

September, 1999

At 11:30 on Thursday, September 30, I had just reached into my post office box to collect my mail. Keys still in the lock, I turned to exchange pleasantries with Anita, one of the postal workers. Suddenly, a monstrous growl crescendoed, the deepest thunderstorm rumble magnified a hundred times, a thousand cannons firing simultaneously in the distance careened toward us, and the two story building began to vibrate and sway as if it were trying to rip itself out of the ground. I yelled, "Fuera!" (Out!)

Four patrons and the postal employees staggered like demented drunks, barely able to navigate the exit's three shuddering steps, then lurched into the street. In the middle of the road I curled into a fetal position. Though covered, my head continued to swivel in an attempt to take in what was happening around me. Cars had stopped, their bewildered drivers and passengers leaping out onto the shimmying roadway. The streets filled with dazed, confused people fleeing from stores, homes and businesses. Screams, cries and prayers mingled with the numbing rumble. Most of my crouching body was in contact with the pavement as it swayed beneath me. I heard a terrifying cracking, a snapping noise which I first imagined to be the sound of buildings breaking apart. When I couldn't see any buildings falling, I realized the sound was subterranean; rocks were snapping in the earth's mantle below me, a realization more frightening than seeing a building tumble.

At first, the ground first seemed to jump up and down, then move side to side. After three minutes and forty seconds, an exceptionally long time for an earthquake, the frantic oscillations stopped. I stood very slowly and cautiously, not trusting what might come next. Then suddenly I bolted a block and a half west to a street from where I knew I'd be able to see my house.....if it hadn't collapsed. From some ten blocks away, I could make out the palapa, the highest point of the house, and knew that the house had survived. I raced back to my parked car in front of the post office and reached for my keys. They weren't in my pocket or in my purse. It hit me that I'd left them in the lock of the post office box. Warily entering the deserted building, I encountered all the heavy, free-standing banks of boxes chaotically collapsed on the floor. Inadequate muscles responded to my brain's message that I *had* to find my keys. Pure adrenaline, I suppose, fueled my lifting of first one, then another bank of boxes, the first still on top of the former, as I groped to find my keys. Snatching the keys, I let the hefty structures fall, smashing to the floor again.

As I rushed out of the post office, I found one of the postal workers hysterically shouting, "My baby, my baby! I can't find a taxi!!" I've known this

woman a long time, and I asked, "What's wrong with your baby? Where is she?" She said that the baby was with her sister, but she was worried about the construction of her sister's house. All the taxis and *collectivos* were full or weren't stopping. I was very concerned about Tere (my student/veggie cook) who was alone in the house, and about my renter, and about the house, itself. I wanted to get home as fast as possible, but I realized that the woman needed help. "Come with me! I can drop you near your house." Suddenly, two more people jumped into the car. "Please take me to Novena Norte," said a man, who'd overheard our conversation. "It's on your way." "Oh, please! Please!" shouted a woman. "I live near Maria. Please take me with you!"

Confusion reigned in the roads. Students from the nearby junior high had spilled into the streets. People were running, trying to find transportation to get to their homes or to their children's schools. I wove between cars and frightened humans. At one point I had to drive the wrong way on a one way street, horn blowing. My male passenger leaped out, short of his destination, in his urgency to reach home. The two women cried. I held the postal worker's hand saying over and over, "Your baby will be fine. You'll see. She'll be OK." Streets filled with pedestrians and vehicles negated what few road courtesies and driving laws occasionally observed here. It's amazing to me that there weren't any serious accidents. Nearing home at last, I saw frenetic parents consoling weeping children at the nearby elementary school, a scene repeated all over town. When I finally got home, I found Tere, my helper, and my renter shaken, but already beginning the clean-up. Tere tells me that she stayed calm, though various clay pots, candleholders, flower pots, and other decorative items were crashing to the floor around her. Happily, there was no structural damage to the house. Each pet reacted differently. Chami was terrified and slunk around for three days after. Muñeca was nervous. Dulci, the kitty, didn't return home for two days.

For eight hours, there was no power. Fortunately, after two hours the emergency generator at the local FM radio station provided enough power to inform us of the damage done. It was first reported that the quake measured 7.6 on the Richter Scale. That was later downgraded to 7.4, but at that magnitude, still places the quake among the strongest ten of the decade, and in the upper third of the quakes of this century. Although Puerto Escondido was part of the area designated as the epicenter, miraculously there was very little damage in Puerto Escondido, itself, owing to the fact that most of the buildings here have been constructed in the last fifteen years when relatively strict height limits and building codes have been in effect. The little villages in the mountains nearby, however, suffered greatly. Homes there are almost all made of adobe. The constant rains of the end of the rainy season created unstable subsoil, and damp adobe bricks gave way easily when the saturated earth trembled. Some

roads and bridges were damaged; the main road to the city of Oaxaca is still difficult to navigate.

On average, there are more than 65,000 earthquakes annually in the world, but only 18 of those are "major" (7.0--7.9), and there's only one in the "great" (8.0+) category. Before I experienced our "Big One", I thought that the numbers on the Richter Scale meant that a quake of 7.4 was one step up from one measuring 6.4. I didn't realize that the scale is logarithmic, that is, each number represents a force ten times greater than the lower number. A 7.4 earthquake is *10 times* stronger than a 6.4 and *100 times* stronger than a 5.4 and *1000 times* stronger than a 4.4 and so on. About 80% of the seismic energy in the world is released in the so-called "Ring of Fire", a belt encircling the Pacific Ocean. That places Puerto Escondido squarely in the most active seismic zone along with the west coast of all the Americas, and the east coasts of Asia, New Zealand and Micronesia. Statistically, however, our odds of having another major quake for the next thirty to one hundred years are very slim. There will be other quakes, but chances are they'll be minor ones now that the immense pressure has been released.

We've had, perhaps, fifteen inevitable after-shocks, one measuring 4.4--1000 times weaker than the September 30 quake. We are all a bit jumpy. My students stiffen visibly when one of the many military helicopters flying relief missions to the mountain communities passes by overhead. Thunder, and even big trucks passing by a half mile or more away, provoke cocked heads, listening, waiting. In retrospect, the experience was more humbling than terrifying for me. I was witness to an event my brain labeled "earthquake", but my senses couldn't fully process. I felt completely at Nature's mercy, unable to act. It wasn't similar to the hurricanes when constant mopping, sweeping, and bailing made me feel that I was somehow controlling my environment. The earthquake was mysterious, overpowering, a dawning that Nature's whim could produce a menacing force in whose presence I was truly insignificant.