housed several sweatshops a block east on Regina had fallen into a bank. Lalo rushed over to the pile and poked in the rubble for signs of life. He thought he heard a groan and put his ear to the broken walls, then ran back to #39 and borrowed a shovel. He would walk the Centro for days with that shovel, pitching in where he could to dig in the rubble of fallen buildings for survivors.

DEATH TRAPS

A block away, across from my current room at the Isabel (I would not be in residence for another week), a large stone final slipped from the roof of the National Library and flattened a passing *combi* van. Mario García was squeezed into his tin kiosk on the corner assembling the morning papers. He lumbered over to help out but couldn't move the fallen slab by himself. It didn't much matter. Everyone inside—five passengers and the driver—was already dead.

Two blocks farther west out on San Juan de Letrán—now the Eje Central Lázaro Cárdenas thanks to Carlos Hank González's road building—the Torre Latinoamericana had been whipped around like a weed in a windstorm but survived the earthquake intact. The Super Leche across the Eje on the corner of Victoria was not so lucky. Two four-story apartment buildings had fallen through the roof of the packed breakfast restaurant—like La Blanca (which survived without a scratch), the Super Leche was Gachupín-owned, with large murals of cows on the walls. Between the customers and the 20 apartments upstairs, maybe 300 people were killed. There is no precise count.

At the foot of Isabel la Católica Street, a dozen blocks north on the other side of Reforma, a billowing cloud of grit and black smoke filled the horizon like a premonition of 9/11. The towers of Tlatelolco had been knocked askew, 103 of its 148 buildings seriously damaged. The Nuevo León, 13 stories tall and holding 3,000 tenants, had fallen off its foundations and lurched precariously to the right. One floor had pancaked into the next. Once again, Tlatelolco was the stage set for a massacre.

THE DEAD DOCTORS

In the Alamos colony a mile south down Isabel la Católica, my compadre Hermann Bellinghausen, a doctor who doubles as a writer for *La Jornada*, walked the damaged streets in the direction of the Medical Center. Sirens wailed in the distance. Trees had been dislodged from front lawns. At the Centro Médico, Oncology and Traumatology had come down. Seventy doctors had been crushed to death in their residence hall and hundreds of mothers and their newborns were buried under the ruins of the Hospital Juárez—six miracle babies, some still in incubators, would be discovered alive a week later. Hermann

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watched a doctor still in his bathrobe and slippers put a stethoscope to the chest of a dead man splaved out in a squalid little garden.

Hermann crossed over into the Colonia Roma. A 10-story building at Tamaulipas #12 had been shaken apart like it was made out of cards. The smell of gas was pungent. Hermann sat down on a ledge, ignoring the danger, and lit a cigarette. He held his breath. This monstrous city that he both hated and loved had become an assassin. He felt like an orphan.

"*Mamá, Mamá,*" a girl in a Catholic school uniform stood whimpering in the street, clutching her book bag. Neighbors knelt on the busted sidewalks in front of their collapsed homes and prayed. Later, Hare Krishnas would come out and dance on the dead in the ruins and Jesus freaks passed out leaflets saying the Chilangos had gotten what they deserved because they were sinners.

By noon, life was stirring. Hermann watched families setting up camp under sheets like Bedouins on the median strips where Uru-churtu had once planted his flowers. A whole population had suddenly mobilized itself—doctors, nurses, *taxistas*, the *vecinos* of the Roma—without anyone giving an order. What Hermann was witnessing, the birth of the civil society, would alter power balances and change Mexico in the weeks and years to come.

7:19 FOREVER

Nikito Nipongo (his comic nom de plume) ambled down Bucareli Street toward the Alameda. Government buildings spilled all over the street. The Commerce Secretariat and the Navy building were in ruins. The government itself seemed to have vanished. Bureaucrats had jumped into their sedans and hightailed it for the safety of Cuernavaca. Terrible secrets were revealed. When supervisors ordered their workers into the ruins of the Mexico City prosecutor's office to retrieve files and typewriters, they found six bodies stuffed into the trunk of an agent's car in the flattened parking garage. The bodies, reputedly Colombian drug dealers, had been wrapped in tape and were covered with cigarette burns.

