

CHAPTER 2 - 1974: Cyclones, Politics and Stolen Dreams**28,500 WORDS – 65 PAGES**

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Riders on the storm

Riders on the storm
 Riders on the storm
 Into this town we're born
 Into this world we're thrown
 Like a dog without a bone
 A township all alone
 Riders on the storm

There's a cyclone been to play
 Tracy squealed on Christmas Day'
 Take a long holiday Go take a ride
 Sweet memories will die
 I'm a Killer on the pray,

Ya gotta love your town man
 Ya gotta love Darwin Take it by the hand
 Make them understand
 Our world on it depends
 Darwin should never end
 Gotta love our life, oh yeah

Based on the 1971 hit, Riders on the Storm, by the Doors.

By Liz Elaine, Sonia and Louise Ball - 27 December 1974

1. MY DARWIN

Christmas Eve 1974; you couldn't actually say Cyclone Tracy caught Darwin by surprise because we all knew it was coming. What actually surprised us was the ferocity and destructiveness of the storm. It was a life-changing moment for thousands of people, myself included. It was not that we didn't have any warnings. They were plentiful, if somewhat blasé, on both the television and the radio stations. The warnings were pre-recorded with a siren we'd all grown too used to and advised people to stay indoors, store drinking water, food, batteries and emergency supplies and to shelter in a substantial sturdy room like the bathroom or laundry. They also told us to stay calm and stay tuned to the radio. But we had grown used to these warnings and we ignored them that night; just as we always had. So did most of the other 43,000 (ish) Darwin inhabitants who had not gone away for the holiday season. A cyclone never hit Darwin, and certainly couldn't strike on Christmas Eve. Could it?

Some business houses and government offices put their cyclone plans into action late on Christmas Eve day and so did some house-holders. But not us, we had big plans for Xmas and preparing for a cyclone was certainly not on our list of priorities. I had been out of school for a couple of years and was well and truly into my apprenticeship as a hairdresser. I had some serious socialising to do that night and nothing was going to get in the way of that. Initially I had planned to spend Christmas Eve in Darwin with my friends and then travel out to Wildboar to have Christmas dinner with my family the next day after I'd done my early four hour shift at the BP Service Station where I worked weekends. I had been charged with taking my grandparents out to Wildboar and I was due to pick them up at 10.30am on Christmas Day. I had been saving madly to go overseas so was working three jobs at the time. As well as pumping petrol on the weekends I also worked a couple nights a week as a barmaid at the BeachComber bar at the Koala Hotel just down the road from the salon where I was doing my apprenticeship.

I loved the Darwin of 1974. It was exciting and vibrant and as a community we seemed perched on the edge of many exciting things like self government, the Alice-Darwin rail-link, mining opportunities and improved trade links with Asia with whom we identified with so much more than the eastern seaboard or southern states. Growing up in the "Top End" of Australia we had deeper connections with Malaysia and Indonesia than we did with the "bottom end" of Australia. Darwin had a distinct Asian influence. We ate salty plums and satay, cooked with coconut, tamarinds and mango, dressed in sarongs and carried our belongings around in a dili bag. You only went "south" to go for training, education, sports or health reasons unless it was to see

family (like the Government “long soxers” and other southern workers did when they went “home”). Locals with no southern ties, as we were, mostly chose to go “north” to places like Ambon, Bali and Dili. It was quarter of the price and much more reflective of our cosmopolitan lifestyle. For many Darwinites, this was where their roots were.

It was also a time I started to really develop my love of history in all forms. We had some truly amazing trips through Arnhem Land looking at artifacts and two of our neighbors in Fannie Bay were Peter Spillett and Colin Jack-Hinton, both renown for their work in recording Territory history in their own ways. Through our childhood friendships with their children we all got on pretty well. Colin Jack-Hinton was a larger than life eccentric who founded the Maritime Museum and Peter Spillett was the founding President of both the National Trust in Darwin and the Historical Society of the Northern Territory. Two very different personalities but both men whose work with our unique Territory history and heritage left me spellbound.

Darwin was a town of plenty as they’d say in the more cultured centres of Australia. To us it meant we had a “big mob” of everything. There were big mobs of beer, big mobs of buffalo and big mobs of barramundi and we’d mix it all together at barbeques with big mobs of mates under the most glorious sunsets in the world. I was a very political young woman and wasn’t afraid to have my say. Most local people in my age group (18-25s), were at the time. We’d grown up in a Territory where our parents were continually disgruntled at what “the government” were doing to us in one way or another. They were still reeling from the unfairness of not being permitted to vote in the 1967 referendum when it was their lifestyles that would be impacted more than any other in Australia by the outcome. Two of the questions put in that referendum sought changes in the Australian Constitution where-ever Aborigines were mentioned. This included removing the impediment in s.51(xxvi) to the Commonwealth Government making special laws with respect to Aborigines and removing the impediment in s.127 to counting Aboriginal people in the census. The referendum produced a massive 90% Yes vote in all six States and laws were subsequently passed:

This was meant to be a watershed period for changing the social and political relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in the Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland particularly. Unfortunately it was not to be. Most people believed the Yes vote would end legal discrimination and other injustices and that it would permit, for the first time ever, Commonwealth intervention in Aboriginal Affairs. As history now tells us, this was far from a black and white issue and so much more deserving of a more deeply scrutinized and comprehensive approach. Territorians, of all persuasions, justly felt they deserved to have their say and be heard irrespective of the outcome.

1974 was also a time when there were whispers amany and debate aplenty about the Racial Discrimination Act and the Native Title Act particularly in relation to what Gough Whitlam, the Prime Minister of Australia at the time, was going to do with the Gurindji people at Daguragu where land at Wattie Creek was about to be excised from the Vestey Pastoral Lease. In 1966 a group of poorly paid aboriginal stockmen had staged a walk out from Wave Hill and set up camp at Wattie Creek calling for their own land to be legally handed back to them. While most people I know didn’t object to this so much as the fact that Territorians were again not being properly consulted.

Dr Rex Patterson, Federal Minister for the Northern Territory released his somewhat contradictory report, The Alligator Rivers Report, which looked at the wetlands including the uranium province, the proposed Kakadu National Park and the Arnhem Land Aboriginal reserve all in the immediate vicinity of Wildboar Abattoir. It created much talk and debate around the campfire

Like the rest of the Northern Territory, Darwin was administered through Canberra and there were always disagreements and differences of opinion on how we should be governed. The one thing we all agreed on was that while Darwin was undoubtedly the friendliest city of the Commonwealth it was not the most obedient. According to my father “the government” sent Commonwealth public servants to Darwin to “civilize us” and bring us into line with the other states. In 1974 politics was the hot topic at most gatherings and meetings. In that year the Legislative Council was replaced by a fully elected 19 Member Legislative Assembly representing the whole of the Northern Territory. The first Legislative Assembly took office only two months before Cyclone Tracy. My parents were great supporters of self government and good friends of Goff and Joyce Letts. Dr Goff Letts was a founder of the newly formed Country Liberal Party and Leader of the Majority in that very first Legislative Assembly. He’d worked with Dad at the Animal Industry Branch and our families were close for many years. My mother played squash with Joyce Letts and as kids we all knew each other pretty well. In fact, as a young girl I aspired to be like their daughter Marion and my very first pre-teenage crush had been on their eldest son Ewen. I have no idea where either is today. How times change!

Ron Withnall, member for Port Darwin, was one of the two independents on that Assembly (the other was Dawn Lawrie who later performed my wedding ceremony on Fannie Bay Beach in 1981). Ron Withnall, a solicitor of note, was one of the owners of Marrakai Station. Originally from Townsville, he served as the Crown Law Officer for the Northern Territory from 1954 to 1968, when he was elected to the NT Legislative Council (forerunner to the Legislative Assembly). He was also inaugural President of the Law Society of the Northern Territory. Mr. Withnall (as we respectfully called him) was a keen advocate for self-determination and self government. I used to love listening to him get excited about what was happening with Territory politics and he was always telling me that young people like me were living in the “the best times” and had a responsibility to carry the Territory to bigger and better things. I liked Ron Withnall. He had a gentle attitude until you ruffled him and he knew what my father called “his stuff”. I’m sure he’d never met a bunch of kids as feral as us and we managed to ruffles him a few times. He had forgiven us many sins and childhood misdemeanors over the years.

Another Territory politician I enjoyed spending time with was Tiger (Harold) Brennan who was the Mayor of Darwin at the time. To say he was a bit eccentric is probably an understatement but the Territory was like that. He'd been born in India and educated in the English public schools system. He was balding, had thick glasses, a moustache, smoked fat stinky cigars, wore a pith helmet and openly minded every-bodies business. Opponents to his eccentric ways said he was full of "Pith and wind" but I enjoyed his rambunctiousness. He was a real character of the bush and his enthusiasm (and unrelenting bias) for the Northern Territory was contagious.

I'm not sure how he ended up in the Territory but I know he used to prospect for tin and Wolfram around the Tennant Creek area and that during WW2 he was seconded to the US Army and was awarded the Congressional Medal of Freedom for Service in the Pacific. He later became known to my family when he was prospecting at Maranboy, an old tin mining centre, just south of Katherine. He later went on to represent the outback electorate of Elsey before becoming the Mayor of Darwin. He called in at Wildboar, and our McKinley Street house, quite often and he loved to get raucous and hold the floor. Because we were two of very few single young women in Darwin after the cyclone Tiger kept a watchful eye over Diane and I, as he did with young families, the elderly and other vulnerable constituents in his community. We used to be watchful of "The Tigers Eye" because we knew if we did anything to untoward he'd either dob us in to my father and we'd all be in trouble or worse, we'd have to sit through one of his tirades which were usually reserved for "*those blinking bods*" in the Canberra bureaucracy.

