CYCLONE!

Carroll Cox, 1975

THE SETTING

On Christmas Eve, 1974, Darwin was a rapidly growing city of 45,000. Most of the growth had occurred during the past ten years. Nearly 3,000 miles separated Darwin from other cities, and there was little in between but vast stretches of desert and sparse gum forests. The isolation combined with the hot, steamy conditions during "The Wet" which extends from November to April had, in the past, discouraged all but the pioneer types.

During the sixties and seventies things changed. Seemingly endless mineral wealth was discovered in the area, bringing an influx of large companies. This in turn brought more government workers to keep an eye on them. Large companies bought cattle stations and spent millions developing them. Television, air conditioning, and a modern theatre came to Darwin, making life more pleasant for the wives who accompanied the new workers. Building trades and real estate boomed and new businesses mushroomed up. Darwin became known as the place to "make a quid", so people flowed in faster than houses went up. Thus it had a very large house trailer or caravan population.

A potpourri of races and individuals could be seen in Darwin at any given time. There were Indians, Greeks, Chinese, Italians and Germans. An office worker in his white shirt and tie might be hurrying down the street in the wake of a group of barefoot hippies. Housewives often did their shopping clad in bikinis as they pushed babies along in strollers. Aboriginal stockmen wearing jeans and elastic-sided boots would be in town to spend their pay. They would stagger out of the pubs pushing and prodding at each other and flashing big, white smiles at the world in general.

Darwin houses were built for the tropics and little thought was given to originality. Most houses were just built up on steel or concrete stilts and had plenty of louvre windows to catch the breeze blowing in from the Timor Sea. Colourful flowering trees and multi-hued shrubs compensated somewhat for the monotony of the houses.

That was the Darwin of Christmas, 1974. There was a cyclone called Tracy somewhere in the area. So what? It was pouring down rain and the highway south was cut. So what was new? The only road to Darwin was often flooded or washed out for weeks at a time during "The Wet". Sometimes we ran out of tea and sometimes we ran out of toilet paper. Necessities were flown in and "The Wet" went on.

People were talking and laughing and making plans for Christmas the same as people in any other city the world over.

"Buy up plenty of beer for the holidays!"

"How many parties have you been to?"

"What did you get your kids for Christmas?"

"If this keeps up, they'll have to stay inside all day tomorrow. Oh my aching back!"

"Most of my friends have gone south for Christmas, half their luck!"

"Well dearie, that's what you get when you work for the Government, six weeks leave every year."

"Blast the rain! We wanted to have a picnic for Christmas."

The general opinion was simply that Tracy was a bloody nuisance.

THE CHARACTERS

CAROL: A working mother with a husband and two children. Americans, they, and other members of their family have lived in Darwin for a number of years.

GRAEME: A young Australian businessman. Only in his early thirties, he is the Darwin manager of a nation-wide firm.

NANCY: A Scottish girl in her late twenties. She was working as a barmaid at the time of the cyclone, though she travels a lot and has held a variety of jobs.

PETER: A young man about town. Works at the weather bureau and is friendly.

RAY: A Canadian in his late thirties. Ray is a big-hearted, colourful character.

BERNICE: A former nurse, married to a Dutch school teacher. They are in their late thirties and have four children.

EUNICE: She is at the helm of a three-generation household, where she tried to maintain the peace between a vociferous teenage daughter and an elderly mother who also believes in "speaking her piece". Her husband, a government worker, has escaped south for a few weeks.

ROBYN: Trim, young mother, the only daughter of doting parents. This family and that of Bernice are very close friends, and belong to the same church.

PAULINE: An active, wiry woman in her fifties, she both runs a farm and drives a school bus.

GRANNY: An Aboriginal woman in her eighties. She grew up on a famous cattle station with Pauline's mother.

KEN: A successful businessman caught up in the throes of the eternal triangle.

DR. RODE: A German pathologist working at the Darwin Hospital.

THE AFTERNOON

"Don't get blown away by the cyclone", a last minute Christmas shopper kidded me, as he hurried out of the downtown bookshop with his gaily wrapped parcels under his arm. His attitude reflected that of most people I had talked to that day. To us, a cyclone meant winds and heavy rains that were most inconvenient at this, the Christmas season. It was bad enough having Christmas in the middle of summer without a heavy downpour as well!

Christine, my assistant, was complaining as we locked the door after the last of the Christmas Eve customers. She had been planning a festive Christmas dinner in her garden.

I scurried through the rain to my car, waving and shouting to several acquaintances on the way. Darwin is a friendly town. You can't go anywhere without seeing people you know. No one seemed to be the least bit worried about the cyclone. They were on their way to a round of parties that would last well into the night. They may as well enjoy themselves, I thought. It certainly did not look as if there would be any garden parties or picnics on Christmas Day.

I drove slowly down the highway towards home, 11 miles away, looking forward to a rest after the days of Christmas rush.

Around four pm everyone began drifting back to the office building for the round of Christmas parties. They seemed to me to be quieter than usual, and the topic of conversation was the cyclone.

"I have some frozen chickens at home. If the cyclone hits, I'll cook them on the barbecue."

"Even if the power is off all day, we'll be all right. I just bought a generator the other day."

"Hope I don't get too much rain in the house. We just had a new carpet put down on the living room floor."

"I was in a cyclone once, down on the Queensland coast. Water coming in the house was the least of our worries. We were afraid we were going to lose the roof!"

I listened to the casual conversation, but didn't take part. I wasn't in much of a party mood. I sipped at my drink and stared out the 5th floor window at the sheets of water spilling from the grey sky. Pam, my wife, had a good time. She wasn't worried about anything.

NANCY'S STORY

Originally I came from Edinburgh, Scotland, but I've been in Australia nearly four years now. I love it here, but at Christmas you miss your family. Mine are all in Scotland. Just that afternoon I had received a beautiful little cross on a chain from my parents. I was that thrilled with it, I kept showing it to my customers at the bar where I work.

People kept talking about the cyclone that was supposed to hit. It didn't worry me much. I didn't know anything about cyclones.

At the weather bureau we get our information from the Air Force, from aircraft observations, and from ships at sea. Then we funnel it to the public news sources. We first knew of Cyclone Tracy on December 22nd. There was nothing about it to indicate that it was any different than any other cyclone. Every year we give out several cyclone warnings in Darwin.

During the afternoon I went into the bureau to have a couple of drinks and talk over the situation with the fellows on duty. Then I went home and slept the rest of the day, as I was on night duty.

When I woke up I thought that the weather looked pretty grim. I listened to the radio and Tracy was 32 miles away moving on a direct course to Darwin. I hurriedly dressed and raced for my car, not even bothering with my usual cup of coffee. Things would be humming at work tonight.

BERNICE'S STORY

We had just moved into a new government house. We spent all day Christmas Eve shopping for new furniture, and were very disappointed that we could not have it delivered the same day.

My husband had been teaching in the Darwin area for a number of years, and we were used to wet weather and cyclone warnings. Foremost on our minds was our approaching holiday. The six of us intended to fly south to see my family as soon as we had our new house set up. Our only worry at that stage was where we were going to leave the dog while we were away.

EUNICE'S STORY

Many people say, 'If you had warning that the cyclone was coming, why weren't you ready?' One could go back any number of times to the same old warnings, the same heavy rains and gusty winds, then it's all over. If this has been the pattern in the past, why should it suddenly change?

My husband was away, so our household consisted of my mother, my thirteen-year-old daughter, and myself. Under our house were two small apartments. My daughter, her husband, and two small children lived in one, and a single Canadian girl named Barbara lived in the other. None of us took the cyclone warning seriously.

By six P.M., the wind was rising steadily, so we took a few precautions such as securing loose objects, closing doors, and seeing that windows were open a little on the side of the house away from the wind. We then felt we had done everything necessary. Mother, Michelle, and I felt quite light-hearted and independent, fully capable of dealing with any situation.

ROBYN'S STORY

Mother and I both worked in a large department store. Shopping had been heavy all day on Christmas Eve, and though there had been much talk about the approaching cyclone, there seemed to be very little worry about it.

What bliss when closing time came. How beautiful to have the holidays ahead!

We were a very close family, so Rob and I, with our three children, were spending the night with Mum and Dad. Jim and I arrived home to find an atmosphere of great secrecy abounding. The children, with Rob and Dad, had been busy wrapping presents. Leslie and Evan, who lived in a caravan downstairs, were there too. We all chattered happily, and thoughts of the cyclone vanished from our minds .

PAULINE'S STORY

"I have a little farm a few miles out of town. On Christmas Eve, I always cut down a few cypress pines and take them to my family and friends. Granny was with me that day. She likes getting out for a drive when she can.

After we had delivered the trees, we stopped at Granny's house for a cup of tea before I went to the home of my married daughter, Sue, where I was to spend the night.

'I think it's about time you went home to be with your family,' Granny said at last.

'What makes you say that, Granny?'

'We Aboriginals know these things,' she said simply, and I had known her too long to doubt her word. She went on to tell me how many of her people had picked up their belongings and vanished into the bush land the day before. 'Nobody listen to the black people,' she said. 'They know this wind going to be a bad feller.'

'If it's going to be all that bad, I don't think that this old house is the best place to be,' I told her frankly. 'Why don't you come with me to Sue's house?'

She wouldn't budge, and we continued to argue mildly as we set up her little tree and decorated it. I told her that most likely there wouldn't be much for her grandchildren to see the next day, as her old shack was already shuddering in the wind. She was laughing as she shooed me out the door."

Ken's Story

Cyclone warnings didn't mean much to me on the afternoon of Christmas Eve. I had other things on my mind. I had definitely decided to leave Jill, and was wondering how I could try and spend a pleasant Christmas with her and the kids with that on my mind.

The entire office building was reverberating with human noises as the various staff members enjoyed a round of pre-Christmas parties. Across the room, Carla, my assistant in the real estate business, raised a glass in a gesture to me. Carla and I had not made any plans, but she was the main reason I had decided to leave my wife. She is intelligent and poised and enjoys all the things I did. Jill and I seemed to run out of things to say to each other years ago. It was a lot my fault. I've been busy building up a business and Jill has been busy bringing up kids. I knew I should have been spending more time with them, but it just didn't seem worth the effort anymore.

