PERSONAL HISTORY

# THE WAVE

*A tragedy in Mexico.*

**By Francisco Goldman**

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Aura Estrada in Mazunte, Mexico, in 2004. “We have everything we need to be happy,” she told the author. “Do you know how lucky we are?” COURTESY FRANCISCO GOLDMAN

It was July, 2007. The house I'd rented in Mazunte, a beach town in Oaxaca, on the Pacific coast of Mexico, was large enough to accommodate the several friends who my wife, Aura Estrada, and I were hoping would spend at least part of the two weeks there with us and Aura's *prima* Fabiola—Fabis—and her boyfriend, Juanca. Originally, Aura's friend Mariana was going to come, too, but she was having a hard time making ends meet and told us that she couldn't afford a vacation. She said that she didn't want to go to Mazunte anyway, because the waves were too rough. What? But Mazunte is a safe beach! That's how we unanimously answered Mariana. Because Mazunte is situated in a curving cove that impedes the waves enough to diminish their size, momentum, and strength, it's considered safe for swimmers. Nearby Puerto Escondido, Ventanilla, and San Agustinillo, open to the ocean, are the dangerous beaches. You take your life in your hands when you swim at one of them. But we all loved Mazunte. The waves could be rough there, but they didn't scare me. They seemed about the same as those at Wellfleet, on Cape Cod, where I'd learned to bodysurf as a teen-ager.

A few years before I met Aura, I'd gone to Puerto Escondido with some friends for the millennial New Year. When we got there, people were talking about a rogue wave that had dashed three surfers into the cliffs at the far end of the beach the day before, killing them. My first morning, I went swimming and then to breakfast at a café on the beach, where the waiter told me that the last time he'd gone into the ocean there he'd come out bleeding from both ears. That night, in my hotel room, I lay in bed listening to the waves, which now sounded to me as if they were grinding bones.

I didn't go into the water at Puerto Escondido again until more than four years later, when Aura and I took a surfing lesson while spending a three-day weekend there. A wave caught me by surprise as I was crouching on my board and drove me off the front. My head struck the sandy bottom with a force that stunned me, sending a hard jolt through my spine. Shaken and wobbly, I went and sat on the beach. The instructor laughed. He said that Aura was a more natural surfer than I

was. She was stretched out on a board, and the instructor, standing in the waist-high water, was pulling her around like a child on a sled, then releasing her to ride in on the gliding foam of waves that had broken farther out. It turned out that he wasn't an authorized instructor. He'd lied to us and borrowed the surfboards without permission from the shop of a friend who ran a legitimate surfing school. Our lesson ended when the friend's mother ran onto the beach shouting at him that he was going to get us killed and to bring the boards back that instant.

That was the weekend that I proposed to Aura. We had been together for almost a year by then, and were living together in Brooklyn, despite the difference in our ages and situations: she was a twenty-seven-year-old from Mexico City, a graduate student in Latin American literature on a Fulbright scholarship at Columbia; I was forty-nine, born in Boston, the son of Guatemalan and Russian immigrants, working as a journalist and writing a novel. I'd brought a diamond engagement ring with me on our trip, and had hidden it in the safe-deposit box in our room, waiting for the right moment to bring it out. Every morning, Aura and I took the microbus to the beach in Mazunte, and I considered trying to propose there. But where could I safely hide the ring while I went swimming? I always worried about thieves on that beach.

By the last evening of the trip, I still hadn't proposed. My neck was stiff and aching from our surfing lesson. I'd come down with a cold, and the bad shrimp I'd eaten the night before was giving me stomach cramps. All I could have for dinner at the hotel restaurant was a bowl of chicken soup, and I was nursing a Margarita. Still, I couldn't go back to Mexico City, where we were spending the summer, without having proposed. I excused myself from the table and went to our room. A light rain was falling, one of those warm tropical drizzles which feel like the moisture-saturated air inside a cloud, as soft as silk against your face. It might be even more romantic, I thought, to propose outside on the beach in this rain. I took the ring in its little box out of the safe and put it in my pocket. Aura came into the room. "Let's go out to the beach," I said. "Why?" she said. "I don't want to go out

to the beach. It's raining." "It's barely a drizzle," I said. "Come on, we have to go to the beach. I have to ask you something." She looked at my hand in my pocket and grinned. "Ask me here," she said, laughing. "*Ay*, *mi amor*, what do you have in your pocket?" "This is serious," I said, and I pulled the box out of my pocket and dropped to one knee.

One of those mornings, on the microbus to Mazunte, we rode with a Mexican man who was living in Sweden and had returned for a vacation with his Swedish wife. He sat across the aisle from Aura and kept up an ebullient monologue about Mexico and its beaches. Sweden has a lot going for it but no beaches like Mazunte! He even chanted a long list of tropical fruits that grew on that coast, including, he emphasized, five different kinds of banana. He had never actually been to Mazunte. He and his wife were both wearing straw cowboy hats that looked brand new. His nerdy bumpkin quality delighted Aura—*the best beaches in the world! five different kinds of banana!*

We were sitting on the beach a little later when a commotion broke out. There were shouts for help and swimmers running to the aid of someone who'd had an accident. We went, too, and saw the Mexican from Sweden lying face down in a few inches of pooled water, flailing and kicking as if he were drowning. He was carried up onto the beach and set down on the sand, where he lay coughing, sputtering, gasping, his wife crouched alongside. Someone told us what had happened. He'd been knocked over by a wave and, apparently disoriented by the rush of surf, had swallowed water and panicked, even as the wave receded, having practically deposited him on the beach. He was fine. We went back to our chairs. Eventually, we saw him and his wife trudge past us, cowboy hats back on, carrying their things. We said goodbye, but only the wife replied; he stared morosely down at the sand. Later, we occasionally laughed at the memory of the Mexican-Swede—a funny-sad story about the dangers of a certain kind of naïve enthusiasm rather than about danger itself.

