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## The House in Ruins

### LIDIA

The crash woke me up. I felt somebody yanking me by my feet, I remember I even yanked the covers up. It was my mama. When she pulled me off the bed, the loft came down with the roof and everything. We just huddled in a little corner. Everything had collapsed. All that was left was one stick poking through. There we were, in a tiny little corner, and everything was dark. You could hear little bits of dirt falling all around, and the voices were getting further and further away. My little sister Luz was bawling. She wouldn't let go of me, shaking, just a baby. She was scared by all the shouting, by hearing the wood splintering and the rocks falling. I cried a little too, but Mama hushed me, "Shut up now. Don't cry. Let me open a way out. Let me see." She was like she always is, looking for a solution to what was happening then and trying to calm us down with a shout or a curse, so we wouldn't lose it. And so we wouldn't make her lose it too, I imagine.

We were there for a good while. They say the neighbors were already all running outside, some of them hurt, with their heads split open, everybody covered with dust. That's when one of my uncles showed up, the one who works around the corner from here, and they say that he started shouting, "My sister-in-law, my nieces, my sister-in-law!" He started looking for us, "Gregoria's missing, Goya's missing!" and everyone went back to where we were. My brother Alfredo was there too, and he was screaming, real awful, "Mama, Mama!" He was losing it because

there was no house left. Finally he heard us. "We're ok," Mama said to him. And they started to pull off the rocks. In the *vecindad* there was a man named Alejandro, everyone called him El Perro. He started to scrape, to dig. First, he got my sister Luz out, and then me, but when they went to get my mama out, she wouldn't fit. Well, El Perro goes and grabs her and pulls her out by her clothes. That's how they got her out. When Mama came out, the part of the roof that was covering us collapsed, everything caved in. It was like bombs had gone off. One roof fell in, and then they all did. There were people with their heads cracked open, but nobody was dead. When we got out into the street, the *vecindad* was flooded, because all the pipes had broken. Awful, awful. It was bad, although it didn't seem so bad at the time because you were so scared.

When Mama got out and saw the *accesoría*, without a single plate left, she started to cry, "What are we going to do?" And then she kept crying because we found out that my brother Lalo had been taken to the Cincuenta Clinic over in Santa Cruz. We ran all the way there, barefoot, her and me. On the way, we saw lots of things: kids impaled on sticks, all bloody. Women and men lying in the street, others helping. When we got to the hospital, it was worse. There were people covered with blood, dirt and blood dripping off them, babies, pregnant women, old ladies, dead people already covered up in sheets, people who came in with their skulls cracked open, people with no arms. Horrible, horrible.

## ISRAEL

I was six years old when the earthquake fucked everything up. Mario and I lived with my Grandma Alicia and my uncle Jorge, right at the front of the *vecindad*. There was a loft in my grandma's house, with two beds. That's where we were sleeping. Back then, we would get up early. My uncle Jorge would go to work, and he always left us money for some empanadas from Don Poncho's, around the corner from here. That day, we woke up and my uncle was in the loft. I don't remember if he was putting on his shirt or his sweater or what when my brother Mario said to me, "Güey, ask him to leave us something for the empanadas." So I asked him, "Uncle, how about it? You gonna leave us something for an empanada?" "Yeah, gimme a second." But suddenly there was shaking and boom! the shitshow started. My uncle threw himself over us and pow! the roof falls in, and the steel rods from the loft and everything fall onto his back. Look at his back now, it's all full of holes and scars. After that, I remember some relative from around here pulled us out. We were

out! And when you turned around to look, you realized it was an utter disaster. I was stunned. The whole damn city fell in, like in those movies of Germany when everything's destroyed by the bombs. It was just rubble, buildings fallen down, people crying, people running.

They moved us to Cinco de Mayo *colonia* with Patricia's folks. My Ma stayed in the house to wait and see what would happen to our place. A few days later, we came back to live in camps, houses made from cardboard and wood. We had nothing. We didn't have any clothes, we didn't even have anything to eat. Real bad shit. Me and my brothers were little. Back then, only my oldest sister Mariana had moved out to live with her husband and my oldest brother Alfredo with his wife Patricia. My mama was the only one working to support the rest of us. She always knew when the aid trucks were coming with sugar, beans. She was always running with buckets and bags so that they would give us drinking water.

## GREGORIA

We all lived right in the street, and that's the damn truth. When I made it out, I was naked. Well, I was wearing what I was wearing, but with no shoes on. Everything got left inside. What were you going to get out? My children went to Patricia's house. She's Alfredo's wife. They were there with her parents at the Cinco de Mayo *colonia*, but then we heard that they were going to fix everything for us and I had to bring them back with me real quick so they could be seen, otherwise they wouldn't have given me anything. They put us in an empty lot that must have been about thirty years old. It was full of garbage, animals, rats. That's where the drunks were living, though nobody realized it until an ambulance came and took them away. Later, they even said the rats crawled up into their rectums. Well, they brought some machines in to clean out the trash. They made us little rooms with some beams and some rubber they brought, and we moved in there. There were five hundred rats at the very least. And scorpions, too. None of them stung any of the children because we bought bags of powdered lime and threw it everywhere. They brought us coffee, rice, a few barrels of water, clothes, kotex pads, diapers, money, spoons, plates, canned food. They supported us, because nobody had anything. We lived in the empty lot for a year.