In spite of all that, I wasn't the least bit happy at the thought of breaking up my marriage. So many people would be hurt, how could I be happy? Yet I certainly wasn't making anyone happy at the time. Why was life so miserable? All in all, it looked like being a bleak, bloody awful Christmas, so I poured myself another drink.

DR. RODE'S STORY

At the time of the cyclone, there were about fifty doctors in the 183-bed Darwin hospital. There were many types of specialists—government doctors. We are a Territory, and the Health Service in the Territory is in the hands of the Commonwealth Government. There are private practitioners who also utilize the hospital for their patients.

In a case like that of the cyclone, our laboratory is in touch with the weather bureau, because we have to put up an emergency roster. I rang the weather bureau at 3 PM, and they told me the position of the storm. Most of my staff were going out to parties, and I told them who had to come in if the cyclone came within twenty miles. The others were to come in afterwards as soon as possible. We call that particular setup a disaster roster. I was not actually the head of the department—that was another doctor who was on leave. I had never had experience with anything like this before, so all I thought of was that there could be a lot of people injured, and they would need blood.

Everyone made jokes about the experience we were going to gain that night, and one of the technicians related to us how an Aboriginal man who had left the hospital earlier had told him that this cyclone was going to hit Darwin, because the mangroves were sprouting and the crocodiles were laying their eggs high on the shore.

My wife had a little antique shop, and she was staying open late on Christmas Eve, so I went on home and fixed up a tree and a few other decorations to surprise her. Then I went and picked her up, and later a few friends came in, and we all talked about the terrible weather.

THE EVENING

Caroll's story

We have a few acres out of town and live there in an old galvanized iron house. My sister and her husband, and their three children (the baby only a few days old at the time), live next door in the same type of dwelling.

Around seven, a friend stopped by to tell us that his neighbour, who worked at the weather bureau, had told him quietly that the cyclone could be pretty bad. It seemed to be tightening up, with winds up to 130 miles an hour. It was heading straight for Darwin, and all services were on red alert.

This information spurred us into action. We put away loose objects and took things off the walls. The men put several old railroad irons on the roof to hold it down. We all felt excited, but not worried.

Our sons, aged nine and ten, went off to bed early so that we would be free to wrap their presents. I did this while Lee became very involved in setting up a battery-operated train set. Engineering difficulties arose that required the utmost concentration. I'm sure that thousands of fathers around the world would be familiar with this procedure. The repeated cyclone news on the radio was calm and reassuring.

It seemed certain that Tracy would hit Darwin, but everything would be all right as long as normal precautions were observed. We let the dog and pregnant cat into the house, and Lee dashed out into the rain to make sure the parrot aviary was secure under the giant mango tree.

The wind had increased by then, and there was a strange whine in it. We decided to go to bed and see if we could get some rest. "Later we may have to hold things down," we joked.

Graeme's story

Pam and I left the party about 9 PM and went to pick up our boy, who was at the babysitter's, about 7 miles away. At that stage, small trees were beginning to blow across the road, and we knew that we should be at home. As we drove, we listened to the cyclone warnings, and they said that Tracy would hit the city about 3 AM.

When we got home, I parked the ranch wagon diagonally across the back of our smaller car, so that they were in a V shape. Then we went upstairs and opened a bottle of champagne and wrapped a few presents. We hoped the storm wouldn't be too bad. We had a new home and were very proud of it.

The radio kept telling us minute by minute that they were going to be on the air all night. That was all very well until the power went off at about 11:20 PM. Of course, all the power in the city was off from that time on—a huge instant blackout.

We lit candles and felt very brave. The radio station was now operating by an emergency generator, and we had a battery-operated radio, so we were still able to listen to the news. We sat there for a while and listened to that calm voice on the radio and watched the flickering candles. The wind beat against the window, causing them to rattle ominously. We were wide-eyed, but our little boy slept peacefully.

Nancy's story

I don't know why so many people stayed in the bar that night. I know that if I had had a home, I would have wanted to be in it. I didn't like the sound of the wind, it was sad and eerie. But maybe that's just me. I'm very imaginative. The cross I had just received from my parents somehow comforted me. Maybe that sounds silly, but it did.

Nobody was rowdy in our bar. Some of the regular customers I knew quite well—especially an old Scottish man who was always very kind to me. I often wondered if he had some secret tragedy in his life. He drank himself into a stupor nearly every night. He never bothered anyone though. By midnight on Christmas Eve, the wind was really wicked. My old friend was slumped over the table where he had been drinking, so we commandeered a car and sent him home.

All the customers were gone now. Suddenly I felt very alone.

Peter's story

When I went to work I had difficulty driving in a straight line because of the crosswind. The force of it was pushing me from lane to lane. The weather bureau was in the nine-story Mutual Life building. I made sure I parked the car where it would be sheltered from possible flying objects.

People asked me why I was early, but I noticed that everyone else on the midnight shift was already present. It was only 10:45. Tension was in the air. We knew that the cyclone was going to hit, and we knew that it was a strong one.

My specific duty was distributing information. The information was given to us by the computer inputs, and we called those who were really affected, which in this case was everybody in the immediate vicinity. We communicated information to the radio and TV stations, and by telex.

Across the street, there were people going to Midnight Mass. I looked down at them and was amazed that they would go out in such weather. Some of the staff were playing cards. A couple of the fellows went out and brought their families in to shelter for the night. They all trooped in wet and windblown, loaded down with blankets, dry clothes, and thermos bottles, and pushing along sleepy-eyed kids.

Judy kept fretting about her new car. She had just paid $5,000 cash for it. The people at the airport told us that they were already beginning to lose roofing.

Where we were, there wasn't much sound. We noticed that the higher in the building we went, the louder the wind sound was. It was screaming. We stayed upstairs and waited.

Ray's story

Many of the people who had been drinking in the afternoon were still at it. Why didn't they go home? I wanted to go home, but there they sat, happy and drunk. A few of them had kids at home with babysitters, so I had to stay and babysit the parents.

The first sober moment came when some windows broke in front. I would have laughed at the looks on some of the faces if I hadn’t been so scared myself. The bar was on the ground floor next to the pool, and while we were still listening to the sound of breaking glass, a car parked near the pool began moving as if controlled by an unseen driver. It was swept straight to the pool and dropped neatly in. The voices in the wind seemed to be laughing.

I left then. The drunks would have to shift for themselves. I was going home to my family. The drive home was unreal. It was only three miles, but those were the longest three miles I had ever driven. When I got home, my wife said, "Gee, I think we're going to get a storm!"

Bernice's story

We spent the early part of the evening with old friends who, exactly a year ago in weather similar to this, had lost a daughter in a light plane crash. As we said goodbye to them, I had my first real premonition of disaster. The drive home intensified the feeling. There was a hum in the wind like nothing I had ever heard before.

When we got home, I was glad to be busy with the children, preparing them for bed and reading them stories. Bob saw that everything was secure in the shed downstairs. Later, when Bob and the children had gone to bed, I scrubbed the bathtub with Ajax and filled it with water as per cyclone instructions. Then, as I noticed that the wind was beginning to blow rain in around the edges of the glass louvre windows, I put a few towels around. I certainly didn't want water stains on the beautiful wooden floors! Feeling that I had done everything I could, and weary from the day's shopping, I went to bed with the transistor radio next to my ear.

Eunice's story

We three women spent the first part of the evening in a fairly normal sort of way. Mother and Michelle arguing mildly about the volume of Michelle's record player, and myself in the role of mediator. About nine we decided to all go to our rooms and read.

By ten, after having spent an hour listening to the increasing wind, we decided to share one bedroom. I never looked at a clock, but it seemed to me that the power went off very early. I roamed through the house with a big torch (flashlight), making sure that the louvre windows were open a crack on the offside of the wind.

We began to hear crashing and thumps outside. Mother and Michelle jumped into my bed, for once in complete agreement. Suddenly a great ripping noise reverberated through the air. I flashed a light over the walls but couldn't see anything. Then we realized that we were all getting drenched! We looked up and saw clouds and flashes of lightning. Part of the roof was gone already! The three brave, independent women vanished and in their places huddled three trembling wrecks. I rushed to the telephone and, with trembling fingers, dialled the emergency number.

“Wh..wh..what shall I do?” I stammered. “My roof is coming off!”

“Yours and everybody else's, Lady,” a scared voice shot back at me. “The building is coming apart down here. By morning there won't be a roof left in Darwin. Just go to the nearest school, or find shelter wherever you can.”

I slowly replaced the receiver. I had honestly thought it was only us—that there was something wrong with the construction of the house. (Later we found out that our part of town received the earliest damage.)

Hand in hand and holding tightly to the railing, we made our way down the back stairs to my married daughter's apartment. There was a man there. We hugged him and were glad to all be together. Narole's clock said midnight.

Robyn's story

After a light meal, Rob set up the pine tree and the kids decorated it. It was a beautiful tree, and they were so excited we had a hard time getting them to bed afterwards.

When they were finally settled down for the night, we noticed for the first time how bad the storm was getting. Rob and Evan went downstairs and came back with the baby who had been asleep in the trailer. They reported that the trailer was shaking badly in the wind, so it was decided that Leslie, Evan, and the baby would sleep upstairs with the rest of us. We went around putting things away then, but we were still making a joke of it all. Evan is a heavy-set person, so we said that the rest of us would take shelter under a bed, but he would have to lie on top of it, to hold it down.

Jenny, from next door, came over for a chat. She was very excited and said that she was going to sit up all night, so that in years to come she could tell her grandchildren all about Tracy. Her six-year-old son John wanted to stay up too, but she had told him that Santa couldn't come unless he was sleeping. Soon her husband, who we called “Big John," came after her. He told her she was "nuttier than a fruitcake to go out in that weather."

When the power went off, the atmosphere changed. I think we suddenly realized that this was something serious. Mum and Dad had a beautiful shell collection, so we packed it all up in suitcases and that kept us busy for a while. After that we prayed together.

We made Mother lie down on the couch, and the rest of us just sprawled around on the carpet and talked quietly. Strong gusts of wind shook the house and some of the coloured balls fell off the tree.

Pauline’s story

After dinner, Jack read stories to their two little girls while Sue and I worked on Christmas dinner. After that, we decided that we would make everything 'safe' for the cyclone before we went to bed. We did everything the radio announcer told us, except for taping the windows. We considered that a waste of time.