After a fairly wild party at Wildboar a few years later he gave me his pith helmet as "a new one was in order". He died a little later in January 1979 and his family requested his well worn pith back. I was upset at the time because I did not want to give it back but my father sat me down and explained how important the helmet was to who Tiger was and that it was only fitting it go with him to the grave or to one of his family under the circumstances. I didn't agree then, I wanted to keep it. Today I fully understand the wisdom of what he told me and I'm glad I handed it back.

Amid the flurry of such characters and advocates for self determination 1974 was also the year the Country Liberal Party (CLP) was born in the Northern Territory. It was, in simplistic terms, an alliance or merge of the Country Party in the south (Alice Springs) and a small group of Liberals in the north with both groups having a common arch enemy – the Australian Labor party (ALP). The Country Liberal Party was the smallest political party ever formed (at the time) but went on to become one of the most successful having the longest term in office in Australian politics than any other. I was fortunate to later meet other Territory political characters like Sam Calder, Bernie Kilgariff from Alice Springs and Les McFarlane, Member for Elsey.

I also liked our new Mayor who was elected in May 1975 just after Tracy. Dr Ella Stack lived not far from us in Fannie Bay. She was Darwin's first woman Mayor and we were really proud of her because we really did believe she had what it took to rebuild our town. One of her platforms was to get Darwin residents back into safe but affordable housing and this is what I personally feel got her across the line. Many Federal and southern bureaucrats, along with their unsympathetic entourages of consultants, planners and advisors, were hell bent on either relocating the city of Darwin completely or implementing a planning code so extreme that none of us would ever be able to afford to re-build under it. The first time Dr Stack donned her Mayoral robes was at the 1975 Debutantes Ball where she presided over a record number of teenage debutantes which was pretty ironic considering there was meant to be none of us in Darwin. My good friend Shirley Ansell (of Darwin Co-op Taxi fame) and I were talked into being debutantes by previous Mayor Tiger Brennan who died soon after. There were very few dress shops in Darwin at the time (only six months since Tracy) so my mother flew a wedding dress in from somewhere and modified it - which is another irony because it is the only time in my life I've actually worn a wedding dress. I've been married twice but chose a more casual theme on both occasions!

I'm not to sure I understood in those days the difference between the right and the left or even fully understood party politics. I can honestly say that I have personally had many great working relationships with both sides at different times of my life. In 1974/75 we were just all fired up because we wanted the Territory to be run from within by Territorians and the CLP gave us that opportunity albeit without much of a voice in Canberra. My father, a staunch CLP man, was an undisputed "Gough botherer" to the extent he even cracked a bottle of crinkle cut rum to celebrate when he (Whitlam) was sacked by the Governor-General on 11 November 1975. However, he was angry that it all happened on the same day that we, as a country, were supposed to remember our war dead. Malcolm Fraser had won favor in Darwin by promising us statehood within five years. As it turned out it was a disappointingly empty promise as he did it without much thought to process and it never eventuated. We are now on our "third time lucky" attempt. I live in hope, some 35 years later, that statehood won't turn into another 100 year promise like the Alice to Darwin railway line. I am still as keen an advocate for statehood today as I was then, but I also like to think I'm a bit wiser. When the 1975 Federal election came, my father taped "Vote #1 Fraser" onto the side of my yellow Datsun coupe in blue electrical tape. I was distraught when some-one peeled the "F" off Fraser and turned the "s" into a "z". I now had the words "Vote #1 Razor" on my car. I was horrified but my father roared laughing

"Don't worry about it," he laughed, " think they can take the 'F' out of Fraser do they? – we'll show them on Election Day"

Never-the-less it seemed to us that the day (and rule) of Canberra based bureaucracy and the "long soxers" was finally going to tittle in our favour. The Northern Territory was about to become of age and so were we. We were fired up and wanted to be part of it. We were young and excited and thought we held the future of the Northern Territory and its people's right there in the palms of our hands.

And then, overnight, with a puff of wind, it was all gone.....

Unfortunately not much thought had gone into planning Darwin. It was sort of adhoc and jumbled but to those of us born and raised there we didn't know any different - it was just home and we liked it that way. We were more concerned about the state of the roads than the state of the buildings. Every wet season was the same. The trucks got stuck in flooding washouts in places like Newcastle Waters or on the Katherine low level bridge or even further south in Alice Springs when the Todd flooded Heavitree Gap. By necessity we learnt to stock up on matches and toilet paper, flour and rice and big mobs of spuds and oranges because they'd last without refrigeration.

Despite the fact that Darwin had been hit by several cyclones in the past there had been no real emphasis on building houses to withstand cyclonic winds.

It is estimated that between 70% and 90% of the houses in Darwin were totally inadequate even for a cyclone of half Tracy's might. Apart from wind force, no-one had considered the impact airborne rubbish and flying debris would have on stilted houses with louvres from window to floor in many of them. In our house in McKinley Street the bottom two feet were tin or galvanised louvres and then it was glass to the ceiling; great for the sea breeze but pretty crappy in a cyclone. In the dry season we'd hang wet towels on over louvres to get a cooling effect as the sea breeze came through. In the wet season we'd drape our wet washing over them so it would get kind of dry and we could wear it. It never quite dried but the dampness was kind of cooling in the stickiness of the buildup. If we did get a serious cyclone warning (other than on Christmas Eve) we'd generally tape up the windows, bring the dogs inside, kick back with a stubby or three on the veranda and watch the storm roll in across the Timor Sea.

I get annoyed when people try compare Darwin to other Australian cities. And they always do! We were always told we lacked certain airs and the social grace of southern cities. Who cares for that stuffy lifestyle we thought. We didn't know any other life nor did we want to. To us, it was annoying that people from the "bottom end" used to come up and try to tell the people in the "Top End" what to do. I reckon we could of, and still could, give a few lessons on life to the city slickers "down south" and on the eastern seaboard.

I also hated the assumption that we were a bunch of rednecks. Sure, there were some, but most of the people I knew were compassionate and caring and totally accepting of the many and varied cultures and peoples whom made up Darwin's populous. I understand the census shows around 50 different countries were represented in Darwin at the time of Tracy. We were a happy, carefree lot with a healthy disregard for southern bureaucracy, or any authority for that matter. In the Territory I grew up in there was nothing derogatory about being a blackfella, a whitefella or even a yellafella. It was the "reds under the bed" we had to watch, or those buggers from "down south" or Canberra!

Once you got away from the Commonwealth government bureaucracy and the myriad of people who were in Darwin on "two year transfers" and into the nitty gritty of the population just about every-one in the Territory had a nickname and some didn't have surnames. No-one questioned it. If you said your name was Bluey, Tiny or Treehouse then that was it. It was a place where people could come and start their lives anew. It didn't matter if you were hiding from the law, the taxman or the ex-missus, you could pretty well get lost in the Top End which was an irony considering that pre-Tracy Darwin was pretty much a town where every-one knew every-one else. We didn't lock our houses or our cars, we had no idea what a tie was let alone a business suit. Winter was something that happened in Santa Claus land and Christmas cards. We only knew two things; the wet and the dry.

Christmas time is smack bang in the middle of the wet season and the wet is cyclone season. Up until Tracy I'd always thought of a cyclone as being a severe monsoonal downpour perhaps combined with one of the spectacular electrical storms we'd have every year and some seriously strong winds. We'd actually had several very mild cyclones come close by Darwin in my life including Cyclone Selma which had headed straight for Darwin before doing a U-turn and vanishing westward only a few weeks before hand. The perceived apathy that Darwinites were accused of could actually be based just as much on our past experiences and poor warning systems as it could our laid back complacent attitudes. It was an unfair accusation. In fact, the first warning that went out for Cyclone Tracy was actually aimed at the Arnhem Land coastal areas and I remember being concerned for my parents at Wildboar Abattoir because it was only about 40kms from where the Mary River wetlands connect with the Van Dieman Gulf in Chambers Bay.

My mother was in from the station the day before Christmas Eve and came into the salon to caution us all - more about behaving ourselves and not drink-driving than about the cyclone but never-the-less it did come up in conversation. The tropical low had turned into a cyclone and was named Tracy. I remember we all had a glass of something with Mum and laughed at the stupidity of calling Cyclones after women's names when we all knew plenty of blokes who were "full of wind". I asked my mother to consider having Christmas day in town. "*We'll be all right,*" she said "*You just worry about getting yourself there on time,*"

The whole system of cyclone warnings had been recently reviewed and procedures were in place for the community to be warned when a cyclone was imminent. This included media alerts through radio and television which would be preceded by a siren. When you've spent the past three or four years listening to countless cyclone sirens that never resulted in actual cyclones crossing the coast why on earth would you heed one on Christmas Eve. The sad thing about Tracy is that even those that did heed the warnings and do as they were supposed to do didn't fare in the slightest any better than those of us who ignored it at the end of the day. Even when the warnings became Top Priority we ignored it to the point we didn't even comment on it other than how the rain would ruin our Christmas "do". No-one expected that Tracy would keep heading towards Darwin instead of veering south-west like they *always* did

Being Christmas Eve, all the action started to happen around lunch-time. Our regular clients bought bottles of champagne to the salon and despite pacing ourselves we were quiet tipsy by the time we'd shut the doors at 5pm and settled into finishing off what was left in the various bottles. By the time we actually left work it was pretty "blowzy" and my friend Diane made a few comments on how this storm could ruin Christmas. *"Only if we let it"* I replied. She'd only been in Darwin for a couple of years from Mt. Gambier so how could she possibly know that these cyclones never actually hit Darwin. Diane and I both had big plans for Christmas Eve.

2. CHRISTMAS EVE 1974

Being Christmas Eve we had champagne and beer flowing at the salon all afternoon and despite trying to control our intake Diane and I were a bit tipsy by closing time. We both had places to go and people to see but planned on ending up together later in the night at a party at her house. It was raining buckets when we left the salon. Typical of the Darwin lifestyle of the day the staff at the Bureau of Meteorology had their own Christmas party in their offices so they could watch what was happening and keep Darwin informed. By all accounts quite a few people ended up at the "met" party. My grandmother, who lived in a caravan in my parents yard at 11 McKinley Street in Fannie Bay was a bit worried when I called in to see her after work so I rang the bureau (as you could in those days) and was told;

"If she's in a caravan get her to baton down the hatches because we are in for a hell of a storm."