For our trip in the summer of 2007, we had reserved tickets on a Monday-night first-class bus from Mexico City to Puerto Escondido, which had seats that converted almost into beds. Juanca had to work that week but would join us at the weekend. The Friday before we were due to leave, Aura, who was now enrolled in an M.F.A. course in addition to her Ph.D. program, gave me a draft of a short story she was working on, "*La vida está en otra parte*," about a wayward teacher. I found a lot in it to praise, but I told her that I thought she'd rushed the ending. The next day, at one in the afternoon, I was just leaving the gym when I got a message from Aura on my BlackBerry: "Fabiola is here . . . I made her eggs and coffee for breakfast. I'm still drinking coffee and working on my story which has already changed a lot. Did you really mean it last night when you said that I'm an artist? Or were you just flirting and working me up????"

I wrote back, "*Claro que eres una artista mi amor de máxima sensibilidad e inteligencia*." ("Of course you're an artist, my love, of maximum sensibility and intelligence.")

The exchange reminded me of a conversation we'd had on our first date, almost four years earlier.

"That's a robot?"

Aura was showing me a drawing she'd made of a pair of lace-up shoes surrounded by tiny handwritten notations, sketched patterns of angular and undulating lines. "They're shoes that come when you call them," she said.

"You mean you call out, 'Shoes, come here,' and they come walking to you wherever you are?"

"Yeah," she said. "Well, you can't be too far away. And they can't go up and down stairs."

Aura Estrada, in Massachusetts, in 2006. *COURTESY FRANCISCO GOLDMAN* COURTESY FRANCISCO GOLDMAN

We were sitting on the couch of the apartment where she'd grown up, in Copilco. Her notebook was open on her lap. The shoes were her invention, though still no more than an idea. The robotics would be built into the shoes, she explained. The engineering of the walk was complicated, but imagine it, she told me, as "a synchronized iambic pentameter."

"That's a pretty awesome invention," I said. She dipped her head like a proud circus pony and said thank you. We had met in New York, nine months before, when we both attended a reading given by a mutual acquaintance. Aura was living in Providence then, studying on a fellowship at Brown. We had exchanged information, and I'd sent her a copy of my most recent novel but had never heard back. I'd told myself, She must have hated the book. But that's all right—she's way

too young. You really have to forget about her. Then, in late August, she had unexpectedly appeared in El Mitote, a dingy bohemian and cokehead hangout on the edge of the Condesa, in Mexico City. (I rented a cheap apartment in the neighborhood and spent time there whenever I could get away from New York.) I was drinking at the bar with friends, and there she was, standing before me. I felt as if I were staring at her through a thick haze—the cigarette smoke in the air, my inebriation, my shy amazement. "How come you never answered the e-mail I sent you?" she asked. I said that I'd never received an e-mail from her. She'd sent me an e-mail, she insisted, in which she'd thanked me for the book, and told me that she was coming back to New York. I didn't think she was the kind of person who wouldn't say thank you for a book, did I? "Well, I don't know what happened to that e-mail," I said. "It must have got lost."

Aura was leaving for New York in three days, she told me, to begin her studies at Columbia. That news lit a silent burst of sparks in me. I'd be flying back, too, in two weeks. "Then there's no time for us to get together before you go," I said, but she said, "Why not? There's time." And we agreed to meet for dinner the following night.

On the couch, she turned more pages in her notebook until she came to one that was filled with writing in turquoise ballpoint ink. This was a short story she'd recently finished. "Do you want to hear it?" she asked. "It's really short, only four pages." I said of course, and she read it to me. The story was about a young man in an airport who couldn't remember if he was there because he was arriving or because he was going somewhere. It was written in a minimalist lonely-airport tone, with a sweet, deadpan humor. I wasn't concentrating very well, though. At dinner, I'd already begun casting my hopes forward, plotting how soon I could see Aura in New York. Then she had taken me by surprise, inviting me back to her apartment. Had she only wanted to read me a story? Sitting close to her, I watched her lips form the words, and wondered if I was really going to kiss them in the next few minutes, or hours, or ever.

Aura's parents had moved out of the apartment and into a new place a year before. All they had left behind in the living room was the couch we were sitting on and the round dining table, metallic gray and white, where Aura had sat through thousands of family meals. Most of her books and things were already packed into cardboard boxes.

When Aura finished reading, I told her that I really liked the story, and she asked me why. While I spoke, she held herself perfectly still, as if she could hear my pulse and was measuring it like a polygraph. Then she told me that I'd only said what I'd said because I liked her. I laughed and said, "It's definitely true that I like you, but I liked the story, too, honestly." We began to kiss, and ended up in her bed. I was so surprised by this development that I felt like a puppy romping in a field of tulips. But then she asked if I minded if she kept her jeans on. I said, "That's O.K. with me, really, no big hurry." A while later, we fell asleep in each other's arms. On her ceiling were hundreds of little glow-in-the-dark stars.