Finally, Jack and Sue went off to bed, and I went to my room, but once I was alone, the storm became worse, I was sure. The wind increased, and the house was creaking. I thought of my animals out at the farm and Granny in her shack. All ideas of sleep departed, and I dressed

again and went out to the living room. It wasn't long until Sue joined me, then Jack. We would wait it out

Granny’s story

Soon after Paulie left, my daughter Flo came and tried to get me to go to her house. I scolded her for going out in the bad weather when she had a husband and child to look after. When I was alone, I listened to the radio. There was nice music, and the man telling about the cyclone. My neighbour came over too, and I was happy that I had people who cared about an old woman like me. When the lights went out I wasn't afraid. I just lay down on my bed and thought about the people of my race. Most of them would be far out of town. Fifty years ago, I would have been, too. But now I was too much like a white person.

Ken's story

I went home about seven, and the nasty weather didn't help my mood any. Water was running down the streets, and the wind was so strong I had trouble driving the car.

My two daughters were playing with the baby when I went in. They looked hopefully at me, and I realized with a pang that they were afraid to say anything for fear I would snap at them. Jill fluttered around putting food on the table, and I noted with annoyance that she was wearing an old dress that I detested and her hair was hanging in one eye. I sighed, and the evening ahead stretched interminably. I was torn between the desire to be pleasant and the urge to criticize.

Later I tucked the girls in bed and was surprised at how moved I was when they hesitantly put their arms around my neck. How eager they seemed to be to love a father they seldom saw.

As the storm worsened and we began to hear strange and ominous noises outside, Jill burst out, "What's going to happen to us, Ken? We can't go on like this."

The thought occurred to me that she sounded like some silly female on a TV soap opera, but what she said was true. Here was my chance to tell her that it wouldn't be going on long at all because I was going to leave her. But the words just would not come out. There I was, a businessman used to making snap decisions in a hopeless muddle of indecision when it came to my own personal life. I stood looking out the front windows and suddenly made up my mind. I realized that we could really be facing a disaster, and if we were, everyone should be working together. So instead of telling Jill the truth, I just cleared my throat and said, "I'll try and be easier to live with, Honey."

I was surprised at the relief I felt.

Dr. Rode's story

We had a few drinks during the evening. My wife, Let, sparkled in her red evening dress and was a wonderful hostess, but as the winds got stronger, drinking held less appeal. I guess we felt we might need all our wits about us!

Robert, the technician on duty at the hospital, kept calling me on the phone. He was very nervous, as he thought we might forget all about him and leave him stuck on his own. He kept asking me if I had any news from the weather bureau.

About ten, we ventured out on the verandah and marvelled at the trees bent with their weight of wind and water. Later on, I called the weather bureau, and the man I talked to seemed very excited. "Yes," he told me, "the cyclone definitely is going to hit Darwin, probably the northern suburbs."

At this point, I left the party and went in to the hospital. On the way, I saw water gushing from broken pipes and had to dodge trees that had fallen across the road. Also, the car was rocking. This was about midnight.

THE NIGHT

Carroll's story

I awoke uneasily to find the power off. Lee was not in bed, and I found him in the kitchen working on the transistor radio. 'Nothing,' he said. 'That's funny, when they said they would be on the air all night.'

The smashing rain was pouring through the louvre windows and rolling across the floor. We moved the Christmas presents, a procedure we were to repeat several times during the night. Railroad irons rolling across the tin roof combined with the howling wind created such a din that we had to shout to make ourselves heard.

The boys woke up, and we sent them under our bed with their blankets, as we had decided that our room was the safest place to shelter. The dog lay down with them, and Rex complained that she smelled. Russell retorted that he loved his dog and was going to look after her during the cyclone. Rex could move if he didn't like her smell. I was glad of this normal behaviour.

Lee and I moved our heavy mahogany table in next to the bed, threw some blankets down, and curled up under it. It was miserably uncomfortable, and Lee could not fit both his legs under it. This upset Russell, who was sure his father would lose a leg if they were not both safely under the table. So Lee groaned and folded himself up some more.

Suddenly, the wind stopped. This was the eye, and the storm was half over. We stood up, our groans sounding very loud in the eerie silence. Holding on to one another, we crept to the front door and shone our powerful torch out. What we saw were fallen trees, telephone and power poles twisted into grotesque shapes, with wires hanging everywhere, and our big workshop half down. A look at the backyard greatly upset us, as the giant mango tree had fallen over on the parrot aviary, smashing it to the ground and burying the aviary beneath the spreading branches.

The first indication of the return of the storm was a distant whistle. Then there was a loud rustling of leaves and tin clattering here and there. It took only a moment for the gathering

forces to slam against the house in a furious onslaught. We were almost knocked off our feet on the way to our shelter under the bed and table. The change in wind direction resulted in a flow of water to our formerly dry spots. There was no such thing as a dry place in the house now.

The walls seemed to wave and blur. I stared, fascinated as the windows ballooned in, then were sucked out. Every time they swelled towards us, I would hold my breath, waiting for them to explode, but not one of them ever broke. The ceiling was full of water and breaking in places, adding yet more water to our cold, damp misery. I still managed to doze fitfully, and Lee told me I was inhuman. He never shut his eyes all through the night.

Graeme's story

About 1:30, Michael woke up crying because rain was blowing into his room. We took him in with us so that we would all be together. Shortly after that, the radio went out, so we were all on our own. (We learned since then that the wind had actually turned the radio transmitter on its side.)

The storm raged around us and I heard trees beginning to go, but I still felt very confident that our house would withstand it. Just before the eye passed over, there seemed to be a terrific buildup in noise. Then dead silence.

We went outside, into the stillness, and I was elated. We had no reason to think that the second part of the storm would be any worse than the first. People came out of their houses from up and down the street, and most of them seemed to feel the same way. We were on top of the world. The gardens were a mess, but so what. We were all safe and still had our homes. After about fifteen minutes, we could hear the storm returning, so I said to the fellow next door, 'Okay Mike, it's coming back now, so we'd better go in. See you in the morning.'

The wind was coming from the opposite direction now, and I immediately saw that our problem would be the big glass doors. They were bowing in like billowing curtains. Pam brought my toolbox, and I began hammering the doors down with three-inch nails. As I did this, the entire wall alongside the doors just blew in. At first, we were immobilised with shock. Then it took me about half a second to decide that the house was no place for us. We had a short, intense argument as Pam wanted to remain in the house as the warnings had instructed. I guess I must have been pretty convincing when I told her that our house would not be there in another couple of minutes, because she grabbed the boy, and we groped our way down the back stairs, which were in the lee of the cyclone, and fell into the little car which was somewhat protected by the ranch wagon.

From our position in the car, we watched our entire house blow away. I never did find even one piece of the roof, though some of the house ended up in the pool.

We hadn't been in the car long when the windscreen blew in, so we spent three hours with the rain beating in, listening to the neighbourhood being ripped to pieces. Now and again, I would

turn the car lights on, and we could see timber and sheets of iron flying through the air at high speeds. We had run across several feet of unprotected area to get from the house to the car, and we were amazed that we hadn't been killed on the way.

Michael finally went to sleep in his mother's arms in spite of the driving rain and sickening noises. Pam and I just huddled there, shivering with cold and waiting for it to be over.

Nancy's story

The boss wanted all the staff to stay on duty, so we were there when the cyclone hit. I was too nervous and scared to sleep, so after a while I went to the bathroom down the hall. I had just opened the door to go back into my room when the ceiling fell on my bed. I started to go to someone else's room, but then things were crashing all over, and I was scared to move. Finally, I grabbed a chair and sat down in a corner, and that is where I stayed for the rest of the night, holding my cross and praying.

Peter's story

Information stopped coming from the weather bureau at about 2 AM. As the power went out, we were probably better off than anyone else in Darwin. We had an emergency generator which cut in, so we had coffee, lights, and air conditioning. The lights attracted people from the vicinity, so as houses went in the storm, homeless people kept pouring into the building all night.

We couldn't see much outside, so we just talked, played cards, and ate food left over from the party. Now and again, one of the windows would break, reminding us of the lashing the outside world was taking!

Ray's story

I had only been home a few minutes when the bathroom window broke. Then I realised I had better take our little daughter from her bedroom at the front of the house to ours at the back. On the way, I remembered looking out the window and seeing the two fellows next door walking along like they were in a blizzard. They had some kind of little light, just like a bloody Ichabod Crane graveyard movie. I think they were trying to do something with their 26-foot sailboat.

Anyhow, I picked Megan up, and I was just a few steps away when the bloody wall caved in over her bed - just like that! Then the roof came off. Things were happening too fast to think. All we could do was act. Naturally, the rain was pouring in on us, and everything was getting soaked, so I grabbed our mattress and made for the clothes closet with it. My wife had Megan then, and two neighbours came in about that time, so we all jammed ourselves into the closet with the mattress over our heads at kind of an angle.

That's where we were for the rest of the night. No one was worried about being uncomfortable. I was just waiting for it to be all over because I honestly thought we'd had it. That night was the first time I was ever religious

Berenice’s story

I woke up when the radio went dead. That really jolted me, as I realised that the radio station must have been badly damaged to stop transmitting. I was more aware of the noises outside now that the radio was silent, and they were frightening!

Bob hadn't been able to sleep, and he was pacing the floor. He came to a stop in front of the balcony window, and I saw him stiffen. 'It's gone!' he said in an unbelieving tone.

'What's gone?' I asked.

'The whole balcony has just disappeared.'

He then ran to the living room to untie the dog and bring it to Paul's room, where we were. He looked back as he reached the passage and saw the door he had just come through, along with the whole wall, disappear. He wanted to go down to the car then, but the radio instructions had firmly stated not to go underneath upstairs houses.

We had all moved into the one room by then, and as we were still clad in our nightwear, I decided that we had better have clothes on. I had a pile of clothes on the floor for just such an emergency, so I grabbed shirts for Mark and Paul, the two oldest boys, then started to get clothes for Luke and the baby. I was too late, for just as I reached for them, they blew away.