Even that didn't ring alarm bells for me. As my Grandad set about battening down his hatches, pulling down his annexe and guy-roping his caravan to the giant gum tree in our yard I drove my boyfriend's old FB Holden home to have a shower and get ready for a night of partying. It was raining at the time, not real heavy and certainly not with any great gusto, but I remember it well; it was a dark misty rain because the windscreen wipers on the old FB didn't work real well at all. As well as a party at my best friend, Dianas' house in Meigs Court, I had been invited to have a drink with my boyfriend and his co-workers at the PINTs (Postal Institute Northern Territory) club. I also intended to have a drink with my boss and fellow employees at the BP Service Station but made my first call the Fannie Bay Sailing Club where I was to meet my friend Vicki who was going to join me for the evening.

She was a keen sailor and her father was concerned about what the weather looked like. The sky was dark and sinister looking and there were plenty wind and rain squalls to be seen everywhere in the distance. The sea itself was sort of heaving and moaning and it was, with hindsight, quite eerie. The Sailing Club was full of patrons full of indecision. Vicki's father had decided earlier in the day to tie down his boat in the dry dock area as many others were now doing. After surveying the horizon with hands on hips and a seaman's knowing eyes he told Vicki and I that *"the sea don't breathe like that fer nuttin"*. He told Vicki she had to go home with him to ride out the storm and with a stern look told me I should go home, pack my car, and get out to Wildboar where I'd be safe with my parents. *"Yes Sir"* I said and drove straight to the BP where my boss was also surveying the horizon albeit, much more casually and with beer in hand. After some to-ing and fro-ing about the odds of Darwin being hit by a Cyclone on Christmas Eve we decided it was pretty improbable and replenished our drinks. It was too wet and windy and the gas bbq wouldn't light so we decided to order pizza. Just because the weather was miserable didn't mean we had to be. The pizza shop didn't answer. Nor did the next place we called. *"Oh well"* we said, opened more beer and cooked our sausages out the back in an electric frypan attached to an extension cord and shielded by a promotional umbrella. Ironically it was for life-saver lollies.

I stayed at BP for about an hour and a half. I had to pick my boyfriend up from his work party (PMG) at 9pm which was why I had his car. He had intended to get "blotto" as his social club had been saving up for their Christmas party all year. As I was leaving my boss informed me, knowing full well my intention of partying all night, that I'd better be at work on time the next day. I had the early shift. All of us had been rostered on four hour shifts over Christmas and Boxing days so we could all have some time off for the public holidays. Because myself and a bloke we used to call Loony Lazza had no kids we were meant to be doing the 6am to 10am shift on Christmas Day while those with little kids did the Santa thing. This would have given me just enough time to get out to the Marrakai Station for lunch with my family and I think, from memory, Loony had a flight to Adelaide booked later in the day to see his family. He was a funny bloke Loony. I never saw him again after that night and I often wondered what happened to him. I was the drive-way attendant and he looked after the counter. It was all about drive-way service in those days. He was tall and lanky with red hair and freckles and a real larrikin kind of a side-ways grin. He had a lisp that would put Ita Buttrose to shame and was an avid radio listener. While I was pumping petrol and checking oil, water and tyre pressures he was busy entering magazine and radio competitions – in fairness, he always shared the prize. *"Lith, Lith, Lithen to this Lith"* he'd yell when something interesting came on the radio.

When I got to the PINTS Club I was given an address to go to where the blokes had moved their party too. The Club must have decided to close earlier because of the weather. No mobile phones in those days. I was met with a note stuffed inside a plastic bag and stuck to the gate. By coincidence it was just around the corner from 2 Meigs Court in Stuart Park where my best friend Dianne was having the party I intended to spend the night at. It was so windy by now that I knew I shouldn't be driving. It was pitch black but I can't remember if it was because the power was off or because it was raining so heavily. The car was being buffeted by the winds and I had a hell of a time trying to avoid falling branches, palm fronds, corrugated iron and other flying debris. At one point a rubbish tin crashed smack into the side of the car leaving a huge dent in the passenger side door. I nearly had a heart attack but as I snaked along the road I honestly thought this was as bad as it would and could get. I don't know how long it took me to drive from Parap to Stuart Park but I was incredibly relieved to reach my destination. I did not imagine it would or could get any worse.

It was short lived. I remembered my little dog was at home alone. The only noise I could hear above the howl of the wind and the force of the rain hitting the car roof was the dogs in the street which were barking and howling incessantly. My dog, Tequila, was a tiny Mexican Chihuahua and was petrified of lightening and thunder. My boyfriend Kym was horrified at the dent I'd put in the side of his prized FB.

Despite his inebriated condition he drove me back to my place in Fannie Bay to pick the dog and my car, a little Austin 1800. I then followed him back to his place in Larrekeyah to secure ourselves for the night as he didn't want me alone. It was a nerve-wrecking experience but I was kind of relieved when some other debris hit his car with him driving. It took the focus off the dent I'd put on his car. We'd decided to give the Miegs Court party a miss. I guess it was about 11.00pm by the time we'd got into the room. Kym was a technician with PMG (which became Telecom in 1975) and because of the housing shortage in Darwin at the time most PMG technicians were housed in hotel/motel accommodation. At the time of Tracy, Kym resided on the top floor of the Anwell Motel in Larrekeyah along with several other PMG staff.

The wind was horrific and we could feel the building move as we steeled ourselves against the wind and climbed what seemed like a never ending staircase. "*Some shoddy builder must have built this place,*" we thought as walls started to peel and bricks fall. We lay on the bed fully dressed in case we had to evacuate. About ½ an hour later we heard loud banging on the door. It was pitch black and carpet on the floor was soaking. The sound of the wind and debris hitting the walls outside was frightening. When we opened the door to let in another couple through the almost continual sheet lightning we could see across the road and saw the corrugated roof starting to lift off a typical Darwin style stilted house. We could also see several huge trees blocking the road and other trees skipping down the street with their roots in the air. Those trees that were still in the ground looked abstract as huge gouges had been hacked and sliced from their trunks by sheets of iron and hunks of steel. It was weird but what actually spooked me most was seeing the power lines whip around the sky like frenzied tentacles as they were torn from power poles.

The sky behind was green and angry. We wouldn't normally see the sea from there because of the dense tropical trees and shoreline mangroves but there it was - clear as anything through the trees that had been stripped bare. The manager of Northern Research, the prawn facility, was Danny Thomas who was a neighbour of ours. His sons, and plenty of other people we knew and grew up with, worked on the prawn trawlers. We also knew some of the men working on the trawlers Flood Bird and Frigate Bird which were operated by the Gollin Kyokuyo Company. We knew most fishing companies at least had some of their fleet in town for Christmas. The sea itself was angry and heaving more than it had been earlier when I was at the Sailing Club and I was struck by its blackness. "*Please God let them be alright*" I whispered to myself not knowing the worse was yet to come.

We weren't too far from town centre and we could hear the church bells ringing, and ringing, and ringing, in the distance. I'm not particularly religious and I'm not a catholic but I had several friends who always attended Midnight Mass and I knew they were going that night. I struggled to hold myself upright gripping the veranda rail to prevent myself being blown back into the room at a dangerous speed; "*Please God, let them be alright too*". I said for the second time in about thirty seconds.

I found out later that the Bishop, Reverend John O'Loughlan delivered the service in ankle deep water as louvres smashed, the roof blew off and the lights went out and the bell was ringing from the wind not from being pulled.

The couple we let in were a tech who worked with Kym called Rubes, and his girlfriend who was a wild little thing from Kangaroo Island nicknamed, Scruff. She had a long thick fluffy mop of her that could have been a hairdressers dream if she'd let any-one touch it. At best it was like a lions mane and at worst, a rats nest; hence the nickname Scruff. Rubes and Scruff were much more organized than us. They had a battery operated radio, a carton of Carlton Draught (a territory essential in those days), a few packets of Marlboro red, a dolphin torch and a few packets of chips. By now the ceiling was leaking like a sieve and there was literally nowhere dry to sit. We stripped the beds and set ourselves up in the bathroom complete with mattresses and pillows. We sandwiched ourselves between the mattresses mainly to protect ourselves from the wet but also from debris falling from the ceiling. I remember shivering but whether it was from the cold and damp or from undiluted fear I don't know. We tried talking and reassuring each other and at one point we even sang a few songs. When I think back on it all these years later the most absurd thing was that we kept trying to smoke our cigarettes in that damp small confined space where we couldn't even see each other. We focused on keeping the lighter dry as much as saving our lives. We were all Creedence Clearwater Revival and John Fogarty fans and I remember singing 'Who'll stop the Rain' which has always been a favourite of mine both before and after Tracy. "*Long as I remember the rains been comin' down – Clouds of mystery pourin' confusion on the ground,*" we sang as we huddled wet and cold under our waterlogged mattress barriers and Cyclone Tracy screeched incessantly on the other side of the door.

We had the radio on but we could hardly hear it over the noise outside. I think it must have been the 1.50am warning that shocked us. Rubes held it to his ear and then yelling as loud as he could repeated it to us

Cyclone Warning issued by the Darwin Tropical Cyclone Warning Centre at 1.50 AM CST 25/12/75.

Tropical Cyclone Tracy was located by radar at 1.30 AM CST 22 km west north west of Darwin moving east south east at 6 km/hr.

"*What the hell?*" Tracy hadn't even hit the coast line at Darwin yet. "*What the fuck is this if it isn't Tracy?*" I remember thinking

We thought the radio was wrong. There must be a delay in broadcasting and surely Tracy was just about over not just about to begin. We sat huddled in the bathroom drinking beer and smoking cigarettes sandwiched between our two mattresses.