The telecommunications tower near the Ciudadela had keeled over. Televisa's Chapultepec Avenue studios burst apart, killing dozens and knocking the station off the air. The hotels around the Alam-

Alameda" was saved only because attentive waiters stashed it in the Del Prado kitchen.

Across Juárez, the Regis Hotel had blown up. Shaken off a foundation damaged by Metro construction, the boilers exploded, igniting a pyre that burnt for 50 hours. No one knows how many were incinerated. Down in the Metro, hundreds of thousands of passengers who had been trapped for hours in the dark trains and on the crowded platforms groped their way back to the surface and into the light. The time on every clock still read 7:19.

GOVERNMENT AGAINST PEOPLE

The first response of **Regent** Aguirre and the De la Madrid government was stunned silence. In the neighborhoods, burglar alarms whooped but no cops showed up to investigate. You couldn't call an ambulance because the phone lines had collapsed. With no help on the way, the neighbors dug with their own bleeding hands to reach the survivors. Shovels and picks thudded against the ground in desperate unison.

Finally, 36 hours after it had all come down, the police and the military put in an appearance on Regina Street and the blocks south of the Zócalo, ordered the neighbors to stop digging and forced them away from their busted homes at bayonet point. The soldiers cordoned off the blocks or *manzanas* under the pretext of protecting private property and looted the apartments of what valuables they could put their hands on—Alma Guillermoprieto, who grew up on Calle 57 in the

Centro, has documented the looting of a Mariachi-occupied apartment building east of Garibaldi Square. Fingers were chopped off to steal the gold wedding bands of dead spouses.

"The soldiers blocked off the streets and we couldn't get out to find food and water," Lalo Miranda who was the *jefe de manzana* or block captain on Regina recalls bitterly. "We fought the soldiers with rocks and our bare hands so we could rescue our neighbors," remembers Raúl Bautista, an ex-wrestler and street vendor who would soon become the scarlet-and-canary-caped Superbarrio, protector of *damnificados* (earthquake victims).

Others had easier access to their property. More than 800 sweatshops in the Centro had been demolished, the corpses of the seamstresses rotting in the ruins. Many owners were far more interested in saving their sewing machines and their inventories than their

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workers, and they bribed the cops to let them poke around in the rubble to remove their merchandise. There were thought to be 40,000 garment workers in the center of the city. No one knows how many thousands did not come home from work that night.

The dead were concentrated at the Social Security baseball park on Cuauhtémoc Avenue, wrapped tightly in plastic and laid out in rows all over the outfield. The stench was insufferable. Survivors looking for their family members puked all over the grass. Rescue workers sprayed the cadavers with pesticide and priests plied the corpse field giving belated last rites.

How many perished September 19? At first the De la Madrid government minimized the toll and said 4,000, and then in the face of the

mounting tragedy conceded it might be 7,000. The damnificados' estimates ranged from 10,000 to a high of 25,000. How many? *Un chingo*. A lot. Who will ever know? Hospital records show the Sismo left 14,268 injured, and 2,000 were never accounted for. As in the aftermath of 9/11, pictures of the missing were slapped up on the walls of the Centro: "Alondra Terán. Nuevo León. 10,000 pesos reward."

The Temblor left 954 buildings damaged beyond repair. Another 150 came down after a second smaller quake the next afternoon. When the earth began to shake again, thousands rushed into the open Zócalo for salvation and camped there for days. Some 2,500 structures were rendered uninhabitable. It all came to about \$5 billion USD in material damages. But the damage was more than material.

At first, the President refused all outside aid but later relented as the enormity of the tragedy dawned on him. As much as \$30 billion is thought to have been eventually received in relief aid. People are still asking where it could have gone to.