In the morning, when I was in the bathroom, she leaned out of bed and took my wallet out of my pants on the floor. When I came back in, she was holding my driver's license. She looked up and exclaimed, "Forty-eight!"

"Yup," I said, embarrassed. She was twenty-six.

"I thought you were at least ten years younger," she said. "I guessed you were thirty-six."

"Thanks, I guess I'm supposed to say," I said.

Aura moved in with me in Brooklyn about six weeks after she arrived in New York, and two years later we were married. Because I usually worked from home, I rarely had to leave the neighborhood, but for Aura the commute was long. From my place, in Carroll Gardens, she'd walk twenty-five minutes to the Borough Hall subway station, and then ride the train at least an hour to get to

Columbia. In winter, the trek could be brutally cold. I finally persuaded her to let me buy her one of those hooded North Face down coats, swaddling her from the top of her head to below her knees in goose-down-puffed blue nylon. "No, *mi amor*, it doesn't make you look fat, not you in particular. Everybody looks like a walking sleeping bag in these, and who cares, anyway?" I said. With the hood up, and her gleaming black eyes, she looked like a little Iroquois girl walking around in her own papoose. She hardly ever went out into the cold without it.

Another complication of the long commute was that Aura regularly got lost. She'd absent-mindedly miss her stop or take the train in the wrong direction and, engrossed in her book, her thoughts, or her iPod, not notice until she was deep into Brooklyn. Then she'd call from a pay phone in some subway station I'd never heard of: "*Hola*, *mi amor*, well, here I am in the Beverley Road station. I went the wrong way again," her voice determinedly matter-of-fact, just another over-scheduled New Yorker coping with a routine dilemma of city life, but sounding a touch defeated anyhow.

From Aura's first day in our Brooklyn apartment to nearly her last, I walked her at least part of the way to the subway stop every morning, and often she tried to coax me farther, or even up to Columbia with her. I'd spend the morning in Butler Library, reading or writing. We'd have lunch at Ollie's, then go and blow money on DVDs and CDs at Kim's, or browse in Labyrinth Books, emerging with heavy bags of books that neither of us had the time to read. On the days when I didn't accompany her to Columbia, she'd sometimes phone and ask me to come all the way up there for lunch, and, as often as not, I'd go. Aura would say, "Francisco, I didn't get married to eat lunch by myself. I didn't get married to spend time by myself."

On those morning walks to the subway, Aura always did most of the talking—about her classes, her professors, the other students, some new idea for a short story or a novel, or her mother. When she was being especially *neuras*, going on

about her anxieties, I'd try to come up with new encouragements or else rephrase prior ones. But I especially loved it when she was in the mood to stop every few steps and kiss and nip at my lips like a baby tiger, and the way she'd complain, "*Ya no me quieres, verdad*?," if I wasn't holding her hand or didn't have my arm around her the instant she wanted me to. I loved our ritual except when I worried: How am I ever going to get another damn book written with this woman making me walk her to the subway every morning and cajoling me into coming up to Columbia to have lunch with her?

Degraw Street, where we lived, supposedly marks the border between Carroll Gardens and Cobble Hill. When I first moved there, about four years before I met Aura, Carroll Gardens seemed like a classic Brooklyn Italian neighborhood, with its old-fashioned restaurants where mobsters and politicians used to eat, lawn statues of the Virgin, old men playing bocce in the playground, and, especially on summer nights, so many loud tough-guy types milling around that I always felt a little menaced walking through there. Cobble Hill was where Winston Churchill's mother was born, and it still looked the part, with its landmark Episcopalian church and its quaint carriage-house mews. By the time Aura moved in, the two neighborhoods had pretty much blended together, both overtaken mostly by prosperous white people. By day, you wove through long crooked lines of baby strollers on the Court Street sidewalks, and ate lunch or went for coffee in places filled with young moms and au pairs, and an embarrassing number of writers. A few blocks away was Red Hook, the harbor and the port; at night, we could hear

the ships' foghorns. Aura loved that; she'd nestle closer in bed and lie still, as if the long mournful blasts were floating past us like manta rays in the dark.

Our apartment was the parlor floor of a four-story brownstone. Back when the Italian family that still owned the building had lived there, the parlor would have been their living room, but it was our bedroom. It had such tall ceilings that to change a light bulb in the hanging lamp I'd climb a five-foot stepladder, then stand on tiptoe atop its rickety pinnacle, arms flapping, fighting for balance. Aura, watching from her desk, in the corner, said, "You look like an amateur bird."

With the exception of the table where I wrote, in the corner of the middle room, between the kitchen and the bedroom, and some of the old bookshelves, Aura and I slowly replaced all the furniture from my slovenly bachelor years. It frustrated Aura that we hadn't moved into a new apartment, free of traces and reminders of my past without her, though she did completely transform the apartment we had. Sometimes I'd come home and find her pushing even the heaviest furniture around, changing the crowded layout in a way that had never occurred to me, as if the apartment were a kind of complicated puzzle whose solution was the perfect arrangement of furniture.