Bob still wanted to go downstairs, but I stubbornly refused to budge. Then the walls started to break loose. Mark said, 'We might die in this house, Daddy.' He was eleven years old.

We all went into the bathroom then, and had a drink out of the tub. Almost at once, the louvre windows exploded, showering glass on us. Paul was shining the torch around, and there was blood everywhere. It was pouring into my mouth, and I was wondering why I didn't feel the cut. Then I realised it was Bob's blood, blown onto me by the wind and rain. I wanted to look at his wound, but he wouldn't allow me.

After making sure the children were all right, he began herding us out of the house. We started down the hall, and framework from the roof was falling all around. One piece of timber fell on my shoulder, but I hardly noticed it. Bob checked the front door, but we had no hope of getting out there. Too much rubble. We had to go out the back way, into the wind. The stair railing had been knocked against the door, apparently by flying debris and I could barely squeeze myself and the baby out. I made our way down one stair at a time in order to avoid being blown away. The big boy followed on their hands and knees, then finally little Luke. Bob really had to struggle to get through the small space.

Outside, the wind sounded like a roaring jet. We groped our way to the car, and though we felt much safer there, our hopes for shelter were soon vanquished. The windows were already out when we reached the vehicle, and we had barely nestled ourselves in when another exploded. This time the baby caught most of the glass.

For the first time, he bellowed. In a way, the noise was comforting, and after cleaning all the glass off him, I found he didn't even have a scratch!

The dog had come out with us but had vanished on the way to the car.

Eunice's story

In Naroli's apartment there was a gas lamp which gave us light, and a gas burner which produced hot drinks. Good cheer reigned supreme as we talked about what a night this would be to remember.

Suddenly the guttering crashed down the back stairway. In gunfire sequence the door blew open, the big window exploded, spraying glass everywhere, and the mirror fell off the wall and landed on the bed next to one of the children. Michelle screamed, Mother shrieked, and both children woke up crying. Barbara, the Canadian girl, was cut all down her arm and leg and blood was pouring out. We didn't waste any time moving to her apartment, our last place of refuge. Once we were settled down, John attempted to take Barbara to the hospital, but they were back in a very short time having been able to go only two blocks. They told how the street was piled high with very unusual Christmas parcels - telephone and electrical poles tied up with wires. Trees and parts of houses were flying through the air. As John put it, "the scene outside was unreal".

When the eye passed over we had no desire to look outside. We just sat and wondered aloud what the second round would be like. The answer came very soon. The very instant the returning wind hit, the window of Barbara's apartment blew in.

We had forgotten that the wind would be from the opposite direction during the second half of the cyclone. We all grabbed children, bottles, blankets, and pillows, and had just reached the front door when the roof fell in, spilling what seemed tons of water all over everything.

We cautiously made our way to my husband's "pride and joy", a heavy and luxurious Leyland automobile. Once more we were on the protected side of what remained of the house. A brick wall still stood in front of us, protecting the car from much of the force of the storm.

We amused ourselves during the remainder of the night by shining the torch out and trying to identify 'flying objects'. Once we saw an overhead fan from upstairs go swirling out to land gracefully in the street.

A decision had to be made when calls of a physical nature began to press insistently upon us. We decided to simply sit there and relieve ourselves. I knew it sounds awful, but no one would even consider leaving our safe, warm spot to venture out into that nightmare. I don't think my husband knows to this day what we did to his car that night!

Robyn's story

Our conversation became desultory, and as the crashing noises and the scream of the wind were monotonous, we drowsed, until the front windows blew in. Pelting rain and glass pricked our arms and faces and sent us all running to the bedroom at the opposite end of the house, snatching children out of beds as we went. The children thought it was all a marvellous adventure. They showed no fear even when the sounds we heard were obviously the house breaking up. A ripping noise began in the room we were in and my heart almost stopped. My two little daughters were holding on to my hands and telling me not to worry, that God would protect us. That made me cry a little, but I pulled myself together.

Some things were flying around in the room. I don't know what—some of the ceiling I suppose. Dad, Rob and Evan pulled the soaked mattresses off the beds and wanted all the women and children to huddle under them for protection. Mom and Leslie did, but I refused. That is why I saw the wall beginning to fall in on us. I screamed a warning, and Dad, Rob, Evan and I all moved with perfect timing to catch it.

It was incredible the way our minds all worked exactly the same. Dad happened to be at the end, and the weight knocked him flat. Evan was in the corner and actually was holding up parts of two walls. Rob and I were in the middle. The jolt from that wall should have at least crippled us all, but none of us suffered any permanent injuries.

We stayed there the rest of the night supporting that wall. It was the only one left in the house. Mother had become hysterical when it was falling. She had thought we were all being killed in front of her eyes. I saw the girls shaking her and telling her to look out at us, that we were all right. What lessons we adults learned from children that night.

Pauline's story

The house seemed to be taking the first part of the storm all right. The wind was howling like a banshee outside, but there was no doubt in my mind that our family would be protected. Why, the children hadn't even awakened. I was worried about Gran though. I kept pacing the floor and muttering about her old shack until I nearly drove Sue and Jack mad.

When the eye was over us, I headed out the door. He grabbed my arm, saying I was crazy. My son-in-law just laughed and asked her if she was only then finding that out. I remember telling him that I would deal with him later, then I ran down the stairs and jumped in my old pick-up. I figured it would take five minutes to drive to Granny’s house, a couple of minutes to get her in the car, then five minutes back.

I thought we were supposed to have about fifteen minutes lull during the eye.

I guess when a person gets to be my age, the mind is only capable of concentrating on one thing at a time. I thought only of reaching my destination. Fallen trees and power poles were all

over the roads, and I kept making detours and driving over piles of debris until suddenly I realized that I had been out for ten minutes and wasn't any nearer to my destination than when I had started. Already I could hear the distant wail of the wind returning. Sheets of tin fluttered threateningly. I stopped the pick-up to get my bearings, and as I took in the scene around me, I felt as if I had been dropped on an alien planet. I don't think I ever felt so lonely in my life.

I decided to go home, mission unaccomplished.

Then as I drove, the wind returned, and my old vehicle was rocking all over the road, and the air was filled with flying objects. Things would come hurtling out of the darkness and smack the side of the pick up, but it kept going. When I finally neared home, I had a shock awaiting me. Things had changed in my absence!

The street I normally took was piled high with the rubble of houses. This had all happened in a matter of a few minutes. My mouth went dry as cotton as I wondered about my family. I drove over a centre strip to turn around and go home a different way, and the pick-up sank in mud up to its axles. I jumped out and kicked it a few times in frustration. I guess because I'm crazy sometimes, like my son-in-law always said.

There was furniture, pieces of houses, fans, refrigerators, you name it—flying through the air, and I was standing out there kicking my poor old pick-up.

I suddenly realized that I wasn't alone in the world. There ahead of me, stalled at the corner, was an old Volkswagen bus, with heads poking out of it and hands beckoning. I ran like the devil was after me, because company really appealed to me just then.

They were a carload of hippies, the boys with frizzy hair, and earrings in one ear, the girls bra less under their long dresses. There were scared young people with wide eyes and pale faces. As the bus rocked in the screeching wind, we moved from one end of it to the other hoping that our combined weight would prevent it being moved.

We all had our arms around each other as we swayed back and forth. They taught me some folk songs and I taught them some of the old time hymns. I can tell you there was no generation gap in that bus!

Granny's story

My old house was falling to pieces. I didn't care. It was only what we call an old humpy. It is the land that is important. This part of Darwin was once the tribal land of my people. I would stay here while the big wind blew. Some of the ceiling blew down. I decided that I would get under the bed. But first I prayed. I knelt next to my wet bed and I prayed to my God like I always do. Then I went under the bed. This was not easy, as I am a big woman and have arthritis in my legs. It was cold and wet under the bed, but I had the peace of God to keep me warm inside, and there I stayed while the rest of the house blew away.

Ken's story

It was strange how things changed between us during those early hours of the morning. Thoughts of breaking up were unreal. The only realities were the aroused elements outside and the little children inside, that the two of us must protect.

Two windows broke and rain began pouring in on the new carpet. Jill was shaking so I put my arm around her and she didn't move away. Then the eye came and everything was silent, and we nearly collapsed with relief.

We went outside and Jill rambled on about how the garden was messed up and how we would go about repairing the damage. I didn't like that. The lull in the storm gave me a very anti-climactic feeling. I had geared myself up for a real disaster, and now it looked as if all we had was a huge mess. Jill's babbling was magnified in the dead silence, and the old irritation washed over me.

A neighbour called out to us and kept me from saying something nasty. Kathy and Ian were a nice young couple. They had two children—a toddler and a baby. They were cheerful because they had not suffered much damage.

After a few minutes we could hear the wind returning, so we bid Kathy and Ian good night and went upstairs. Sherin, our eldest, came out of her room and wanted to know if the cyclone was almost over. We told her that most of it was, and no sooner were the words out of my mouth than the wind hit the house with such force that we were all thrown a couple of feet. I think nearly every window in the house shattered at that time. Then there was a great whooshing noise, and ceiling, roof, and all vanished. Nothing fell in on us. Sherin screamed, and I grabbed her and Jill and we ran to the little one's room. We snatched them out of bed, and jammed ourselves into a built-in wardrobe.

The kids were wailing at being awakened so rudely, but Jill had a way with them and soon had them calmed down. Our temporary shelter was not to last for long, though. There was a great, ripping shudder, and the wardrobe and part of the wall went hurtling across the room and hit the wall at the opposite side. Jill got a painful bump on the head, and I had a smashed finger from the wardrobe door flying open, then shut. We crawled out of the wreckage of the wardrobe and my first thought was to get the kids under a bed. But there wasn't any bed. In fact, there wasn't much of anything left of the house. Dazed, I stared at where the wardrobe had come to rest in front of a piece of wall supported by a beam. If we had gone a little to the left or a little to the right, we would have flown off into space!

Jill and the kids were still huddling on the floor. I started to stand up and look around, and the wind blew me right over on my backside. It was just as well it had, because a sheet of tin went flying by right where my head had been. I was sick with fright. I didn't know anything else to do, so I just dropped flat on the floor and Jill and I lay half over the children, holding them down with our bodies and arms.