I was frightened about the amount of water coming in and thought we'd all end up electrocuted but Rubes reminded me that the power lines had been stripped from the poles and there was no way electricity could get to us. It was a cold comfort. Kym wanted something from the room and took the torch to get it. Just as he re-entered the bathroom and shut the door we heard a series of huge explosions as the windows in the room disintegrated. Later we found shards of glass embedded in the door. A couple of seconds later we heard this huge screeching sound. The hair stood up on the back of my neck and I held my little dog to my chest thinking this was the end. Its hard to describe that sound. I still get goose-bumps thinking about it. It was kind of like some-one using a claw hammer to rip out a creaky rusty nail from a tin roof only ten million trillion times louder. It turned out it was the roof and ceiling of the motel room being torn off but we didn't know that till later. All of a sudden the cyclone seemed to get louder and louder. The wind howled with new ferocity and the horizontal sheet rain sounded like thousands of gunshots as it pelted incessantly at the bathroom door. We were less than two inches from a monster that would surely kill us.

Water poured through the ceiling and we were soaked to the bone sitting in about a foot of water. It was pouring in from the ceiling and had no escape. I swear it was salt water. It made my skin itchy. Some-one told me years later that it was the fiberglass insulation in ceilings that made people itchy but I could taste the salt dripping down my face and stinging my eyes. We were very close to the sea there and the wind must have picked up the salt water. We'd stuffed towels and Kym's dirty clothes under the door because we knew if the wind got into the bathroom we'd be goners. We hunkered down between the mattresses and put our backs to the door as a barricade and waited for it to be over one way or another. Our ears kept popping – it must have been the change in barometric pressure. It made the whole experience seem even more surreal.

We heard a lull. We figured it must be the eye of the cyclone. I guess it was about 3.30am as that's what time the eye was meant to have passed over the city and data at the airport showed it passed over there at 4.00am. If it was it didn't last long and we weren't game to go far. We opened the door with the intention of getting another six pack out of the fridge and couldn't believe our eyes. Not only was the fridge not there but the whole room was gone and all that remained was a bare floor – no walls, no windows – not even any carpet on the floor. Just us and the bathroom perched three levels above the ground. Cars were overturned in the street, small trees that were still standing had been stripped of their foliage and all the big ones had been uprooted. There was corrugated iron and debris everywhere and the sky was a misty green silvery colour. In the distance we could sort of see a moving mass of pinkish orange that seemed to be circling on itself. I don't know why but it reminded me of fairy floss on a stick when it whips around the stick in one of those old fashioned fairy floss machines. It is hard describe and I didn't want to look at it but I couldn't help it. I think it must have been the eye of the cyclone. Other people told me they saw circles of red so I assume they must have been directly under the eye.

Whatever it was, it was not of our normal world. A friend later told me she saw the devil that night and it had a single red eye. I think she may have been right. The eye wasn't directly above us and we still had a slight wind and some misty rain but it was close enough for us to experience quietness for a few minutes. I would estimate about fifteen minutes in total. The silence was such a contrast to the past few hours that it hurt our ears. It was pierced occasionally by a dog howling in the distance or the creak of a piece of house letting go and crashing to the ground. We could see the brick wall of the downstairs office and it looked weird. It took a minute to realize it was caked with leaves that had been ripped from trees and slammed into the wall making an absurdly pretty multi shaded green mosaic pattern. It was like, I would imagine, what having an out of body experience is like. It couldn't be real but we knew it was. It was unnatural. There was not a human sound or indeed anything that proved humanity was even still in existence. We held all hands and I don't remember any of us talking.

Then we heard some-one scream for help; and then it was several people screaming for help. It grew to a howling indescribable roar within seconds. Soon it was deafening. Our ears hurt and we knew whatever it was that was going to happen next it was going to be in catastrophic proportions. I've never heard a sound like it and never wish to again. We realized it was the second wind just about to bear down on us. We literally felt the building shudder and lurch unsteadily as the wind slammed into it with indescribable force from the opposite direction. We hurriedly organized our bathroom bunker and hunkered down again. We were wet and cold and our cigarettes were soaked but it didn't stop us trying to light them and have a few puffs. We lamented the fact that the beer had been blown away. Not because we wanted to party but because we were sure we'd be blown away to certain death and the beer would numb the pain of dying. Our radio was no longer working. I don't know if it was because it was wet or because the radio station ceased broadcasting. It seemed the wind would increase and decrease in intensity and all too frequently we'd hear huge bits of flying debris hit our walls and we'd wait for the bricks to disintegrate. Thankfully they never did. When the wind finally dropped and the rain turned to drizzle daylight started to creep in the tiny window in the bathroom. We were too scared to move in case it wasn't the end. When we heard voices in the street we came out. I was so cramped from being in the same position in water all night I could barely move and my little dog was shaking like a leaf. He did for several days.

I have only experienced two times in my life when I really thought I might die and Cyclone Tracy's second wind was one of them. How on earth that skinny water logged inside bathroom door, imbedded with huge shards of glass and brick imprints from when the room exploded, withstood 280 kilometre plus winds to protect four adults (and one tiny dog) from sure death is nothing short of a miracle. We cheated death that night. So did 43,000 other people. You only have to look at the photos and hear their stories to know it truly is a miracle that so many survived.

Tracy was quite small by cyclonic standards but because she was small she was far more intense than expected. I couldn't believe my eyes when we came out of our tiny sanctuary. It was humid and still and an eerie presence still groped the sky. In every direction there was total devastation the likes of which I could never have imagined. Sheets of corrugated iron, broken glass, upturned cars, fibro walls, sodden furniture and stripped tree stumps littered the street. In between you'd see the odd Christmas tree, bit of tinsel or lonely gift wrapped present. I was moved at the sight of a little three wheeler with red tinsel wrapped around

its handlebars. Men were already in the street clearing a path to get a vehicle through; through to what I don't know. I looked out to the sea and saw not a boat or ship anywhere on the horizon and the sea was still black. It looked like it was in mourning and I found out later in the day that it was.

Across the road several people were helping a woman and two little kids climb out of a bath that was exposed to the elements. She'd hung on so tight they were massaging and pouring water on her hands to get them to unclamp from the rim of the bath. Some-one had wrapped something around the two little kids as they were shaking badly. I will never forget their little wide eyes, white faces and blue lips. No child should have to live with that fear. Not long afterwards a bloodied man crawled out from under a piece of corrugated iron in the yard. He was the husband of the woman in the bath. When they saw each other they bawled openly because each had thought the other dead. Apparently he'd spent the last hour of the cyclone, after their bathroom walls blew away, lying on top of a piece corrugated iron on top of the bath to protect his wife and kids. He was blown away and knocked unconscious. Darwin is full of miracle stories like that. Within an hour people, with all sorts of injuries, and some miraculously with none, appeared from just about everywhere. Some people were still shaking their heads to get their ears to pop and couldn't hear what others were saying.

The camaraderie and mateship was immediately obvious. Some-one else was screaming for their little boy and everybody dropped what they were doing and they found him curled up and shivering in the family car which was half crushed by a huge tree. In between each crisis a shocked silence gripped us. We were tired and exhausted and this was all far too much to take in after the night we had. Fortunately a couple of soldiers from the Larrekeyah Army barracks, just down the road, came down and started organizing us and some work teams. I heard one of them say it was a priority to clear a car width so we could get the injured to the hospital. I was relieved because all of a sudden I remembered my grandparents and that was the same route I'd need to get to them. Kym and Rubes took off straight way to go to their work on foot as no doubt there'd be huge telecommunication problems. I can't remember where Scruff went.

My car was relatively undamaged apart from a few dents and a smashed window. I couldn't believe that my keys were actually still in my jeans pockets because normally I put them on the table at Kym's place but I mustn't have that night for some reason. I wiped most of the glass off the sodden seat and turned the ignition and she fired up no problem. There was a huge tree blocking me from exiting the Anwell car park.

A soldier (he was in pajamas but I knew he was a soldier because of his haircut and the way he was giving orders) came over with a four wheel drive and a winch and pulled it out of the road. The Larrekeyah Army barracks was just down the road. When I told him I had to get to Fannie Bay to check on my grandparents he said he would come with me as far as the hospital to help clear the road but that we had to take some injured people to the hospital on the way. I readily agreed. I was frightened and glad of the company. We put three people in the back of my little Austin 1800 and began to snake our way to the hospital which was located at the end of Mitchell Street. Every time we came to some fallen trees or debris blocking the road we'd stop and move it away or find away around it. There were plenty of other people on the streets by then doing the same thing. My passengers were two men and a woman. All were covered in blood. One of the men had a huge gash above his eye and I could see what I reckoned was his skull. The other had a broken arm which dangled in every direction until some-one put it in a makeshift sling. I cant remember what had happened to the woman except that she sobbed quietly in the back seat the whole time and never said a word. She was totally in shock. By the time we got to the hospital there were bloodied bodies everywhere. I didn't go in; my minor injuries seemed so trivial by comparison.. I bid my group farewell. There were cars coming into the hospital from the direction of Fannie Bay so I knew the road couldn't be too bad.

Casualties had begun to arrive at the Darwin hospital from daylight. They were already starting to overflow onto the street when we were there and I would estimate it to be around 9.00am. During that day approximately 1000 patients were recorded as being treated there and by the days end twenty or so peripheral first-aid stations had been set up throughout the suburbs. Most people were suffering cuts and scratches caused by flying debris such as glass, iron, and timber and trees but there were also plenty of fractures and blunt trauma injuries as well. By Christmas night two surgical teams had arrived by air from Canberra to help cope with the extra demand and from Boxing Day an official evacuation program for hospital patients was implemented. Priority was based on severity of injury. This policy enabled the hospital to keep its patient numbers as low as possible although many people continued to report to the hospital daily for weeks after with injuries sustained, particularly to the feet and legs, during the search for bodies and clearing of rubble afterwards.

