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## The night Santa never made it to Darwin

by **Sonia** , 7 months ago

I was 11 years old living in an elevated house on Rothdale Road in Moil when Cyclone Tracy hit Darwin on Christmas Eve in 1974. I will always remember the events of that terrifying and unforgettable night which seemed to go on forever.

The first sign that something strange was happening took place when my mother was putting us to bed that night and we had a difficult time closing the aluminium louvers because the wind was so strong and kept forcing them open. At approximately 1am my brother woke my sister and I to check what presents Santa had left for us under the Christmas tree. When we got to the lounge we were drawn to the window to look outside at the storm particularly as the sound of the wind was so loud and eerie. What we saw still lives on in my memories as being pretty spectacular. Our yard was covered in a silver glow which made us think that somehow it had snowed in Darwin, being kids and in our naivety this was possible especially in all the anticipation and excitement that comes with Christmas.

It wasn't too long before our excitement was interrupted by our uncle who had decided to get up as he became increasingly concerned about the force of the wind which was making a horrible howling sound. When we told him that it had snowed in our yard he immediately took a look for himself but instead of sharing our excitement he became quite serious and started loudly knocking on my parents' bedroom door to wake them up. The silver we thought was snow glowing on the lawn we later learned was corrugated roofing iron from other houses.

At the time, we didn't know that my parents were in fact awake discussing the force of the cyclone and agreeing that they had made a good decision to not attend midnight mass in such bad weather. So it was by pure chance my parents decided to check on us. When they opened the door they were surprised to see us awake and standing at their doorway because they had not heard us calling out over the noise of the wind.

This in itself is incredulous as my mother is one of those people who was blessed with being a very light sleeper and incredible hearing as she would always hear us if we had left our beds in the middle of the night.

Standing in the hallway, my father suggested my mother take towels and blankets into the bathroom and start filling up the bathtub as he said this there was a loud crashing sound, something had hit the lower section of aluminium Louvre's in my brother's bedroom. This was the first in a chain of events that would take place in a very long and emotionally drained night.

As my parents went into action preparing the bathroom and fixing the window damage, my siblings and I were to wait in our parent's bed. I remember looking at where the ceiling and wall connects watching brown water streaks running down the wall when I called out to my father he immediately yelled out for us to run to him. Seconds after closing the door we heard a loud crashing sound as the walls succumbed to Tracy's force.

Minutes later something smashed the glass louvers, the manhole was lifting our house was now vulnerable the bathroom became our safe haven for the next couple of hours while my father and uncle tried to decide the safest option to get us downstairs to the safety of the storeroom.

During this time, there were so many snippets of memories that I can recall like watching our huge three seater red leather lounge flying through the air down what had been the hallway through to the empty void of what had been my parents' bedroom. Looking out the bathroom window towards the airport and seeing a black twister cutting a path through the bush and my father telling us to get away from the window worried glass would shatter and we would be hurt.

When the bathroom roof began collapsing and debris started falling down on top of us my father moved us across the small passage way to the toilet now made more difficult with the wind tearing through the passage way threatening to carry anything in its path into the dark unknown. My mother still has a small scar on her wrist which is testament of my father's determination to not lose his grip as he pulled her across to join us. The precarious condition of the toilet with only four walls separating us from flying missiles, the wind and rain forced us to make the final and most dangerous move crawling across bare floorboards minus the walls with dark sky and stars visible where we once had a roof.

After some terrifying minutes we made our way down the front stairs thankfully clear of debris and huddled into the storeroom cold, wet and dazed from our experience.

As children I don't think we fully appreciated the enormity of the tragedy unfolding around us, as an adult I often think back to the calm strength my parents projected providing me with a sense of security and confidence that my dad will protect us.

On a lighter note from that horrific night I often think of my father teasing my mother of her decision to pick the old towels and blankets over the recently purchased new ones from the linen cupboard because she did not want them to get wet but after everything was over the linen cupboard was never seen again.

This taught me a very valuable lesson which has stayed with me forever and that is the most precious and valuable thing we all have are our loved ones, you can replace furniture, houses and personal belongings while family and friends are irreplaceable.

After the cyclone my parents chose to stay in Darwin and not be evacuated.



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