In our kitchen, Aura's Hello Kitty toaster branded every piece of toast with the Hello Kitty logo. One year, she bought a Cuisinart ice-cream maker just so that she could make dulce-de-leche ice cream for her birthday party—her thirtieth. By then, we had acquired a long dining table with extensions at both ends that provided enough space for the twenty-plus friends who came that day. We made *cochinita pibil*—soft pork oozing citrus-and-achiote-spiced juices inside a wrapping of banana leaves roasted parchment dry—and *rajas con crema* and *arroz verde*, and there was a gorgeously garish birthday cake from a Mexican bakery in Sunset Park, with white, orange, and pink frosting, and fruit slices in a glazed ring on top. Few people who'd known me or Aura before we met would have guessed that either of us had a talent for such domestic life.

Often in the mornings, when Aura had just woken up, she would turn to me in bed and say, "*Ay, mi amor*, *que feo eres. Por qué me casé contigo*?"—her voice sweet and impish. "Oh, my love, how ugly you are. Why did I marry you?"

"*Soy feo*?" I would ask sadly. This was one of our routines.

"*Sí*, *mi amor*," she'd say, "*eres feo*, *pobrecito*." And she'd kiss me, and I'd smile the giddy smile that you can see in all the photographs of me from those years, a goofy grin that never left my face, not even when I was reciting my wedding vows.

There was a week or so, in 2005, months before our wedding, when Aura lay awake every night, worrying that she was condemning herself to a miserable early widowhood by marrying me. I'd wake and find her staring into the dark beside me, her warm insomnia breath like pulling open the door of an oven. Wasn't it logical to assume that I would die at least twenty years before she did? Shouldn't she think ahead, spare herself that ordeal? We talked about it more than once. I told her, "Don't worry, *mi amor*, I won't stick around longer than seventy-five, I promise. Then you'll still be in your early fifties, you'll still be beautiful, and probably famous, and some younger guy will want to marry you for sure." "You promise?" she'd say, cheered up, or at least pretending to be, and I'd promise. "You'd better keep your word, Francisco," she'd say, "because I don't want to be a lonely old widow." "But even if I don't die by seventy-five," I'd say, "you can just warehouse me somewhere and go and live your life. Really, I don't care. As long as we have children, I won't care that much. Just give me a kid, one kid, that's all I want." And she'd say, "O.K., but I want five kids. Or maybe three."

One afternoon, the spring she turned thirty, Aura looked over at me from her desk while I lay on the bed reading, and said, "We have everything we need to be happy. We don't have to be rich. We can get jobs in universities if we need them. We have our books, our reading, our writing, and we have each other. Frank, we don't need more to be happy. We are so lucky. Do you know how lucky we are?"

Another day, late that spring, Aura announced that she'd decided she wasn't going to be one of those women who, in their thirties, are consumed with being as thin as they were in their twenties; she was going to allow herself to be *rellenita*, a little filled out. Did I have a problem with that?

By the time I got back to our apartment in the Condesa that Saturday in July, 2007, Aura and Fabis were in a state of high excitement. Fabis had been on the phone to a friend who'd just returned from Mazunte and who said that the weather was great, but we'd better go today, because it was going to rain later in the week. Aura and Fabis hadn't been able to change our reservation—all the buses were booked—so they had concocted a circuitous route. We'd take a bus to Oaxaca, stay overnight, then fly to Puerto Escondido in the morning, a short hop over the cordillera, on a small airline called AeroVega. We'd lose our original bus tickets, but we had to get to the beach while the weather was still good. Hurry up and pack!

Should I have fought this new plan? "No, *Ow-rra*, we've already paid for bus tickets—we need to stop throwing money away! And I have a doctor's appointment on Monday." I said those things, but not very forcefully.

By the time we pulled into Oaxaca, the streets and plazas were deserted and dark, and we had to be up at five-thirty to go to the airport. We spent the night in a hostel. In my male dorm, a few other travellers were already asleep in their bunks, and I moved about as quietly as I could, without turning on any lights. I had only one thin blanket. I slept in a T-shirt and jeans in the hard narrow bed and was angry with myself for having given in so easily to this roundabout and wasteful rush to the beach. Why was Aura so impatient?

Where, as we slept that night, was Aura's wave in its long journey to Mazunte? Having done some research on waves since then, I know that it already existed. Most surface waves of any decent size travel thousands of miles

before they reach the shore. Wind blows ripples across a calm sea, and those ripples, providing the wind with something to get traction on, are blown into waves, and, as the waves grow in height, the wind pushes them along with more force, speeding them up, building them higher. It's not the water itself that travels, of course, but the wind's energy; in the turbulent medium between air and ocean, water particles move in circles like bicycle pedals, constantly transferring their energy forward, from swell to crest and back into the trough, then forward again. Aura's wave could easily have had its start a week or more before she encountered it, during a storm in the warm seas of the South Pacific. Where was it that night, as we slept in our bunks in Oaxaca?

There's a Borges poem that ends with the lines:

*¿Quién es el mar, quién soy? Lo sabré el*

*día*

*Ulterior que sucede a la agonía.*

Who is the sea, who am I?

I'll know the day that follows the agony.

Was I the wave?

We reached the house in Mazunte at about noon the next day. At the end of a jungle-lined alley was a gate that we unlocked, and we climbed several levels of stairs to the house, which was like a Swiss Family Robinson tree house nestled amid sprawling branches in a tropical forest. There were a few roofed patio areas, and Aura chose the largest, pushing furniture around, quickly creating a self-contained writing studio. I took a smaller shaded deck, one level lower. Fabis, a graphic designer, was adamantly on vacation, and didn't need a work area.