After I left the hospital I paused for a moment at Yvonne's Beauty Salon, which was opposite the hospital at the end of Mitchell Street. It was my workplace and my mothers pride and joy and it was ruined. Some of the windows were smashed and debris littered the insides but structurally it wasn't too bad. Even though part of the roof was gone it still had a couple of exterior walls. Everything within was soaked. I remember thinking Mum would have a pink fit and I don't know why but I opened the boot of my car and loaded in some important things like the cash register and the files in the filing cabinet, blow dryers, hot rollers and thirty tons of shampoos, conditioners and hair dye. I mean, who knows who would steal it if I didn't take it.

As it turned out, looting did become a major problem in the weeks that followed but the reality was there was no value in me saving the unsalvageable. Denial is a wondrous thing and I thought I was helping at the time. We didn't have to buy shampoo for years. The same soldier who drove with me that far walked past me on his way back to Larrekeyah so I gave him a lift back to the corner. He told me not to waste my time but to get straight to my grandparents.

I did. I headed down Gilruth Avenue onto East Point Road and into McKinley Street. The road wasn't too bad but I couldn't believe the size of the palm trees which had been uprooted and I couldn't believe what Tracy had done to the houses in our area.

There were a few cars on the road and a few people wandering around aimlessly. I saw an ambulance on East Point Road and people were literally rushing it. There was a car in the middle of the road with a man with blood trickling out of his mouth. I felt like I was in a movie set. It was too horrific to be real. I think he was dead but I could not get myself to check. I was shocked when I got to our house. Our family home was basically bare floorboards. My dear little Granny was walking around in a daze and Grandad was busy cleaning up. Their caravan had amazingly withstood most of the cyclone although it was severely sandblasted and a few windows had been broken. All around it the rest of the neighbourhood had been razed. Grandad had built a little fire and made a cup of tea in his billy. He always had a billy of tea boiling on a little campfire outside for as long as I can remember so this was not an unusual sight. He was a fair-dinkum bushie. He wouldn't even sleep in the caravan but chose to sleep in his swag on one of those old cyclone wire beds outside. There was no way he was going to Wildboar now but he said I had to get word to my parents to come to town as soon as possible. My grandmother didn't want me traveling alone and when a bloke we called Stevie Stud, who was actually a friend of mine's ex-boyfriend, came over to see how little Gran was, he agreed to come with me to Wildboar. Then another brother and sister couple, Alison and Butch, whose father Ray, the chef at the Penthouse Restaurant, lived around the corner from us, also turned up to see how Little Gran had fared they decided they'd come with me too. Not long after that my life-long friend and soon to become brother-in-law, Turtle, turned up and he decided to come with us too. Little did we realize the five of us had another night of horror ahead of us.

Gran did not want us going on an empty stomach and made us some baked bean and ham sandwiches and hot orange tang. I've hated orange tang ever since but must confess the only other time I've encountered it since is in Bali. We sat in the middle of what had been our lounge-room and ate it. No walls here now; we had a 360 degree view of the neighbourhood. By now there were people everywhere. I have no idea where and how they all survived this devastation. Every-one was talking. Every-one was panicking. The general consensus was that we had to get out because either a tsunami or earthquake was about to happen. There was flooding in the streets; we'd had nearly 200mm of rain overnight and in Fannie Bay, where we were, there was a sea surge of about two metres which caused localized flooding and a fair bit of panic.

I could see why people were panicking but in my inexperienced mind I didn't think of that as a major problem because we all had houses on stilts. I told Gran she better gather some supplies and water and move upstairs to the safety of the floor boards.

3. THE LONG WALK

And then we headed out of Darwin. Five of us in my little Austin 1800. I let Steve drive and I asked him to call in at the BP. My boss was there shaking his head. "*I'm here,*" I said to him, "*where's your service station?*" Never-the-less when he found out what we were doing he put a jerrycan of fuel in the car and a couple of hot bottles of coke and told us to be careful on the road. "*People are leaving in droves,*" he said.

Getting the word out was a major feat in itself and stories abound about ham radio operators and people driving to Adelaide River to use the phones. Major General Alan Stretton reportedly spoke to the Darwin police station at dawn. Other reports had a PMG tech up a pole at Humpty Doo calling Canberra and the staff at the NAB Bank in Alice Springs making contact with their counterparts in Darwin through a telex machine. Another claim is that the Director of the NT Health Department, Dr Charles Gurd, made radio contact with a coastal freighter out at sea which in turn notified Canberra. Whatever the case word spread fast. I know the small community of Adelaide River rallied themselves immediately cooking thousands of meals for motorists fleeing Darwin in their damaged and sometimes decidedly unroadworthy vehicles. Every roadhouse and community up and down the track prepared themselves for the traffic coming out of Darwin and assisted evacuees in any way they could.

The little town of Alice Springs, through the collective efforts of its combined service clubs managed to raise over \$150,000 in a day and set up an emergency response team that did an exceptional job of helping the thousands of evacuees that turned up. Many were still in shock and were wearing and driving the only possessions they had left. I remember there was great controversy over the money left over from the Alice Springs appeal as it had been given to the Darwin City Council and neither dispersed to the needy or invested wisely. I wonder what it was eventually used for? And I bet the people that donated it do to!

The only contact I personally was aware of was via a Connair (previously Connellan Airways) aircraft which had somehow miraculously escaped the devastation at Darwin Airport. A lot of small aircraft had been flown out of Darwin the night before as a precautionary measure but for some reason Connair left a Heron in the hangar in Darwin. Connair staff managed to make contact with Katherine from the Heron and it was apparently, one of Darwin's first contacts with the outside world alerting them of what had befallen our city. The airport itself was a joint RAAF/Civilian facility and was the largest single piece of land in Darwin at the time. It was very well known as a gathering place for the young people in Darwin, not because it housed the RAAF Base (lots of good looking young men) or because it was the parking ground for the hundred or so small aircraft operated by cattle stations, pastoralists and miners (another source of good looking young men) but because it had a bar that stayed open most, if not all of the night. We had a few drinking holes in Darwin that we frequented but it didn't matter who was where on a Friday or Saturday night, by midnight we'd all be in the Airport bar drinking and having a glorious party. Many airport staff and flight crew would have a drink there after work too so we knew a lot of people who worked at or frequented through the airport.

We called in to the airport that Christmas day in the hope I could charter a flight to Wildboar from Ossie Osgood or Graham Ball as we often did. I was shocked at the devastation. Planes were wrapped around trees and lying upside down and in crumpled heaps along the tarmac. I knew a couple of the Connair pilots and one of them told me they had just sent a plane of evacuees south. It was the very first evacuation flight but because it was a day ahead of the official evacuation I don't know if it was ever recorded as such. If not, then it should be. I have no idea where it went or who was on it. Their aircraft were too large to land on our small

airstrip and we had no idea of the condition of the Wildboar airstrip anyway he told me. Besides, there were plenty of injured people who would take precedence. We continued to Wildboar by car.

By the time we'd actually worked our way to the outskirts of Darwin it was mid afternoon. We expected, that once we got through the debris in Darwin, it would only take us an hour or so to get to Wildboar and there was still plenty of time before dark. How wrong we were in our calculations. It was an epic journey getting through to the outskirts of Darwin. The road wasn't as bad as we thought it would be but we were stunned by what we saw all around us. Steel power lines were bent over, corrugated iron and star pickets were wrapped around poles like they were cardboard, and corrugated iron was everywhere. All that was left of the houses were bare floorboards, cars and trucks and caravans were strewn all over the road and people were walking around in a daze trying to come to terms with the reality of what had happened. Major General Alan Stretton later reported the horror he had traveling that same road in reverse when he arrived on Christmas night and I was surprised to hear that because hundreds, maybe thousands, of people had evacuated Darwin by road that day before he'd even arrived and it had been partially cleared by then. Although it must have been pretty foreboding in the dark when you had no idea what to expect.

Once we got out of town, and Berrimah was pretty much the end of it then, the Stuart and Arnhem Highways were relatively clear of fallen trees and storm debris. While it was obvious a bad storm had passed through, and we had to negotiate around some rubble and debris in places, there was nothing to indicate the last 20 kilometre stretch of dirt road to Wildboar would be impassable. The Wildboar Road was a single lane dirt road that headed east off the Arnhem Highway in between the Adelaide and Mary River crossings. It was a bush track that served its purpose during the dry season but was far from being an all-weather road. It was often rendered impassable during the wet season. My father solved this problem by placing vehicles, dinghies and road plant at various strategic points along the road; the idea being that when you arrived at a boggy patch, you abandoned that vehicle and walked across or paddled your way through swampy or boggy area and continued the journey from the other side in another vehicle. We knew this was likely and the grader or the little tractor were always there at the ready in the bad sections. Dad was always running the road making sure they had enough battery power and fuel to do the job at hand.

It was twilight when we arrived at the Wildboar turn-off and we had only managed to travel a few kilometres when it became obvious that Tracy had wreaked her havoc out that way as well. It soon became impossible to drive through the trees and other debris strewn across the road. We had managed to move some of the smaller trees but eventually came to a big iron wood that we'd have needed a crane to shift. We decided that things would have to be better further down the road so commenced walking just before sunset. At that time we thought we would only have to walk a couple of kilometres to where Dad's grader was parked. We'd no sooner started to walk than it started to drizzle.

We did reach the grader as planned. Unfortunately it had a large tree smashed through the cabin. Try as we might we could not move it, besides as much as we could assess the damage in the dark, it appeared the steering mechanisms were damaged. We continued walking towards Wildboar. Instead of getting better the debris across the road was actually getting worse. We ran into one of Dad's open top Toyotas a bit further down the road – it point blank refused to start despite being sworn at somewhat profusely. So on we walked. By now we were walking in a constant drizzle of rain. It wasn't uncomfortable and even gave us some relief from the hot sweltering humidity and mosquito bites. The occasional bout of sheet lightning confirmed we were still on track because the damage was so bad it was sometimes hard to work out where the actual road was.