The next thing that happened was heartbreaking for both of us. We heard a pitiful whine, and there was Squeakie, our little Terrier that had been a wedding present. He was trying to crawl to us from wherever he had been. He gave a yelp of joy when he got near, and made the mistake of standing up. He just vanished—as if an invisible hand had reached down out of the heavens and plucked him up! Jill gulped and I felt like crying myself. I was thankful she didn't know what I had been planning, because I figured we were all going to die, and if it had to be, I was glad we were together.

Dr. Rode's story

When I arrived at the laboratory, the others had already assembled. There was Karen, our transfusion specialist, with her husband, Gordon. He had come in with her to see if he could help.

Our laboratory consisted of two buildings—the old part in front with a new demountable behind it. When the power went off, we immediately switched onto emergency power. Our lab is about fifty yards from the main building of the hospital so I rushed over to see what was going on. The orderlies were tearing around and a nursing sister on the switchboard suddenly yelled out that roofs were going on some of the wards. I then ran back to the lab to see if we had enough blood. When I got there, I could see the roof on the old building was going, so Robert, Gordon, and I ran in to rescue some of the more valuable equipment.

When the roof went, there were flashes and blue lights everywhere. There were so many shorts because the new laboratory was supplied from the old. I ran through the rain to get the electrician who was on emergency duty. We didn’t need fire with all our other problems. He tore through the storm with leads under his arms and worked frantically to restore some power. At first, it looked as if he would be successful, but eventually, he said it was hopeless, so we shut off the mains.

I rushed back over to the hospital then, and a doctor came crawling in with his wife. They said that their house had just gone. He looked out and saw the big coconut trees in front of the lab go. Pieces of the hospital were flying all through the air. An orderly said that the wards had been badly damaged, but they were looking after the patients. The operating rooms were all right, as they were in concreted areas.

I went back to the lab just in time to see the whole front building blow away. I decided not to take any more trips to the main building as things were flying everywhere. We sat out the rest of the storm in the dark, and I worried myself sick about my wife. I never should have left her home. After all, my family came before my responsibility to my job.

CHRISTMAS MORNING

Carroll's story

It was about six when we knew that the storm was abating. The relief we felt was indescribable. It seemed impossible that the old house could still be standing, though it must be admitted that it was considerably the worse for wear.

Lee heaved himself out from under the table and said he was going to check on our family next door. I didn't like the idea, as tin was still floating around in the air, but off he went like a jungle explorer, pushing through shrubs and climbing over fallen trees. He came back laughing, "The place was awash," he said. "At least a foot of water all through the house, the gyprock ceiling has blown out, and a thousand pieces of it are floating around the floor. In the middle of all this they have piled every mattress and blanket in the house, and all seven of them are asleep there!"

Our boys wanted to open presents, so we did this and had hot drinks prepared on the camp stove. I know it sounds incredible, but living several miles out of town and having survived in our old place, the thought that houses had blown away just did not occur to us. As we gaily opened our gifts, how were we to know that the gifts of most children in town had been sucked away from collapsing houses, that many had spent the night screaming in agony and terror? We were not to know this until later, when a friend taking his frightened family away from the rubble that had been Darwin stopped and told us.

Meanwhile, we went out into the morning and surveyed the ruined landscape. The first thing I noticed was the fallen refrigerator with most of Christmas dinner scattered around it. The turkey was still all right, so I picked it up off the lawn to take to my sister next door to cook in her gas oven. Cream pies were here a little, there a little. There would be no dessert for dinner. Looking around, I spotted the cauliflower roosting on top of some fallen shrubs, and added that to the salvaged turkey. Things were looking up.

Pieces of tin were wrapped grotesquely around the topmost branches of remaining trees. Debris of every description lay solid on the ground and telephone and power poles were twisted into unbelievable shapes. Looking further afield to the swamps behind us, we were startled to see that all the trees were completely denuded. They stood silent and naked, with not a leaf to rustle or a bird to sing.

Lee wandered sadly over to the wreckage of the mango tree, pulling aside branches and looking hopelessly for the mangled bodies of his birds. Suddenly the air was rent by an ear-splitting HELL--LOOOO! There was dead silence for a moment, then every one of us cheered. That parrot talked continuously until the men had pulled him out from under the tree. Right after that, Rex discovered Tic Toc with her new kittens in a cupboard. She purred loudly and proudly as our boys and their two little cousins sat in front of the cupboard and christened the kittens Cyclone, Disaster, Windy, and Blow.

I really don't know why we wanted to have a normal Christmas dinner before we did anything else. I guess to add a touch of normalcy to our shattered world, for by then we knew the magnitude of the disaster and had no idea what lay ahead. What a strange yet cheerful meal it was. Friends wandered out from town in dribs and drabs. The turkey was golden resplendent in the silver platter, and we all sat around the long table with our feet dangling in the water on which the gyprock ceiling floated. We were all dressed in the clothes we had worn all night, except I had a beautiful handmade Indian vest my mother-in-law had sent for Christmas. (I wore it for days.) Some of the fellows had wounds, the most prominent being sported by Wilfred, who had a gaping cut extending from between his eyebrows into his hair. (Later we dressed it.)

After dinner, some of us went to town to look up our friends. It was night when we picked our way out of the devastated town. As far as we had been able to ascertain, no one we knew had been killed.

It was weird seeing darkness where there should have been a city full of lights. The only bright spots we saw were the headlights of an occasional car and an isolated fire or gas light here and there.

Graeme's Story

About seven people began coming out of the rubble. That's all you could call it because there were no houses left, no houses at all. We all started wandering out to see what had become of the neighbors. Mike never came out. The fellow from down the street and I started looking for him. We found him under a large piece of roof near his motor car. Apparently, he had attempted to do the same thing Pam and I had done—take shelter in his car—only he hadn't made it. He had been a nice, average young fellow, and now he was dead. We covered him up and wondered how many others there were.

We stayed near the remains of our houses and waited. In order to pass the time away, we looked for our belongings. All that was left of our house was the floor. The electronic organ was twenty feet from the house. The couch was in the swimming pool. All of our clothes were strewn far and wide, and we had nothing to put on.

About 10:30, a Civil Defense truck came rolling through with a loudspeaker. They told us to stay at home, that the situation was serious, and they would keep us informed. We told them about Mike, and about an hour later, a police vehicle came and removed the body. For Christmas lunch, we had a chicken boiled over a fire built from pieces of our house. That was a unique experience. Pam broke down a few times during the day, though she did her best to keep me from seeing. Finally, we got in our car and went to look up nearby friends. Those were some very emotional moments. People were very moved just seeing casual acquaintances. The emotion in a meeting after you have been through something like this is just incredible.

The real feeling of despair came as the sun started to set. Where were we going to sleep? Eventually, we decided to go into the city and see if my office was intact. It was very wet because of broken windows, but we found a dry corner of carpet to curl up on and counted ourselves lucky. There were many people in the building I had never seen before, but this presented no problems. We were all in the same boat.

Nancy's Story

When daylight began to break, I opened my door a bit and looked out. I couldn't see the ground, it was covered with sheets of tin, fallen trees, clothes, and all kinds of timber.

I headed for the dining room, but it wasn't there anymore. The doors had blown in, the roof collapsed, water was everywhere. But no one in the hotel had been hurt.

We spent all Christmas Day trying to sweep out water, but it seemed like we could not accomplish anything. There was just no end to the water and rubble, and the wet and frightened people that kept coming, hoping for shelter for the night. I just wanted to sit down and cry.

Peter's Story

When we looked out in the morning, we just could not believe what we saw. It looked as if the place had been bombed. There were no trees, nothing green. The main street of Darwin was a world of rubble.

I decided to go home and see how my roommate was. I walked down the stairs and met more people coming in. There were wild-eyed mothers in nighties carrying screaming kids and fathers carrying possessions as well as children. They were all wet and bedraggled and poured into the lighted building like bees swarming to honey. In the parking lot I couldn’t find my car at first. It had moved!

Driving home I felt almost as if I were alone on a strange planet. The silence was unnerving. For the most part, people were still holed up in the rubble of their homes. Now and then I would see a dog or cat scurry out of sight. (By the next day the homeless pets were being shot).

With the power poles and trees all over the roads, it took me a long time to get home. I saw children's Christmas presents on the ground, and stuck in fences. I felt like crying when I saw a Teddy Bear tangled in a fence. It was almost like seeing a corpse.

At last, I pulled up in front of my house, and the main structure was still there. Much of the roof was gone, and water was all over the floor. There was one small area where the roof and ceiling were still intact, and underneath was a dry couch. Ive, my roommate, and I sat on that one dry spot and drank the beer that was left in the refrigerator. After that, Ive went out to see friends, and I went to sleep.

When I woke up, I decided to go out and see if I could buy some batteries for my transistor radio. Lots of people were milling around by then. They reminded me of lost sheep. No one knew what to do. I found a little shop open, and they were raking in the money. People were spending all the money they had on them. We had no way of knowing that by the next day, all necessities would be distributed free and for weeks there would be no need of money. But meanwhile, the little shops sold everything they had on the shelves.

When I got back home Ive was still out, and already a looter had been in the house. The radio I had bought batteries for was gone and so was most of our food. I learned later that looters had stripped many of the garages before the owners could even get to their premises on Christmas Day. It doesn't take the scavengers long to get on the job after a disaster, but their activities were nipped in the bud when the Commonwealth Police arrived from the south.

Ray's Story

When we came out of the closet, the house was demolished. I think the only reason our closet had stayed together was because it was against the brick bathroom. I looked out over the back of our suburb of Stuart Park. It was a hilly area, and I could see a few people moving slowly around picking up things out of the mess. Somewhere I could hear a siren, so I guess even that early someone was doing something. I decided we would do something, too. There was no use hanging around the house, there was nothing left. Believe me, that fact was the least of my worries! I thought it was a bloody miracle that we were all alive!

The six of us got in the car, which was untouched, and headed for the hotel where I worked. The thing that hit us most was the way the bloody power poles were twisted around to the way the wind was going. They are made of heavy steel, and many of them were twisted right off. And every tree left standing was leafless, completely bare. There was no sound. Everything was just eerie, like an atomic bomb had hit the place.