The author and Aura at their wedding, in 2005. "I don't want to be a lonely old widow," she said. *Photograph by Rachel Cobb* Photograph by Rachel Cobb

We swam in the ocean that afternoon. It was overcast, and there had been a rainstorm the night before—the first rain in weeks. Nobody we spoke to had heard that more rain was forecast for the coming days. But the storm was why the water was cloudy and full of plant debris, twiggy and grassy little clusters. Though Aura had been to these beaches often and loved going into the water, she was always afraid of the waves; that day, they were not very big. Still, she clung to my arm and made me wait with her at the water's edge, studying wave sets and timing them, until we went running in. Afloat in the water, she'd throw her arms around my neck and hold on until she felt ready to swim out, diving beneath waves until she was past where they broke, where the water was smoother. Aura loved to stay out there, tirelessly swimming back and forth, like a friendly seal.

"*El agua está picada hoy*," Aura said. "The water is choppy today." Between the swells were many smaller waves, little splashing bursts, as if stones were being dropped from the sky all around us. There were other swimmers in the water,

bodysurfing: young men, mostly, adolescents and boys. I swam in closer to catch a wave. I missed a few and then timed one well, launching forward and swimming hard ahead of the wave's cresting curl, letting it catch and carry me, my arms extended, head up and out of the water, just ahead of its roaring break, until I was finally engulfed by it, thrilled by the force and speed with which it propelled me almost onto the beach. As I swam back out to Aura, I wore a proud grin.

"Is it dangerous?" Aura asked. Her curiosity about bodysurfing had been aroused. She was a much better swimmer than her husband. If I could bodysurf, why couldn't she?

"It is dangerous if your head gets driven into the sand," I said. "You always have to keep your head up."

Getting out of the water, too, she held onto me until the smaller wave she'd been waiting for shoved her forward and then she let go and scampered up onto the beach through the churning foam.

We went to bed early that night, climbing up onto a sleeping platform on the roof, where the breeze off the ocean made the leaves in the trees all around us rustle like a restless sea. We woke in the morning to a cacophony of birdsong and squawks, and to a view of the bay's rounded arc and the Pacific spread out beyond, merging with the blue haze of the sky. We climbed down, leaving Fabis still sleeping. Aura was eager to get to work at her computer. We made coffee and Aura cut up some papaya.

When I remember that day, the only whole one we'd have at the beach, it seems like two days, or even three; it passed so slowly, as time should on vacation. What did I work on that morning? I don't even remember. Maybe the novel I'd been trying to start. I also had a book to review, a new translation from the Portuguese of a six-hundred-page nineteenth-century novel, "The Maias," by Eça de Queirós. I sat at a crudely carpentered wooden desk in the shade, watching hummingbirds

buzz around the flowers and feeling a little envious of the concentration with which Aura was already working, and of how much nicer the work area she'd set up for herself was than mine. At about ten-thirty, we all went for breakfast at the Armadillo, a little restaurant below our *callejón*. Then we went to the beach.

I don't recall bodysurfing that day; if I did, I didn't get a good ride. The red cloth banner warning against swimming must have been up on its pole, because it always was, every day. Not even the beach waiter I eventually asked about it knew why, or even who was in charge of it.

That evening, we had dinner on the beach. It was a wonderful night: the deep-blue phosphorescent evening, the brightly glimmering strings of lights around the outdoor restaurants, the butane torches flaring an incandescent orange. The night darkened to purple and finally hid the ocean. Rock music on restaurant speakers mixed with the steady percussion of the waves. We shared two mediocre pizzas and two pitchers of watery Margaritas, and were very happy. We felt as if we possessed a kind of wealth, a small fortune in saved-up nights on the beach like this one.

In the morning, Fabis went off to do some errand, and Aura and I got to make love, though not for long, sweetly but anxiously—Aura was nervous about Fabis coming back. When we were dressed, and had climbed down the ladder to the kitchen, she put her lips to my ear and told me that soon we were going to be making love all the time to make our baby. I felt so charged up and optimistic.

Aura was working well that morning. I went upstairs and saw her at her laptop, typing, headphones on. Later, as we were walking to the beach, she said, "I'm writing a really great story." It was unlike Aura to speak that way, but she said it with shy conviction. The next day, she might have felt discouraged again. But something was definitely happening for her. The story she was working on had improved drastically in only a few days; that morning, she left it nearly finished—

close enough, in fact, that it was eventually published. She'd been working so hard all year: why shouldn't it have happened right then, that "click," when suddenly you feel as if a previously locked door had opened, and words and sentences seem to exist in a new dimension?

An unforgettable aspect of that nearly cloudless day was the surprisingly large number of people at the beach, and how many of them were in the water, including small children. Sitting in our chairs, we watched the bodysurfers. Aura kept commenting on their skills. A pair of young guys, light-skinned, well built, who looked like brothers, were the best out there, skimming over the ocean surface, expertly poised on the edge of their waves, arms out, like flying superheroes. We'd been into the water at least twice already, and each time we'd tried to catch waves, but I'd had only one short ride; I rarely timed it right.