Of course, Murphy's Law being what it is, the constant drizzle soon turned into pouring rain and we were soaked to the bone. We walked on in the pitch darkness climbing over, under and through the countless trees that littered the road. The extent of the damage was such that in many instances we couldn't tell where the road was even in the lightening and we would wait and debate through several lightening strikes to gauge direction. Fortunately, these were quite regular. Trees that had been landmarks for years were no longer in existence and billabongs along the way were impossible to identify in the foot deep water we were walking in. Over the years my father had let us all name some of these landmarks after ourselves. We thought we were special but he did it so that in the event of an accident or incident it gave him a reference point. I remember we had James' Rainforest, Joe's waterhole and Elizabeth's Sandy Patch among others. Not many kids in Australia can lay claim to a sandy patch being named after them and I doubt today that any-one else even knows it was once named for me. Unfortunately, in the aftermath of Cyclone Tracy, and in the dark of night in the pouring rain, none of these landmarks were identifiable and we had no idea if we'd walked five kilometres or fifteen.

In some places we seemed to walk forever in knee deep water or black soil mud up to our thighs. Any-one who has ever walked in a wet black soil plain will know the suction is horrific. We were all dressed in jeans, shirts but while the men wore sensible shoes, Alison and I were dressed in sandals. We had long abandoned our footwear and slowly but surely the men did too as they lost them in the suction of the soggy black soil plains. We all walked barefoot for most of the journey. It was tough going and we were elated when we finally came across the old Massey Ferguson tractor. It started first go and the five of us clambered all over it. We could finally taste a hot cuppa coming on. The road was so badly flooded we made an error in judgment and headed straight into a creek. Within 50 metres the tractor was all but covered with water and we waded ourselves back to where we thought the road was. We were tired and cranky and tempers were fraying. We had lost our torch in the mud early in the piece. Steve had lost his good watch, Alison and I were complaining about sore feet and all of us were covered in cuts and bruises. I carried my little dog, Tequila, most of the way in my dili bag and you wouldn't think a 3kg Chihuahua would be so heavy. I wasn't game to complain about him because Steve told me before we left Darwin I would be better of leaving him with Little Gran but I wouldn't. He and I both suffered separation anxiety if we were apart too long.

Needless to say there were quite a few monumental arguments along the way. Usually about which way the road was, how far we had traveled and what time we'd get there. Surprisingly, there was never any thought of us turning back or making camp for the night. The one thing we all agreed on was that we keep going. It was much cooler to walk at night even if we couldn't see where we were going. And there certainly was no shortage of water. We hoped against all odds that perhaps Dad would come along the road looking for us because we hadn't made it for lunch. Whenever there was a bit of a lull in the drizzle we'd strain our ears for the sound of the generator or a Toyota coming along the road. Plenty of false alarms but nothing eventuated so we just kept walking.

When we came to the fork in the road where we had a choice of which way to go to Wildboar we stopped and debated. We could go all the way on the road we were on and we knew that one pretty well or we could walk via Helen Creek where Ron Withnall and Don Buck had a small camp. We knew they wouldn't be there but there was some shelter and probably some food. We decided to stick to our original route because if any-one came looking for us they'd be on the main track. We also knew Helen's Creek was most likely flooded and that flowed pretty fast in the wet and we probably wouldn't get across anyway. To this day I couldn't tell you if it there was actually any difference in length between the two tracks.

At one stage, when the rain had let up a little, we spent an hour up a tree because Alison was convinced that we were being stalked by dingoes. There were a lot in the area because of the offal dumps from the meatworks and we could hear them howling in the distance. I told her they were too well fed from dead pigs and buffalo to worry about eating us but we all needed to give our numb feet a rest so we hung out for awhile in that tree then climbed down and just kept walkingagain. The further we got along the track the more we stopped to rest. At another stage we walked head first into a small herd of buffalo. I don't know who was more frightened, us or them, as we all took off in different directions. Trying to regroup in the dark, in pouring rain, among screaming women, swearing men and frightened buffalo is certainly an experience I will never forget I can tell you. Common sense soon prevailed and we got our bearings and found our way back to each other and continued on walking.

The last few kilometres were relatively easy by comparison. I don't think we would have made it otherwise. The rain had let up a bit, the first signs of daylight were starting to show and the road had been cleared. The density and diversity of birdlife at Marrakai was splendid but that morning I was struck by the absence of their morning songs. Tracy had struck out there on Christmas Day morning and my father had spent the last few hours of daylight clearing the road closest to the homestead in anticipation of continuing the job on Boxing Day. The Wildboar Road adjoined the end of the airstrip and followed it down to the homestead making a large V shape. Ironically, on the only patch of road that was uncluttered and that we could see clearly we decided to take a short cut through the bush cutting off the angle part of the V. We knew exactly where we were and a short 1 kilometre shortcut through the scrub would cut off another kilometre of the trip if we'd followed the road through to where it joined the airstrip. It was a scary decision to make as lots of scrub cattle and wild boar hung around the fringes of the homestead but we were truly physically exhausted. The rain dried up a bit and the sun started sneaking over the horizon. We couldn't hear the generator but that didn't worry us. Dad often only ran it a few hours a day in the off season if at all but I knew Mum would have plenty of Christmas fare so I had half expected to hear it running. We came out halfway down the airstrip and could see Wildboar at the other end. A more pleasing or sight I could not imagine. From our angle the first two buildings we could see were the mess hall and the shower block and there was no movement around either yet. As much as I loved the place I don't think I'd ever been so happy to see it before.

As we got closer it became obvious that the aftermath of Tracy had caused quite a bit of structural damage there as well. Trees were down everywhere and bits of roofing iron littered the surrounds. By the time we got there the sun had just risen on Boxing Day but we still could not see a soul around. A quick inspection revealed that the family were asleep in the boning room. It was the sturdiest part of the meatworks with a chiller room one side and a big freezer the other so my parents had moved the family in there for the cyclone which they had experienced Christmas morning. It went through Wildboar after it had passed over Darwin with, thankfully, a somewhat lessened severity. As lacking as the building code was in Darwin I suspect it was a lot more so at Wildboar. Never-the-less my father was really angry that no-one from Darwin had bothered to check the family was OK as "*they must have known it hit us*" he kept saying "*they can track these things you know*".

He had no idea Darwin, for all intention purposes, had ceased to exist the night before and he thought we were exaggerating the extent of the damage and destruction. Needless to say, they were shocked to see us in the condition we were in. My mother in particular was quite shocked. She had woken Dad in the middle of the night and told him she had a terrible dream that I was walking somewhere with my feet cut to pieces. My father told her not to be stupid and that I would have just turned back and gone to Darwin. My mother was always a bit spooky with her physic ability but my father usually ignored her and he did so on this occasion too. And now here I was at her doorstep, looking like a drowned rat, with another four sad and sorry drowned rats standing beside me, (and a tiny one in my dili bag) and my feet *were* cut to pieces. She looked at my father and in those age old words wise words of wisdom that women love to fall back on said "*I told you so*".

There we stood for a few moments, five drowned rats, soaked to the bone, looking at the six of them (Mum Dad and siblings Elaine, Sonia, Joe and James) laying on mattresses and swags spread out all over the boning room floor. And they just lay there for a few moments looking back at us. I cant speak for my fellow walkers but I wanted most in the world at that point in time was them out of their swag and me into it. I was suddenly overwhelmed with the most incredible heavy tiredness. My mother was having none of that just yet. "*A cyclone hit Darwin Mum*" I said "*Its gone*", Within minutes she had Dad lighting a fire so we could have a warm bathe, Elaine getting some food prepared and the others wrapping us up in their bedclothes. We sat shivering on her double bed mattress while she wiped our feet down and dressed them in ointments and creams and bandages. We didn't have any crutches but Dad cut some branches for us to use as walking sticks. I must admit I was shocked to see my feet. They

were wrinkled beyond recognition from the prolonged soaking they'd had over the last two days and had cuts and bruising all over them. Some of the gashes were quite deep and I couldn't remember even cutting them. I must have stubbed my toe at one point because one toenail was standing up at right angles to my foot. I ripped it off with a pair of pliers because my father told me he would if I didn't.

When I got out of my clothes I was shocked again to find that I had several really large bruises all down my right side and a cut and deep graze on the right side of my face, neck and shoulder which must have been from the night before. I couldn't really remember how I got them either but I did sort of recall being flung into the brick toilet wall as we made our way back in after the eye of the storm had passed and the second wind came. Many years later I had a chiropractic x-ray in Alice Springs in an attempt to find a reason for the continual ache in my neck and shoulder. When the chiropractor asked when I'd broken my collarbone and I told him I hadn't. He showed me the x-ray and said it must have gone untreated because it had healed incorrectly. I suspect that injury came from the same time and wonder how many other people have had long term health consequences as a result of Tracy and perhaps didn't know they had sustained a minor injury that came back to haunt them years later. After what I'd witnessed on Christmas morning I know I was one of the lucky ones and I'm not complaining about a broken collar bone or a lost toenail. What was worse at the time was the fact that my mother covered all my grazes and scratches with a bright purple splotches of gentian violet which was considered a bit of a cure-all in those days along with the ever reliable mercurochrome whose pink splotches were used on mossie bites and ringworms and itchy tree rashes. My youngest brother James kept telling me I looked like the purple people eater (one of Mum's favourite songs) and if I could have chased him I'd have given him a purple patch of his very own.

As we relayed our tales of woe to my parents and reassured them that Little Gran and Grandad were ok my father kept saying "Bullshit" and checking individually with us all that the others weren't exaggerating. About lunch time on Boxing Day, after we'd all been fed, and watered and patched up, my family left us all to have a sleep on the floor of the boning room and my father went out to clear a bit more of the road so we could go into Darwin at daylight the next morning. If he didn't believe us before about how bad the road was he did after that. Even in daylight he had trouble picking out the road in places because of all the trees that were down.

4. THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH

At first light on the 26th December the eleven of us climbed into Dads open cut shooting wagon with its huge wet season balloon tyres and with chainsaws, axes, winches and ropes loaded onto our laps and we headed into Darwin. As Dad and Steve chain-sawed the fallen trees into workable sized pieces we winched and towed them off the road. It was hard yakka in the heat and humidity. It took about five hours to do fifteen kilometres by the time we'd pushed our way through muddy bogs and cleared the trees out of the way.. When we spied my little blue Austin 1800 in the distance we knew the worst of it was over. Half of us piled off the Toyota and into my car and we followed my parents into Darwin. What struck me most as we turned from the Arnhem Highway onto the Stuart Highway towards Darwin was that we were the only ones going in. There were hundreds of cars and trucks of all shapes and sizes, some severely damaged, loaded to the hilt with people and belongings and heading south. Some had windscreens broken, some had meager possessions tied with rope to roof-racks and some were so damaged they looked to be literally limping. You could not help but feel there was no way most of this mass exodus would reach its destination. I was wrong. Hundreds of people in every community big or small along the Stuart Highway stepped up to the plate providing fuel, tyres and repairs along with food clothes and comfort. Having done the trip a couple of days before we also thought it amazing that the road was so clear given the debris and obstacles that had to have been removed to allow two way traffic. Broken down cars and motorbikes and distraught people lined the sides of the road. Dad pulled over and we pulled up behind him. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. "Don't stop for any-one," he said "These people are desperate. Keep going till you get to McKinley Street and stop for nothing". We did stop once because it was somebody that Steve or Turtle knew and they had little kids with them. They'd run out of fuel so we were able to give them the jerrycan I got from BP on Christmas Day. They cried with relief. It gave me goosebumps. By the time we took off again we noticed Dad had done a U-turn and had come back looking for us. It was like we were going the wrong way in a one way street. Some people even yelled at us not to go into Darwin and some-one else had scribbled with spraypaint across the roof of an upturned car "Wrong Way – Go Back".

When we pulled into our house in McKinley Street we noticed that Granddad's little single billy campfire was now a much larger and Little Gran was busy boiling and cooling rainwater for babies and serving hot tea to any adult who happened by. A few walls and the inner staircase remained at our house but not much of anything else. My mother went into shock and my Grandmother was crying saying she was sorry she couldn't save the house. Who cared about the house, we were all alive my mother told her but I knew she did care. We spent the next few days sifting through rubble and she managed to save a few things that were precious to her but not many. What the wind hadn't destroyed three days of rain had. Most of our lounge-room was three doors down the street.

My grandparents and parents both had a bit of history with the Vestey's Pastoral Company and when they auctioned off all the household effects from their houses at Bullocky point a few years earlier my mother had purchased a huge wooden dining table and matching sideboard and a few other bits of furniture which she'd loving stripped backed and restored to their former glory and placed in our lounge-room. All that was left of our lounge-room was bare floorboards and a few nails that had held the carpet down. Even the carpet was gone, ripped out from under the nails. The first two jobs my father did were hammer those nails down flat with the floor so it was safe to walk on and to take an axe to the toilet door which ironically, was jammed tight and prevented us access to the only room in the house that still had four *sort of* intact walls. Under the house, where my father had two massive

fish tanks full of tropical fish, the area was awash with upturned furniture, broken glass, dead fish and decaying pond plants. It was putrid. Little Gran had sliced her hand on the glass and Granddad had forbid her to go near it again.

We all slept in Dad's "speedway shed" in our back yard which had miraculously survived and we were lucky because our toilet worked albeit, we had to take a bucket of rain water with us when we went. Every-one in Darwin complained about the lack of water for sanitation but we captured rain water all week in any receptacle we could find for both drinking and toilet purposes. Rainwater was a welcome change to the leech infested muddy water we usually drank from the lagoons at Wildboar so maybe our constitutions and immune systems were a bit tougher than most. Later a water cart used to drive up and down the streets and we'd be able to fill our buckets, bottles and whatever else we could find. Water was restored fairly quickly but once the rain stopped a lot of effort had to be put into blocking broken pipes and taps in thousands of blown apart houses where water flowed freely as there was nothing left above ground to turn off.

A lot of people had showers in these unnatural springs until it was sorted. Our toilet was jammed shut for a couple of days and in the end Dad took to it with an axe. After that there was a real art to holding the door closed to protect our privacy. It was only after an ultimatum of unknown consequence from my mother that the door was fixed so we could close it without having to contort yourself to hold what was left of the door off you in such a way that you could both tend to business and protect your privacy. The following days were chaotic. Mum, Elaine and I salvaged what we could from the salon and it wasn't much because what had not been destroyed by Tracy had been destroyed by the continual pouring rain since.

By now Major Alan Stretton had arrived in Darwin and the Darwin Disaster Relief Plan was underway and a massive evacuation was in process with all non essential and sick or injured people being required to leave. Women and children were mostly deemed non-essential but I was lucky to stay in Darwin that whole week before being evacuated because healthy single adults (such as I) had the lowest priority under Stretton's list. Initially evacuation was voluntary and few turned up initially until the Federal Government promised it would also pay for people to return when they wanted to after the disaster was over.

Within the first two days of the evacuation my two brothers, Joe and James, flew to Canberra to stay with good family friends and ex-Darwinites, Robyn and David Burke. My two sisters, Elaine and Sonia, were flown to Mackay to stay with my mother's sister, Auntie Lilibet. Over 8000 people were evacuated on 28th December, the largest airlift ever in the history of Australia, and they were four of them. I didn't want to go and stuck to my guns, arguing my case, with my father, as I have done all my life. I lost this one. Thousands of people were leaving Darwin daily, many by road and many by air but many thousands more were arriving daily into Darwin as well. This was a time of turmoil in Darwin the dynamics of which have been reported quite differently by various persons and authorities over the years.

Stretton was by all accounts the supreme authority in Darwin and claimed he was acting in a civilian capacity answerable only to the Prime Minister. He let the Darwin populous know this at every opportunity including on radio when transmission was finally restored to the ABC two days later on 27th December. I understand now the need for some-one to be in total control. In an emergency situation the buck has to stop somewhere. At the time this was questioned both by the local Darwinites (like us) who wanted to stay and have some control over what was happening to *their* city and by senior personnel in the military who believed Darwin should be under military control. Right from the start rumours abounded about Stretton over-stepping his mark. There were certainly times in the first couple of months that Darwin felt like it was under martial law even though it was officially not the case. Stretton went to great lengths to assure us we were NOT under military law of any kind. We found this hard to understand. There were military personnel and Federal police everywhere throughout the city and if we loitered we had better have a good reason for it.

Some were outright bullies and with huge guns on their sides we were not game to disobey them. A couple of times after we had queries from evacuated friends to go and see what was happening to their houses we were ordered away from them. Everywhere we went we were put in a queue. We queued for water and ice, we queued for food and essential supplies, we queued to get medical attention or register our names for anything that was going on and we had to queue at the hospital, the police station and other places of authority. We'd been invaded by gun-toting strangers telling us what to do. We were continually being buzzed by low flying aircraft (for aerial spraying) and men in fatigues with fogging machines on their backs and huge masks on their faces sprayed mist all over the neighbourhood. The sky was full of military aircraft such as RAN helicopters, RAAF C130 Hercules and the American Army's huge Starlifter. The usual cargo ships and prawn trawlers in our harbour were dwarfed alongside a dozen or so huge ships of the Royal Australian Navy. We were check-pointed or ticked off everywhere we went and we could always count on an argument between my mother and the Federal Police when ever we went in and out to Wildboar through the official checkpoints. She saw no reason to have to justify to them what she was doing, "*This is MY home,*" she'd say, "*Get back to yours*". In the end if it was some-body who'd she'd run into before they would wave her through otherwise they knew there'd be a big public argument and the crowd would applause her because they all felt the same but weren't game to say it.

My father identified a couple of routes down the back roads where she could miss the checkpoints but she rarely used them. I think she liked arguing the point with them. The attitude of some the Federal police particularly left a little to be desired and there were rumblings among the locals. About 400 Commonwealth and interstate police were sent to Darwin to enforce law and order on our battered population and while there were certainly issues that needed their attention some resorted to unnecessary bully tactics. In fact, our eccentric Mayor, Tiger Brennan, publicly requested of them that they go back from whence they came.

People were being airlifted out of Darwin by the thousands every day. We had no idea if some of our family or friends were dead or alive at the time. Once the looting started even civilians donned their guns to protect their businesses and it was not unusual to see them settle in front of their shops or houses with a swag, an esky, a couple of dogs and a big loaded gun. The daylight hours were often punctuated frequently by gunshots. It was the Darwin City Council putting distraught, injured and abandoned animals out of their misery. I was surprised how quickly the pack mentality instinct kicked in with these dogs and you'd often see huge groups of them searching the debris and rubble for food and wonder if they were eating human bodies. At night we'd hear them howling in the distance and hope they'd be the next to go for their own sake. Military and Federal Police patrolled the city and if we were ever seen out after dark we were told to go home and even be escorted to our cars or driven home.

The biggest thing of course was that it looked like we were living in a bomb ravaged war zone. If you ask me we were a city under martial law it's just that Stretton and the powers that be went to extraordinary lengths to ensure we didn't think we were and that the rest of Australia didn't think we were either.

Tiger Brennan, the Mayor of Darwin, was always a keen battle-ready advocate for Canberra staying out of Darwin politics and just because Cyclone Tracy had devastated the city, was no excuse for "them" being in there trying to tell us what to do. Tiger locked horns with Stretton and many other bureaucrats many times in the following months as every-one clamored and fought for control of our fair city. After life in Darwin returned to a "sort of" normalcy after Tracy, Major-General Alan Stretton and others were dismissive of Tiger Brennan's and the new Legislative Assembly's contribution to both the emergency period and reconstruction of Darwin saying they didn't really play much of a part in the aftermath. Stretton suggested Tiger Brennan was disruptive and I can certainly imagine he would have been. However, I don't recall Stretton (or indeed any other visiting politician) ever coming to my house personally to see if I was okay. Diane and I were a single young women living alone in what was left of a house we couldn't lock in a cyclone ravaged, military besieged and male dominated community. Officially, of course, my parents were in the same house every night and my grandparents were in a caravan in our yard and good family friends Bev and Pat Crosby also resided in our yard in a caravan for a while. Tiger Brennan checked up on us on several occasions, offering food or transport and checking how the family was going. The local pollies did much for the moral of the community by keeping an eye on their constituents and I have never really seen this acknowledged anywhere.