It was good to get to the hotel. It was a hive of activity. Some people were moving in, and others were mopping up. The lobby was a mess. I got my family and friends moved in and went to work. While I was at the desk, a man pulled up out in front in a beautiful car. He came in and asked if we had any rooms available. I asked him if his home was wrecked, and when he said it was, I just handed him a key. This was what we did all day. Another fellow came running in and offered me ten dollars for a room. I said, "I don't want your money. You can have a room whether you have money or not." People were so frantic to get settled into this solid building so they could begin to pull their lives together again.

Santa hadn't forgotten Darwin that day after all. We didn't have any power of course, so we emptied the freezers and cooked the biggest Christmas dinner that anyone ever saw. I wouldn't venture to guess how many people we fed that day. They just kept coming well into the night. And so, for a while, this small segment of the population forgot their troubles and were happy.

Bernice's Story

When dawn came, we could see that our house was gone. When we were able to get out of the car and look around, we found that the flooring was gone from the bathroom, and Paul's room. And that was where I had wanted to wait it out! Ours was a brand new sub-division, so we had no immediate neighbours. The unoccupied houses were all in ruins. Off in the distance, we could see a few cars beginning to move around.

Bob cleared a path to the street so that we could leave, while the boys searched the yard for anything salvageable. They didn't find much, but did manage to get together a few wet items of clothing, which they put in the boot (trunk) of the car. They couldn't quit talking about finding the stove in the yard of the house next door. When the dog appeared and they found Bob's violin intact in its case, their day was made.

Just as we were ready to leave, our friend Rob drove up. It was so thrilling to see someone we knew, and the words just tumbled out. There had been deaths in his street, and he was very shocked and upset. Our car started without any trouble, and we set off following Rob to the home of his in-laws, the Heatons. We had to drive over vacant lots at times because of the debris in the roads. At one stage, Rob's car got bogged, and nearby was another car which was stuck. We pulled them both out.

When we arrived at the Heatons, we all became very emotional, but finally we calmed down and loaded up the cars with everything we could salvage from the ruins of their home. Then we went to the nearest school and registered. The school was bursting at the seams with people, some crying, others roaming around in silent shock. The smell of urine pervaded the air, and little ones wailed fretfully for food. We decided we would go to our church in the city area and see how it had withstood the storm.

It seemed to take hours to drive to town. The destruction we saw seemed unreal. It was unbelievable that it had happened to us. This was the type of thing that happened in far off places like Pakistan, or South America, or China. What a joy it was to see the church buildings in good shape in the midst of hell! Other families were there too, and the men erected a toilet out of rubble over a hole in the ground, and the women pooled the food and set about providing a Christmas dinner. (In the days to come we were to provide many dinners to be taken to the nearest schools and the airport for waiting evacuees.)

No one at all had dry bedding. A bed Christmas night was the bare floor, with bodies sprawled everywhere. It began raining in the night and we got up and rushed around collecting pots, pans and plastic rubbish bins to catch water in. How much we take things like running water for granted!

Eunice’s Story

With dawn the wind eased, and we were able to stand in the carport and survey the desolate new world around us. Opposite us are big railway sheds surrounded by a 6-foot cyclone fence.

Along, over, and through the fence were tin, pieces of wood, ceiling fans and furniture from the entire neighborhood. Clothing and curtains gave a finishing touch, adding spots of colour here and there. The huge tree next door was down, filling their yard. Broken glass lay on the ground like a carpet. Keeping shoes on normally barefoot children became an ordeal.

Everything was gone, and I guess we were lucky to have the carport in spite of the leaks. We called out to our neighbours and found that everyone had survived, so the next job was to clear everything out from behind the Leyland, so that poor Barb could be taken to the hospital.

Later we began picking things up, but decided that it was a fruitless task as there was nowhere to put anything. We channeled our energies into Christmas dinner instead, getting the neighbours to contribute pieces of their houses for the great community cooking fire! Everyone giggled and made jokes and ate like horses. I guess we were still in a state of shock, gratefully to be alive. We knew nothing at that time about the tragedies all around us.

Christmas night we sheltered in a neighbour’s living room, the only part of his house he had left.

Robyn's story

Dawn broke and the wind eased. At last, the end was in sight. Rob winked at me and said, "Hello Muscles." Now that we could hear ourselves speak, we couldn't get enough of hearing the sound of our voices. We were so grateful to be alive. We eased ourselves out from under our wall one by one and found we were on an island! The stairways were both gone, and we were marooned on the floor of the upstairs house. We could see for a long way, and the view was heart-stopping. I could not see one house standing. (We found out later that our area in the far northern suburbs was the worst hit in the city. The eye of the cyclone had bypassed us, and we took a steady pounding from the deadly winds next to the centre of the storm.)

Rob found a hole in the floorboards and dropped down through it, then caught Dad as he went through. In this way, we all went down until only Evan was left. Evan dropped through the hole so confidently, then all of a sudden, he just stopped, and there he was with his bottom half dangling toward us and his top half still up above. We just laughed ourselves silly, and the girls grabbed hold of Evan's legs and swung on them until he fell through, and they all landed in a heap on the floor.

Rob and I then went to check on our neighbours, while the rest picked up what they could. Poor Mum kept crying because her albums were all gone, and her shells were scattered everywhere.

We knew immediately that something was wrong at John's and Jenny's. The brick walls had collapsed. My heart was pounding so hard it seemed about to burst from my chest. We followed a noise we heard, and there they were. John and Jenny both clawing bricks off this enormous pile. "Oh no", that's all I was able to moan. They turned around and looked at us then, and oh my God, I hope I never again see faces like those. No one said a word, so we

began pulling bricks away too, and after awhile the first thing we saw was little John's hand. Jenny began sobbing quietly then.

Finally, Rob brought the little boy out of the pile of bricks, and he was so bruised and his face was blue. I couldn't stand it any more. I started bawling, and then everyone did. We just cried and cried until there were no tears left. I guess it helped, because John and Jenny were able to talk then.

Little John had stayed in his bed waiting for Santa, and part of the wall had fallen on him quite early in the storm. His parents had immediately attempted to get at him, but then the rest of the wall had started going, and they had barely escaped being buried themselves.

Rob went out and found a sheet somewhere, and when he had covered the little boy I walked around with Jenny. I didn't want to take her near my children. I felt guilty because they were all safe. After awhile, Jenny's brother arrived, and he took the little sheet-covered form and lay it in the back seat of his car. John and Jenny got in the front seat and they all drove off.

Rob drove away to see if Rob and Berniece were all right. Mother was very shaken over little John's death. She had never been able to forgive herself that she cried over shells and albums while a little boy lay dead next door.

Pauline's Story

The wind started abating about dawn, and I wanted to leave the bus and go home to Sue and Jack. My new friends wouldn't let me, though. They told me to be sensible and wait until things stopped blowing around. They held on to my arms, and we argued, but in the end, I won as I always do, because once I make up my mind about something, there is no stopping me. I kissed them all and jumped out of the van. I didn't even look at my bogged pick-up, I just started running. I was only about three blocks from Sue's.

I must have made a weird sight as I ran along, sidestepping and jumping over obstacles. Not that there was anyone to see me. I was the only living thing about, it seemed to me. The only sounds were the creaking tin and the lowering hum of the wind. I don't know why I didn't get hit by some of the objects that were still moving gently through the air, looking for a place to settle down. My stomach churned as I saw the ruined house I flew past. Why had I left my kids?

I turned into their street, and as it was a short block, I could see all the way down it and there was not one house left standing. I think only a mother could know how I felt then. I know tears were running down my face, and I was praying aloud all the way down to number 28. I stopped in front of what had been the house, and there were only a few walls left, and the rest was in the street and in the yard. The Christmas tree was laying near the gate, which was twisted and hanging by one hinge. I thought of how I had been safe in that van with my young hippie friends, so I made my way through the debris to where I knew the car was parked under the back part of the house. I can tell you my heart was pounding, and when Sue fell out of the car yelling,

"Mother!", it was the happiest moment of my life. We must have spent fifteen minutes all talking at once.

It wasn't long before the sounds of humanity were wafting through the air, and what welcome noises they were! There were no tragedies on our street, only a few minor cuts and bruises. Neighbours who normally never said more than hello to one another, were hugging and kissing. No one wanted to do anything, so we all gathered in groups and recounted our experiences. Not long before noon, a police vehicle came through, telling us to remain near our homes until further notice.

In the wake of the police, another car slowly wended its way down the street. It was Granny and her daughter Flo! Once more stories were told. Flo's house was one of the few in the city that was still livable, so she offered to house my family for as long as we needed a home. This was a time when friends were really friends. Darwin is a town where, traditionally, all races have mixed together very happily. Sadly, following in the footsteps of the rest of the world, racial tension occasionally raises its ugly head in our city. However, these things did not affect Granny's family and mine. We had been friends for too long.

We gathered up what we could and went with Flo and Granny, some of the lucky few who had a home to go to.

Granny's story

In the morning the big wind stopped, and it was so wet under the bed that I wished I could get out. But my old bones were stiff and heavy, like lead, and I couldn't move, so I waited for my daughter to come. After awhile I went to sleep and the next thing I knew, there she was, looking under the bed at me. When I smiled at my dear daughter and told her I had been waiting a long time, she started crying and laughing all at the same time. Then she grabbed me by the arms and dragged me out from under the bed. She propped me up against it and massaged my legs, and I sat there and looked out over the city.

Soon Flo helped me to my feet and I was able to wobble to the car. I saw my next door neighbours out in their yard, and I waved at them. I was happy. I didn't even bother to pick up anything left around my poor, funny little house. It took us a long, long time to drive to Sue and Jack and Paulie's. I don't know how Flo managed to get through some of the places she did. Poor old Darwin was flung in bits, all over the streets. Flo's husband hadn't come with her because he was at home drinking. He is a white man.

Ken's story

Unbelievably it was morning, the wind was abating, and we were still on the floor of the house! For a long time we lay stiff and immobile, afraid to face the terrifying world. We actually felt the sun's rays before we dared to move, and by the time we pulled ourselves up and stretched, it had gone behind a cloud. The children began talking hesitantly, as if they had forgotten how. That was the most beautiful sound in the world - those little voices that had irritated me so

often in the past. We could have all been wiped out of existence during the night, but here we were, suffering nothing worse than discomfort. We looked at the terrible ruin around us, and knew that everyone could not have been so lucky.