The owner of the *vecindad* was around forty, fifty years old. All the *vecindades* on Ferrocarril Avenue belonged to him. When they collapsed, the government expropriated all of them but this one. We went to see the old man, and it turned out he wanted to sell us the empty lot for

fifteen thousand pesos. But we didn't have the money, so he said we should move out so he could make it a parking lot. One night, the people from the Baptist Church came and they asked us, "How many people live here?" "There are fifteen families," I said. "Keep quiet," they said, "because the government closed off all the highways to keep us from helping you." Solomon came over, a short little guy with a beard and dark skin. He was the number one pastor for the Baptists, the heavy hitter, the *chingón de los chingones*. He says hello to me and he tells us they're going to help us and everything, and I tell him, "Ay! If you don't really help us, I'll cut your balls off." They went and they bought the lot, and they built the *vecindad* that we have today. No, forget about it, the Baptist Church's real *chingón*.

I was the one running around up and down. I went around with all the engineers. We were all women, 'cause few of us had husbands. All us whores were alone; we were all widows, dumped and abandoned. Señora Yola was alone, Señora María Eugenia was alone, Berta, my mama, Doña Fía were alone. I was always alone. I had my stand and I sold my tacos and beer all night. The only one who had a husband was Rocío. He was a construction worker who worked at the Tolteca cement plant. Before the earthquake, they had a house and an *accesoria* in the *vecindad*. I remember one day there was a meeting. We sat on upside-down buckets. It was with the Licenciada Marisela, a Japanese-type woman. She was from the Baptist Church, but she also worked at the Oriente prison. She talked nice, she was good people, but at the same time, she was a real hard-ass. So she started to say, "Rocío, you get a house." And then she looks at me and she says, "Gregoria, tell me: what do you want, a house or an *accesoria*?" And I say, "Ay, give me my *accesoria*." "How many children do you have?" "Well, I have seven of them." "And where are they going to sleep?" "Don't you worry, I'll find a place for them to sleep. But this is what I live off. You know, Licenciada, that I sell tacos." I'd never had a house, before I lived in a little room. I had my loft, I had my kitchen, and I had my bathroom. My mind couldn't even think about a house, I just wanted the *accesoria*. And she turns around and says, "You know what, Gregoria Rosales? A house *and* an *accesoria*." You should have seen Rocío, "No fucking way, Licenciada, how is that possible? My husband works at such and such a place. And look at his salary, we can pay for it, but her, she's alone and she has lots of kids and she can't pay for it." Right there in front of everybody. And Marisela goes, "Well guess what, Señora, if I say that Señora Gregoria gets a house and an *accesoria*, then she does, because I said so." "The thing is, I had both," answers Rocío. "The thing is, I told her that she gets both, and I have my reasons," says the Licenciada. Rocío was pissed. "That's fucking bull-

shit!" "You wanna talk like that? I can talk like that too. I'm from Santa Julia, and I'm a bad bitch too. How do you like that?" And she throws the papers at her, "If you don't like it, if you don't want a house, sign and say you renounce it. Sign it!" "No miss, I . . ." "There you go, then. Like I said, I'm only giving you one." She gave her only one, and me, she gave me my two houses.

After a while they put up the houses. We had to pay for them because the goddamn government wouldn't give us the green light for them to be donated. It wasn't much, but the point was you had to pay something so they would stop their bullshit. The day they gave us the keys, they brought in some mariachis and we had a *barbacoa*. The Baptists paid for all of it. When they gave us the keys, Solomon said to me, "See, I gave you your house, so now you don't have to cut anything off me!" He laughed real hard; he hadn't forgotten what I said to him.

Things changed when they gave us the houses. Everyone got a stick up their ass, "Ay, my apartment." And they didn't want the kids to play in the courtyard anymore because they made too much noise. The damn bricks have changed but you're still the same. The Baptists had also bought the lot next to here to make a kindergarten, so that we Esperanza mamas could put our kids in there. They asked a lady to have her son watch the place for them in the meantime they were building the *vecindad*. Well, those bastards agreed to watch it and all of a sudden they put in the papers; they started paying the land taxes and for the water. They put everything in their name, and they ended up with everything. Also, there wasn't enough money. Apparently the engineers were stealing it, and the architects, and everyone who was part of building the houses, because later the cops came looking for them to put them in jail. That's why the people from the Baptist Church left. They got bored because they realized that everyone was stealing from them. I never saw them again.