I didn't like the look of the young guy, long-haired, whippet thin, crudely tattooed, a piercing beneath his lower lip, who took the chair right next to ours. Why sit so close? Then his friend came and laid out a towel in front of him. Aura said she wanted to go back into the water. Again?

"But look how crowded the water is," I said. It still surprises me that Aura wasn't repulsed by the crowds. The water actually looked stippled with the heads of swimmers, and she was usually hypersensitive to that—she could barely even look at a surface that was densely patterned in that way, daubed, striated, without a shiver of revulsion going through her.

I whispered to her that I didn't want to leave all our things within easy reach of the creepy guys beside us. Aura whispered back that she was sure they wouldn't steal anything. They were just beach hippies.

"You two go in," I said.

"Come on," both Aura and Fabis pleaded. "The water's great today. Come with us!"

"No," I said. "I'm going to skip this one. I want to read."

Aura was wearing the wetsuit bootees she'd bought for the trip, which gave her a slightly waddling gait, and made it harder for her to keep up with Fabis, who was much taller, as they walked down to the water's edge. Aura was swinging her arms a bit to speed herself along, her head tilted up at Fabis while she talked, happily, excitedly. From behind, in her blue bathing suit, she looked just a little egg-shaped, much more so than she actually was. What an adorable, funny, beautiful person my Aura is, I thought.

This is the moment that decided everything: if I am the wave, this is when I begin to crest, with an aching surge of love inside my chest. Even if it had been only the prelude to an inconsequential swim, I'm sure I would still remember that moment. I said to myself, I promise to stop feeling annoyed with Aura, with her insecurities, with her need for reassurance. Who gives a fuck? My God, I'm going to love her more than ever and of course I'll go and swim with her right now. Next I turned my attention to securing my things against thievery, without being too obvious about it. I put my wallet, T-shirt, sandals, and book, which I would never again open, into my cloth Gandhi bookstore bag and looped the bag's handles around a chair leg that I firmly planted in the sand. I could see Aura and Fabis up to their shoulders in the water, facing each other, ducking waves, bobbing back up. I ran down the beach over the searing sand and into the ocean.

As soon as I reached Aura and Fabis in the water, we decided to try to bodysurf. I caught a wave about as well as I ever catch one, and came up fifteen or twenty yards away, exhilarated, thrusting my arms in the air. Fabis tried to catch the next wave, and missed it. The wave after that rose toward us as if pushed by an invisible bulldozer, and I heard Aura shout, "I'm getting this one!"

"I'm getting this one!" Her cheerful, plucky voice suffused with her last ever impulse of delight.

I saw her launch herself and thought, as I dived under the wave, that it seemed bigger, heavier, somehow more sluggish than the others, and I felt a twinge of fear. (Or is that just a trick of memory?) I came up amid a wide swathe of seething foam—the water looked as if it were boiling. Fabis was next to me. "Did you catch it?" I asked her, and she said, "No, did you?" but I was already looking around for Aura. "Where's Aura?" I didn't see her. Bewildered, I swept my gaze back and forth over the teeming surface, waiting for her head to pop up, gasping, her hands brushing hair and water out of her eyes. But she wasn't in the water.

Then I saw her. The withdrawing foam uncovered her like a white blanket slowly pulled back: her smooth, round back and shoulders. She was floating, motionless, face down in the water. I reached Aura an instant or two before three or four other swimmers, and we hoisted and carried her onto the beach. How heavy she was. We set her down on her back on the sand. She was unconscious, water dribbling from her nostrils. But then she opened her eyes. People were shouting, "Don't move her!" She gasped that she couldn't breathe. Someone shouted, "Give her mouth to mouth!" and I brought my lips to hers. I blew in, and felt the hot breath slowly push back into me. I was surprised at the steepness of the beach; it was if we were in a gulley. Had it been like that earlier? A wave came in and almost covered her. Several pairs of hands picked her up, and she slipped from all our grasps, and we grabbed her again, and carried her up onto the hot dry sand. "A doctor, an ambulance," I was pleading. I had to stay by her. She said, "Help me breathe," and I put my mouth against hers. She whispered, "That was too hard," and after the next breath, "Like that." Somebody, maybe Fabis, said that it was *susto*, fright, that was making it hard for her to breathe, that once she calmed down

she'd be able to breathe, and I repeated to her, "Aura, you've had a terrible fright—that's why you can't breathe. When you calm down you'll be able to." Fabis went to get help. Just before she took off, Aura said to me, "*Quiéreme mucho*, *mi amor*."
"Love me a lot, my love."

She couldn't move her limbs, nor did she have any feeling in them. She told me this with the utmost composure, as if she believed that, if she kept very cool and still, the horror might decide to move on to some other prey. I told her that it was only temporary, that soon the feeling would start coming back. I was holding her hand, squeezing it, but she couldn't feel my squeezes. She was caked in sand. Somebody—he sounded German—kept stating with authority that she shouldn't be moved. "*Aire*," Aura said, whenever she needed me to help her breathe. The word came off her lips like a bubble quietly popping.

"*No quiero morir*," she said. "I don't want to die."
"Of course you're not going to die, my love, don't be silly." Squeezing her hand, stroking the hair off her forehead. My lips to hers, in, out, wait, in, out, wait . . .

Somehow the doctor found us before Fabis found him. He was a wiry young man who looked like a surfer. Maybe he was a medical student, not a doctor. Fabis came back with the news that there was only one ambulance on that whole stretch of coast, and it was currently two hours away.