Our outside stairs were still in place, so we walked carefully down them. The first thing we saw was an ambulance pulling up in front of Kathy's and Ian's place or what was left of it. With the ambulance was a neighbour from down the street. He jumped out of his car and went under the house with the ambulance men. I told Jill to wait for me while I went to see if I could help. On my way in I met one of the men coming out, carrying a little form wrapped in a blanket. That was the two year old. I rushed in and there was Kathy lying on a blanket on the cement slab. Ian was holding her head in his arms while the others looked at her legs. Only they did not look like legs anymore. They were twisted and smashed, and bones were protruding through the flesh in several places. Kathy's eyes were dull with pain, but she was conscious and looking lovingly at her husband. I had never seen a pair as crazy about each other as those two were.

While the ambulance men brought the stretcher in, I asked Dave where the baby was. He told me the story in whispers. Kathy and Ian, each carrying a child, had tried to go down the outside stairs to the car. A section of the house next door had flown straight at them and they had gone down, stairs and all. Somehow, Ian had been thrown clear, but the baby had disappeared out of his arms. He crawled around for a few minutes trying to find it, then he began calling to Kathy. The screaming wind carried away her weak replies. When he finally found her, she was halfway buried under the rubble of the stairs. She weakly asked about the children, and though the baby was gone and he could not see the two-year-old anywhere near Kathy, he told her they were both all right. He knew that she was terribly injured, and he wanted her to rest. The storm was still raging at its height, so he curled himself around her head, hoping to protect her from any more flying objects. This was where they were found by Dave.

By this time, Kathy was unconscious, so the two of them carefully extricated her from her prison. Near her feet, they found the two-year-old. Dave said that finding the dead toddler just after having seen Kathy's legs nearly undid Ian, but somehow the poor guy carried his wife under the house and stayed with her while Dave attended to the child.

Kathy was just barely with it as we loaded her painfully on to the stretcher, but even so, it was easy to see that the slightest movement was terrible agony to her. The first aid man carried her to the ambulance and Dave and I walked at either side of a pale, unseeing Ian, and helped him into the back to sit at Kathy's side. I noticed that they had the little body in front. Then the ambulance rolled slowly off, its first trip on what would undoubtedly be a long, long day.

I went back to our place to find Jill, and seeing her out in the yard quietly talking to the children as they picked up things, the scene I had just left hit me with such force, that I suddenly just started crying like a baby. I mean one day you have the happiest family in the neighbourhood, and a few hours later their world is shattered beyond repair, while I, who had been planning to leave my wife and kids,

had them all running to me now, love and concern written all over their faces. I wonder if there was a God, and if there was, how He could allow such an injustice to happen. Or was there a lesson there?

Men, women and children from all around spent Christmas morning looking for the missing baby. We men centered our search on the pile of rubble where Kathy and the two year old had been found. We moved, poked, and probed through everything, but we never found it.

We didn't have a Christmas dinner. None of the adults were hungry, though I suppose the women found something for the kids to eat.

Late in the afternoon, Dave and I made an expedition to the building where my office was to see whether all of us who needed a place to shelter could move in. A lot of people were there already, but there was room for more. On the way out we met Carla, and though I was glad to know that she was all right, she seemed to belong to another world. It was getting late, so Dave and I hurried back to lead the exodus from our neighbourhood.

Dr. Rode's story

At six I went home. My car had debris all over it, and I was surprised that it started. I tried to go home through the Botanical Gardens and all the trees hundreds of years old were lying across the road. I then went around the Gardens, driving through lakes, puddles, holes and ditches, and dodging junk of every description. When I got home, the neighbours were gone, their houses were gone, and my house was severely damaged. I thought that my wife and guests were dead. I jumped out of the car, the sheets and towels I had brought from the hospital.

When I went into the house, there was everyone laughing like hell. They were huddling together, shivering and cold and just glad to be alive. I threw sheets and towels and answered all the questions in a hurry, then my wife and I headed to the hospital. She had on a red evening dress, which she wore for days as she helped with patients.

By the time I arrived back at the hospital, the first ambulance had come through. I joined the other doctors in the main building and we briefed each other very shortly, each taking over a certain job. I said I would get the blood, then the superintendent asked me if I would be in charge of the dead. I said that I would, as no one else was willing to take on the job.

The first thing I did was rush over to the Red Cross to get blood, but no one was there. They all lived out in the northern suburbs and could not get in. The roof was gone, but I got a half way dry carton of blood. We then shoved a bed into a corner of the hospital pharmacy and started getting blood from relatives and anyone who looked a little bit fit.

Next I had to find a place for bodies, as the morgue was gone. We arranged a temporary morgue in the police station, and as the bodies came in, I examined them and wrote reports. Most of them had died of asphyxia, from being crushed under something. A few were killed by flying debris. We took pictures of all unidentified bodies. Burial could not wait. Not in the

Darwin climate. I expected there to be at least 500 dead, but there actually were only 49. There were many stories of hundreds of dead people and mass graves, but I personally had no knowledge of these.

Most of the doctors and nurses worked over one hundred hours without sleep. On the first day we did 92 major operations. I cannot say how many smaller injury cases there were. Everyone stopped counting. They just worked and worked.

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POST-SCRIPTS

Tom Bell, a former member of the legislative council, was with his wife and son in a house that started to break up. They decided to run to another house a short distance away. While they were running, a sheet of tin shot through the air and chopped her in two. He and the son took the two parts of the poor woman back to the wrecked house. The daughter had been away the night before. She came back early in the morning to see how her family had fared, and found her mother in the kitchen severed, under the blanket.

In the suburb of Nightcliff, a fourteen-year-old girl had her spine severed when a brick wall collapsed on her. They dug her out and she spent four hours strapped to a door in the back of a station wagon. The roads in the area were so bad that no vehicle could get through.

A man took a fellow apparently suffering from severe shock to the hospital. The medical people wouldn't look at him because they were swamped with far more severe cases. They pointed out that he wasn't even bleeding and he was sitting up by himself. About that time, the man's eyes rolled back, and he fell over dead.

There was a woman with an invalid husband. She only weighed about 95 pounds and he tipped the scales at nearly 200. At the height of the storm, with their house blowing away from them, she got him out of his wheelchair, down the stairs, and into their car. As they were going out their glass door, it had exploded in their faces and they were both all cut up, but she said she never felt anything. The neighbour's roof blew off and landed sideways against the stilts of their house, protecting their car from flying objects.

A man was very concerned about his mother, who lived alone. Very early in the morning he began driving to her home. He found all the roads choked with debris, and taken several detours. He was picking his way slowly down one street when, suddenly, a screaming woman threw herself in front of his car, crying, "For God's sake, come in, my husband is bleeding to death!" He rushed in the partly wrecked home and found the husband on the floor with a piece of wood with tin attached to it embedded in him. The injured man was bleeding profusely and was in a semi-conscious state, so was taken to a nearby police station forthwith.

There were two kids left in a mobile home on Christmas Eve, while their parents went partying. The home unit was picked up and rolled for over one hundred yards with the kids in it. They

walked out without a scratch, and some people in a nearby house ran out and grabbed them, and kept them until the parents turned up the next day.

An Austrian couple were crouched in their boat, and it was picked up and hurtled into the neighbour's yard. The man sent his wife to their pickup utility, and he ran into their partly constructed bathroom. For some reason the wife chose to sit on the driver’s side of the vehicle. A two by four approximately twelve feet long rocketed into the vehicle from the back, sliced through the back of the seat next to where the petrified girl was sitting, through the padding of the door and out the other side.

The Austrian drove around town proudly exhibiting the two by four for days.

One family were huddled on the floor of an upstairs house that was almost gone, when a baby only a few weeks old came flying through the air and landed in the middle of them. It was several days before contact was made with the happy parents.

Then there's old Oscar, a Norwegian who jumped ship during the First War to escape a bad marriage, and has been in Australia ever since. During the Second World War, he lost a leg when Darwin was bombed. At the time of the cyclone he lived in a little pensioner's apartment where he was quite happy and independent. On Christmas Eve he had been to a big party one of the department stores always puts on for the old folks. He had had a great time, and was singing at the top of his lungs when he was delivered home. No one will ever know what he went through that night, because on Christmas Day he was found unconscious in the shambles of his apartment, having suffered a stroke. The position in which he was found would indicate that he fell out of his wheelchair while trying to get out of his apartment. Today he lives at the hospital and smiles vacantly at the television.

In the northern suburbs, there is an 80-foot-high water tank with the impression of a refrigerator on its side. The refrigerator was found at the bottom and identified as belonging to a householder several blocks away!

A certain "death-house" disintegrated to the extent that all the floorboards were blown out. The woman who lived there was scalped and had a breast cut off by flying tin. Her seven-year-old daughter was blown out of the house and literally pulverized by flying objects. The husband suffered a broken collarbone.

There was a young couple who rode out the storm on board their 32-foot sailing yacht. The wind blew them right up under the wharf and against the shore.

In a third-floor hotel room (fortunately unoccupied), a car was found parked neatly, having blown through the wall from some distance away.

In front of an apartment building, the remains of a house, including the floor and several walls, had been dropped on five motor cars.

In a city theatre, there was a car halfway up the stairs to the upper circle of the movie house. It had been blown right off the street and had come to rest upside down on the carpeted stairs.

There was a couple, known in their neighbourhood to be heavy drinkers, who had spent Christmas Eve at a round of parties. Friends took them home about 10 PM, carried them inside and put them to bed. The next morning the ground level home was in ruins—no ceiling, no walls—only a couple of pieces of furniture, including the bed, were left. Concerned neighbours were horrified when they saw the two still forms on the bed, but were reduced to helpless laughter when it was found that the two suffered from nothing more serious than a mammoth hangover.

One hippie-type fellow figured he was safe in the bathtub. When the house went, the bathtub was lifted up and flung through the air some distance. The fellow got up and walked away with only a few cuts and bruises, but he still said it was the "worst trip" he had ever been on.

There was the dignified family man who shepherded his large brood into the nearest school, where hundreds were already assembled soon after the cyclone was over. He was a born leader, and he circulated among the weeping women and frightened children speaking words of comfort and cheer. No one at all laughed because he was wearing only a pair of boxer shorts with the rear end torn out.