"*Aire*," Aura whispered.

The young doctor took control. We couldn't afford to wait two hours, he said. We had to get Aura to the nearest hospital, in Pochutla, about twenty kilometres away. A man volunteered to drive her to the hospital in his S.U.V. We would use a surfboard as a stretcher and load Aura into the back. When the doctor asked for help, some of the young men standing around us moved away as if a blowtorch were being held to their feet, but others came forward to kneel around Aura and carefully lifted her as a surfboard was slid beneath her, and we carried her on the

board to the S.U.V. In the back, I crouched behind her head, holding it with both hands, trying to keep it from moving, while continuously bending forward to give her breath. The S.U.V. lurched from side to side on the rough dirt road, every rut like a deep ditch, and it was impossible to keep her completely still. A youth was crouched at the other end of the surfboard, as much to keep it from sliding out onto the road as to hold Aura's legs steady. For some reason, he had a green feather, and he was stroking it against the soles of Aura's feet and asking her if she felt anything. She whispered that she did, and I kept telling her that being able to feel the feather meant that everything was going to be O.K. The youth with the feather was praying for Aura. "You're like an angel," I told him. Finally, we hit paved road. About forty-five minutes after leaving the beach, we reached the hospital in Pochutla.

The hospital was on the town's outskirts, a flimsy one-story construction that looked like a rural elementary school. The emergency-care area was small and spartan. The staff kept Aura on the surfboard, which they laid atop a bed. They put a neck brace on her. But they didn't even have a respirator; I still had to help her breathe.

The first doctor who came to look at Aura was clearly an alcoholic, dishevelled, bleary, and utterly indifferent. Fabis was out in the waiting area, making a few last calls on her cell phone before its battery ran out. She tried to call Aura's mother, in Mexico City, but got her answering service. She couldn't reach Aura's stepfather, either. Her cell-phone charger was back at the house in Mazunte. She asked the S.U.V.'s owner if he could go and get it for her, and he said that he would. Extraordinarily, he came back with it in not much more than an hour.

Finally they brought a hand-operated respirator, and a nurse held the mouthpiece over Aura's lips while I, with both hands, rhythmically pressed the ovoid white plastic balloon that pumped air. After a while, I was told that I had to fill out forms, and a nurse took over the balloon, while I was led into a tiny cubicle with a desk to wait for another doctor. I phoned Aura's mother and got no answer, so I

sent an e-mail telling her that Aura had had a swimming accident, was in the hospital, and to please phone me or Fabiola immediately. My phone's battery was now very nearly gone. I e-mailed my lawyer friend, Andrew Kaufman, in New York, and others to ask for help in getting Aura medevaced to the United States. I was barefoot, in my bathing trunks and a T-shirt. Fabis had handed me the T-shirt. She'd also had the presence of mind to run and collect our things on the beach.

The second doctor was an old man with white hair and a mustache. He asked me questions for his forms and slowly typed my answers on a manual typewriter; the process seemed interminable. I thought I heard Aura calling for me and abruptly got up and left. When I got to Aura, there was a third doctor there, a husky young man with chubby cheeks and an air of benevolent intelligence. He was working the manual respirator now, calmly squeezing it between his hands and looking intently from Aura's face to the monitor attached to her. I asked if she had been calling for me, and the nurses said no, she was *tranquila*. He handed the balloon off to a nurse, and took me into the corridor to tell me that Aura needed to go to a hospital in Mexico City as quickly as possible, by air ambulance. Her heart rate had considerably slowed, he said, but they'd given her a shot of epinephrine and restored it to nearly normal. When I went back into her room, I was told to keep an eye on the monitor and say something if her heart rate sank below forty. When the doctor hammered under Aura's knees, there was a tiny reflex movement. He ran the hammer down the sole of her foot and asked her if she'd felt anything, and she said that she had. The nurses and I smiled at one another. Then the doctor pretended to do it again, swiping the hammer downward without actually touching her skin, and again Aura claimed to have felt it.

My memories of what happened that endless day will always be clouded and uncertain. I do know that Fabiola was constantly working her telephone, trying to arrange for the air ambulance. I went out to the corridor, where I'd left my book bag under a chair, to get my sandals and wallet; that's when I discovered that somebody, probably back at the beach, had stolen all my cash and then put the wallet back in the bag. I had one credit card, which the thief had left alone, an American Express card, useless in any Mexican A.T.M. My other cards were back at the house in Mazunte. I heard Fabis on her cell phone say plaintively but urgently, "But, Ma, imagine if it was me"—her mother had asked her if we could wait a day for the air ambulance. Fabis said, "Ma, she might not make it until tomorrow."

Finally, Fabis's family found an air-ambulance service in Toluca that would fly to nearby Huatulco to pick Aura up. It was already late afternoon, and they were rushing to a bank to withdraw the twelve thousand dollars in cash that the ambulance service was demanding. Fabis's sister had found a spinal-cord surgeon, the father of a friend, who was one of the very best in Mexico City, and who was waiting for Aura at the Hospital de los Ángeles, in Pedregal, one of the city's wealthiest areas. But there was a new problem: the air ambulance couldn't come because the Huatulco airport, which was closing for the night, was denying it permission to land.