A young couple named Bill and Anne were the proud possessors of a new home. It was obviously a wise choice, as it was the only house on the street left standing after the cyclone. During the first half of the blow, they had decided that the bathroom was the place for themselves, their dog, and two cats. They were soon joined by the couple next door. During the

eye, two Greek families from down the street trooped in with their pet goose and another cat. The company in the bathroom then numbered eleven humans and five animals.

All was well until the storm started again. The shrieking wind and obvious sounds of houses coming apart were too much for the goose which started honking, the cats, which started fighting, and a Greek lady, who began screaming hysterically. The men were apparently overcome by the hullabaloo, so Anne, who is a lovely delicate appearing English girl, punched the Greek lady in the jaw. She collapsed, weeping at a much lower pitch, onto a tangled ball of fighting cats. The cats jumped apart and the goose was so intrigued by all the action that it stopped honking.

Things were well in hand for the rest of the night, and all were mightily satisfied with the place of refuge they had chosen.

A young newcomer to Darwin was living in a caravan (house trailer) park in a tiny old-fashioned round type trailer. When the eye passed over, he breathed a sigh of relief that the cyclone was over, and went to sleep. When he woke up, his home was rolling over and over and over... and ...over.... and.....over.... He rolled up into a ball and passed out with fright. When he awakened again, he was lying on the cupboard and the door was above him. He climbed out, ran frantically to his motorcycle, which hadn't budged, and joined the line of traffic leaving Darwin. He wanted to be gone when "it" hit again!

AFTERWARDS

The Natural Disasters Organisation came into effect on October 21st, 1974.

Major-General Alan Stretton was the man in charge. He had been a company commander in Korea, a battalion commander in Malaya, and Chief of Staff of the Australian Army in Vietnam. He seemed a likely choice to coordinate the armed services, the Government, and civilian bodies into effective working units.

Most people of Darwin were wet, miserable, and bewildered on Christmas night. Seething masses of humanity were crammed into schools and office buildings without water, toilets, or bedding to sleep on. Babies cried endlessly, and mothers did not know what tomorrow would bring. But happily, tomorrow brought definite plans. Major-General Stretton and local officials had already assessed the damage and had decided to move as many people out of Darwin as possible. Frantic labour had been going on all night at the heavily damaged airport to make this possible.

The biggest airlift in Australian history began on the day after Christmas, or Boxing Day. The serious stretcher cases and people who had lost their immediate families were put on the first few planes. On the 27th of December, the first Jumbo that flew in broke the world record for a passenger load, with 654 aboard. Late on the same day, a 747 flew out with 694 men, women,

and children for Sydney. On December 26, 26, and 28, 14,464 people went south by plane. On the 29th, people were loaded on planes ranging from Jumbos, Hercules, 727 Jets, BAC 111's, DC 3's, and the giant U.S. Air Force Starlifter. When the airlift ended on the 31st, air controllers estimated that about 23,000 Darwin residents had been flown out.

Several thousand more went out by road. Some people had begun driving during the eye of the cyclone. There was a steady exodus for several days, and the tiny towns "down the track" were inundated with shocked and battered travellers. It was fantastic the way all of Australia rallied to the aid of stricken Darwin with help and money.

Those first few days were hard on mothers with small children. There was little they could do but wait for their names to come up, so that they could be taken from the relief centres by bus to the airport, where they would board planes and fly south to frantic relatives who, because of the loss of communication, had no idea whether their Darwin relatives were dead or alive. Many distraught relatives sat in southern airports for days, hoping and praying that the next plane from Darwin would bring their loved one.

One poor mother in America had five children, four in-laws, and seven grandchildren in Darwin. She telephoned every capital city in Australia hoping to find out something about them. Knowing of her plight, ham radio operators all over her part of the country tried day and night to pick up someone from Darwin. It was three days before a relative in Adelaide got word to her that her children were alive and well.

The people left in Darwin worked hard. They worked in the schools, registering people, and cooking meals for countless numbers. They worked at the airport, clearing runways, tagging evacuees like luggage, distributing cool drinks and umbrellas to the mothers and children waiting patiently to be taken away from the wilting tropical heat. They also had an unexpected job at the airport—that of separating the sheep from the goats! The goats were some scared men dressed as women in the hopes that they would be able to board a plane and leave behind the destroyed city.

Darwinites drove buses, and organized into clean-up crews. Already the stench of rotting food from gaping refrigerators and freezers was drifting into the air all over the city. Men remaining behind to mop up in Darwin kissed their wives and children goodbye, not knowing when they would see them again. Many would have preferred to stay, but women with young families realized they would hinder the efforts of the workers. There were no electricity and running water, so even though all remaining behind were immunized, the risk of disease could still be great.

In the country areas of Darwin, many families remained intact, as they had water and, in many cases, their own generators as well. All over, several families shared home while repairs were carried out on damaged houses. Horses and other stock roamed the countryside, as no one had time to repair fences those first few weeks.

During the war, the Japanese had bombed Darwin 65 times, inflicting severe damage on the harbour. At the time of Cyclone Tracy, there were 27 manned boats in the Darwin harbour. Only six survived. The rest sank, ran aground, or were smashed on the rocks. A total of 20 people died in the harbour, with others being unaccounted for.

The light aircraft section of the airport looked like a wrecking yard for airplanes. They were upside down, topsy turvy, and piled one on top of another. There were even pieces of some planes deeply imbedded in others.

Afterwards, people learned why Tracy had been so much worse than anyone could have suspected. A phenomenon known as "explosive deepening" had occurred, causing the eye of the cyclone to shrink rapidly. This caused an enormous and progressive increase in the ferocity of the wind in the "maximum speed ring", a band around the eye where the temperature is strongest. Freak incidences such as the refrigerator hitting the 80-foot water tank could only have been caused by tornadoes developing around the periphery of the eye. A cyclone alone, however violent, could not cause such upward movement. The tornadoes and explosive deepening no doubt account for the gross miscalculations of expected wind speeds. It is estimated by some that speeds of 260 mph were reached, but no one will ever know for sure, as all the instruments were broken early during the storm.

By the day after Christmas, the Salvation Army and some of the big department stores were on the job distributing bedding, mattresses and clothing. A couple of days later water was coming through the main pipe line into the city. It had several outlets in it, and people descended on it by the hundreds to take their first baths. The pipe line is next to the highway, and anyone driving by, day or night, could always enjoy the sight of bathers cavorting around the pipe line, some wearing bathing suits or underwear, others considering those frills unnecessary.

About a hundred Commonwealth Policemen were flown to Darwin to assist the exhausted local men, most of who had suffered great losses. A certain amount of looting went on, but it never did get as bad as many had feared, maybe because the extra law enforcement officers effectively discouraged ambitions in this direction. It was rumoured that a few of these men did a little looting themselves as they went about their duties, and there was supposed to have been a modern-day Robin Hood, who visited their rooms in the hotel while they were away, carrying off radios, cassettes, and cameras to be distributed to all and sundry. It is well known that even if the stories are true, other Commonwealth police worked 20 hours a day to keep the peace in Darwin.

Some power was restored in the city area within a little over a week. Welders and electricians worked long seven-day weeks, and crews were brought from southern states as well. Gradually the lights came back on in some main parts of the city and in outlying areas. The devastated northern suburbs remained virtual ghost towns for months.

Inevitably the big letdown came. The first intoxicated feelings of fight and purpose dissipated, and only the hangover was left. People began to realise that it would take a long, long time to

rebuild the city and their lives. The days of equality were over and bickering arose between government and private workers. Sick to death of the smell of the wounded city, men would depart, some forever, others to return because they did not belong anywhere else.

Gradually though, things leveled out, and the work went on. The army and navy clean-up crews were great morale boosters, and after they had helped clear the roads and make essential government services operational, they went to work on private blocks of land. Wives and children drifted back as soon as they were allowed in, and they lived in trailers, in makeshift shanties built from fibro picked up in the streets, in tents and buses and station wagons, and even in bathrooms left under houses.

All through the "Dry Season", one could take a drive through Darwin in the evening, and see people gathered around a table on the floor on one such house, the bar had been left intact, and the bottles and lovely crystal cocktail glasses were lined up neatly, ready for use. Sometimes a campfire could be seen burning cheerfully up there. If the floor dwellers should happen to prefer more luxurious living, a tent would be pitched.

Printed on one stark wall in the northern suburbs, was the legend, DARWIN OPEN AIR THEATRE, FEATURING GONE WITH THE WIND. On the side of a cement yacht were the words: TRACY COULDN'T MOVE HER, NOR CAN YOU. On the back of a battered car were these coy words: I SPENT THE NIGHT WITH TRACY. There were many, many more of these ironically humorous signs, a symbol of the spirit of Darwin.

When school opened in February, the education authorities were well and truly caught with their pants down. Out of three high schools in operation before the cyclone, only one high school and four grade schools opened. Some of the schools had been destroyed and others were being used to house army and navy men. No one had any idea how many children were around. And once the restrictions were lifted, Darwinites poured back into town. Bus drivers told how they would pull up on a street full of piles of rubble, and "kids would come out like rabbits out of holes". It was weeks before more schools could open, so many children had a prolonged holiday. It was first come, first served.

With the opening of school came the first big step back to normalcy. For it is true that children are the life blood of a city, then Darwin was far from dead!

EPILOGUE

Cyclone Tracy is now a year in the past. Christmas 1975 was quiet in Darwin. In spite of restrictions, delays in loan approval and the high cost of living, new and better houses are springing up. Many former city dwellers have moved to the country areas. A recent census has shown that Darwin is less than 10,000 down from its former population. This is quite

incredible, considering that building losses were estimated at ninety per cent. In fact, Lloyds of London reported that losses caused by Tracy resulted in the largest pay-out in history!

Many people who were in Darwin that Christmas of 1974 will suffer nightmares for the rest of their lives. Some will never recover from their human and material loss. At least not on this earth. Still others were strengthened by the experience having realized how thin indeed is the line between life and death, between riches and total loss. One thing we all have in common though, whether we be young or old, lost much or little, left Darwin or stayed, WE WILL NEVER FORGET THE NIGHT WE SPENT WITH TRACY.

THE END