The Huatulco airport official was named Fabiola, too. Over the phone, Fabis told her, "If my cousin dies, you're going to have that on your conscience the rest of

your life." Kaufman, my lawyer friend in New York, was also applying pressure. His law firm had worked on corporate cases with one of the most powerful lawyers in Mexico, and he had persuaded that lawyer to call the Huatulco airport. After the call, the Huatulco Fabiola relented and agreed to keep the airport open until midnight.

When an ambulance came to carry Aura to Huatulco, about twenty kilometres away, the young doctor, who was actually an intern from Guadalajara, only recently assigned to the hospital, volunteered to accompany us, with the manual respirator. Aura, wrapped in a bedsheet, was lifted off the surfboard and onto the ambulance litter. Whoever owned that surfboard had apparently given it up for her.

After nearly an hour's drive, we approached the airport through a back entrance, and I heard the whine of an idling jet engine in the steamy tropical air. The young doctor wouldn't accept even taxi fare back to Mazunte; off he went, after a round of heartfelt and hopeful goodbyes, carrying the manual respirator, to stay at the house of a friend. Aura was transferred to a new stretcher, and covered snugly in a silver thermal blanket. The air-ambulance doctor told us that Aura's vital signs were good. Once we were in the air, she said that Aura didn't need a respirator. It was true: Aura was managing to breathe. She looked at me and asked, "*Mi amor*, *me puedo dormir un poquito*?" "Can I sleep a little bit?"

She slept for a while, and then a final ambulance took us from the Toluca airport across Mexico City to Pedregal, in the south. With us was a doctor who looked barely into his twenties, quick and sure in his movements, an alert, serious type, with glasses and delicate, sharp features. He was intently watching the monitor, reading Aura's vital signs. Then he said, his voice tense, "I don't like how this looks." The optimism of the air ambulance was gone. Now I can't say whether I am grateful for those last moments of hope and relief, or whether I feel that we were cruelly deceived.

Aura's mother and stepfather, whom Fabis had finally reached, were waiting for us outside the hospital's emergency entrance. Some of Aura's *tías* were there, too. It was about two in the morning. Aura's mother, arms folded, glaring at me, spoke to me accusingly. "This is your fault," she said. This was how I'd brought her daughter back to her, the daughter she'd given away to me to protect in marriage?

Aura was awake. It was as if she'd saved up all her energy to be able to give her mother this last brave declaration: "*Fue una tontería*, *Mami*." "It was a stupidity, Mami."

I think the renowned surgeon and his team of doctors knew almost right away. I don't remember how long it took before they came out to speak with us in the waiting room. The surgeon was a tall, corpulent man. He told us that Aura had broken the third and fourth vertebrae of her spinal column, cutting into the nerves that controlled her breathing and her torso and limbs. She would probably be completely paralyzed for life. They were trying to stabilize her spinal cord so that the swelling could go down. Then they would decide if there was any way to operate. She had ingested ocean water, too, and they were working to clear it from her lungs. I pleaded with the doctor. I told him that Aura had had sensation in her limbs off and on throughout the day, that in the air ambulance her vital signs had been fine and she'd even breathed on her own. I told the doctor that she was going to be fine, and that he had to believe me, and I remember his stricken eyes helplessly observing me, in my dirty, sweaty T-shirt and bathing suit.

I wasn't allowed into the intensive-care unit to see Aura. The medical teams needed to work without interruption. Fabis went home to sleep. I don't remember there being anyone else in the waiting room, except Aura's parents, who sat on vinyl couches on one side of the waiting room, while I sat alone on the other. The light in the room was very dim. I couldn't phone anyone because my battery was dead. At one point, I went out and walked through the long empty corridors, stepping into a little chapel to pray. I swore that if Aura survived I would live a religiously devout life and show my gratitude to God every day. Back in the

waiting room, I told myself that, if she was going to be paralyzed for some time, I would find a way to get her into the best rehab facility in the U.S.; I would read to her every day, and get her to dictate her writing to me. Those were the kind of thoughts I was having. Now and then, I got up and went to the intercom receiver and pressed the button and asked if I could come inside to see my wife, but every time I was told that visitors weren't allowed until the morning.
What did you think about that long night, my love, as you lay there dying and alone? Did you blame me? Did you think of me with love even once? Did you see or hear or feel me loving you?

It wasn't until the next morning that I was finally allowed in to see her. The eminent surgeon's assistant, a bulldoggish woman, told me that during the night Aura had had two heart attacks, and she was now in a coma.

I pressed my lips to Aura's ear and thanked her for the happiest years of my life. I told her that I would never stop loving her. Then the assistant surgeon brusquely ordered me out.

Ten or fifteen minutes later, stepping back through the white curtain, I instantly sensed a vacuumed-out stillness around Aura's bed, and the assistant surgeon told me that Aura had died minutes before. I went to her. Her lightless eyes. I kissed her cheeks, which were already like cool clay.

My sobs must have been heard throughout the hospital.

Juanca missed the funeral because he went with a friend to Mazunte to bring back our things. They found the house exactly as we'd left it. They packed up everything, even Aura's shampoo. Aura always just closed the lid of her laptop when she was done working for the day, so when I opened it later I found the screen as she'd left it. There were two open documents: the latest version of her

teacher story, and something new, probably the start of another short story, titled "*Hay señales en la vida*?" or "Does Life Give Us Signs?" ♦

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