Darwin was invaded by men. This included thousands of Army, Navy and Airforce personnel as well as hundreds of media people and charity and health workers and, ultimately countless tradesmen volunteering their time to fix houses at least to a habitable standard for those who chose to stay. There also seemed to be a constant stream of Federal and State politicians and even Mayors from all over the country coming to visit and offer assistance. The stench of Darwin was horrific, looters were running wild in the street and hearing gunshots in the distance became a common occurrence. We always hoped it was a stray cat or dog being shot and to our knowledge it always was. A lot of people abandoned their pets and a lot were severely injured too so this mercy killing was a necessary evil. A little dingo looking dog used to sit on a pile of rubble on the end of our street and howl mournfully at the moon every night. One night he didn't howl and we knew he'd been shot. There was a lot of rumours about dogs being shot even when they were tied up in makeshift camps or on the back of utes. No-one was game to leave their pets unattended. The rumour mill always works overtime in times of disaster and Darwin was no different. Religious cranks told us that Darwin was eternally doomed because it was named after the origin of the species and this was God's revenge.

Aboriginal people had their own theories including that Tracy was payback for our pillaging of sacred lands including that the totem for natural disasters, Nungalinya (Old Man Rock out from Casuarina Beach), was upset because huge boulders had been removed by non-believers. We had a few people come to our house preaching asking us to pray for forgiveness or redemption or whatever and this upset my father who felt it was a matter of if he wanted a service he would attend his own church he didn't want it coming to him. Graffiti type writing for instructions or fun had started to appear all over Darwin so in order to stop the "bible bashers" from annoying our household he wrote a sign and nailed it to a tree in our front yard. It said "*Yea though I walk through the Shadow of Death I shall fear no evil for I am the meanest son-of-a-bitch in the valley*". We didn't get too many unwelcome callers after that. Other signs around Darwin said things like on a house wall the words "*We're still here so how about keeping the driveway clear*" or "*We're in Adelaide all OK*" in two foot letters across the only wall of the house left standing or "*Tracy Had Me*" across the dented bonnet of a car. Many people, including us, wrote songs and poetry and verse. I guess it was our way of dealing with it because the seriousness of disaster was always there in every waking moment and sleeping nightmare. We had to let it out and verbalizing worked.

Never-the-less my father decided he and Mum would go back to Marrakai for a while and there was "NO WAY" he was leaving me in Darwin on my own. By now we had kind of fixed up a room in the house, canvas roof and all, and I was sharing it with my friend Diane (from Meigs Court) and we begged him to let us stay because we'd look after each other. "*Two of you is worse than one,*" he said knowingly "*you are both going and that's final*"

Of course Diane and I both had ulterior motives but we couldn't discuss them with our parents for God's sake. Diane had gone all "*googly eyed*" over a man called Rodney who not only saved her when the roof blew off her house but had risked his life to save her dog Whiskey. It must have been the real thing. *Love in the first wind!* I was bridesmaid at their wedding in Mt Gambier in 1978 and Dianne returned the favour for me in 1981 when I got married at the Sailing Club on Fannie Bay Beach. Rodney ended up working for my ex-husband, Dave Martin, for many years. Dianne and Rodney still reside in Darwin and remain very good friends of mine to this day. I was however, at the time of Tracy, still interested in Kym the PMG tech who had done a pretty good disappearing act of his own in his precious, but very dented, FB Holden. He and his Auntie had apparently driven out of Darwin

early on Boxing Day while we were at Wildboar. I wanted to be in Darwin in case he made contact from his parent's home in Adelaide when he got there. In those first two days after Cyclone Tracy it is estimated that around 10,000 people had left, half by road and half by air, and he was one of them. *"Forget him"* my father said in a most unsympathetic voice. *"He wasn't tough enough for the Territory anyway"*. It had nothing to do with real men eating quiche - if you didn't know how to break in a horse, shoot a buffalo or wrestle a wildboar then you weren't a real man in his eyes. Exit Kym the PMG tech!

My mother, like Diane and I, was deemed a 'non-essential' resident and we were told we had to go. They always said the evacuation was voluntary but they did a pretty good job of deciding who could stay and who couldn't stay. My mother told the Federal Policemen who were trying to convince her to leave that they should go home instead of her because this was her home and she was staying and that was that. As she walked away I heard her say *"arrest me if you don't like it"* but they didn't. She would have many arguments with the Federal Police in the ensuing months but she always *always* won. Unfortunately, she agreed with my father that Darwin was no place for single young ladies and arranged for Diane to go to her parents in Mt Gambier and me to go to my godmother, Elaine Philips in Beaumaris in Melbourne. *"But I'm not a young lady,"* I howled to her. *"I don't want to go."* I howled even more. *"I'm not leaving Tequila here- the council will shoot him.* In the end she promised me that if I went for a few days rest then she would get Work Permits organised for Diane and I to come back in as 'essential' workers of some kind or rather. *"You know I can do it,"* she said. And she did.

My father couldn't understand it. *"There's 40,000 people desperately trying to leave Darwin and you silly bastards want to stay?"*

But he wouldn't go either. I managed to stay in Darwin until the 1st January 1975 when I was airlifted to Adelaide in a huge C130 Hercules and then flown by civilian aircraft to Melbourne. Dad was right, some people were desperate to leave. Perfectly healthy men had been caught posing as women or pretending to have serious injuries in an attempt to jump the evacuation queues. By the time I flew out on one of the last, if not the last Hercules, the evacuation proper was officially over and our flight was partly full of people who did not want to leave.

Aside from the turmoil within our own family the city was also in turmoil. Once the word had got out on Christmas Day it did seem like there were as many people coming into Darwin as were leaving it. There were military personal, construction workers, additional doctors, nurses and health inspectors all arriving from all over Australia to cope with the caring for 30,000 people jammed into emergency centres and makeshift housing, without power, water, electricity, clothing, or sanitation. What meat we still had in our big freezer at McKinley was starting to defrost without power and we delivered it to Darwin High School which had become a food collection point. It disappeared in minutes. People were sick of living out of cans. We'd go there every couple of days to get fresh fruit and supplies. Dad went to Wildboar and got a killer occasionally and delivered meat to family and friends on a regular basis. We had to be a bit quiet about it because it was far too wet to open the meatworks proper and even though Dad was a meat inspector by trade it was technically and legally meat that had not been certified for human consumption. No-one cared; we ate buffalo fillet while others lived on tins of tuna and bully beef. I am still staggered at the generosity of the people of Australia. Darwin High School was set up like a huge Department Store.

It also acted as a mess hall where thousands of people would go daily to eat in a huge makeshift dining area. We never ate there but we did go for groceries. We cooked by campfire at home. We could get blankets, cooking utensils, clothing, huge canvas tarpaulins, toiletries and just about anything we needed to make our lives more comfortable at Darwin High.

By the 27th December Darwin was a hive of activity. In the streets front end loaders, graders and backhoes worked from daylight to dark clearing rubble from roads and pushing people's lives into huge piles of rubbish to go to the tip. In places they dug huge trench latrines or holes to bury rotting food from abandoned refrigerators. The stench of rotting food was horrific and we knew there where still dead bodies to be found. There was a real fear of a disease outbreak. The Army was tasked with dealing with and emptying the putrid contents of fridges and freezers in some 12,000 houses let alone shops, supermarkets and wholesalers. If there are unsung heroes in the clean up of Darwin it would have to be the twenty or so 5/7 RAR Army men on that job. Everywhere you went in Darwin for a weeks you'd see teams of masked up men in hygiene suits sifting through wreckage to dispose of rotting food among rubble and debris that contained dead humans and animals. It was a mammoth task and they did it without question.

The radio broadcast daily health bulletins and we'd all sit by the radio to get updates. Even though the authorities kept telling us a disease epidemic was unlikely they arranged a mass immunization against cholera and typhoid and we all had to line up at the St Johns Ambulance centre on Ross Smith Avenue for what seemed like hours before we got our shots. Because of my cut feet, forehead and shoulder I was also given a tetanus shot and a penicillin shot. *"Call me pin cushion"* I joked to my little sister Elaine to stop her from crying as she lined up. For a town that was supposed to be emptying fast there was a lot of people there. We'd gone in a family group, complete with Dad's brother John and his family. They had migrated to Australia from Wales only a year or so before and we'd initially enjoyed traumatising our "pommy" cousins, Louise and John, with our wild Aussie antics as youngsters. All in all, as we got older we all got on pretty well. My father had made the decision that we'd all be going to Wildboar that night (to get a killer so we had fresh meat). So with freshly injected aching arms and butts we set off for to spend the night at Wildboar in a convoy of about five vehicles late in the afternoon.

People always laughed at my Austin 1800 but Dad had bought it for me because of the front wheel drive (and the fact I didn't want a 4WD - I wanted a girls car) but it got through that trip where most of the 4WDs didn't. Dad said it was mostly because

they weren't experienced 4WD drivers in real 4WD conditions but I thought it was because I was a better driver and I really rubbed it in to my Uncle John with whom I had a great relationship despite the fact he thought I was spoilt rotten by my father. In hindsight I probably was to a degree but I reckon I earned every bit of it!

Traveling in my car were my two sisters Elaine and Sonia and my cousin Louise and we sang our hearts out all the way to Wildboar. We were a very singing family and enjoyed making up our own words to songs; like when Mum bought her new purple GT Ford with matching felt hat "*Oh how we roared in that purple GT Ford along the road to Marrakai*" we sang in our loudest voices. We made up several songs about Cyclone Tracy on that trip happily singing them away around the campfire that night. We even got to sing our personal number one hit 'Cyclone City' into the phone a few weeks later and it was played on a London radio station.

CYCLONE CITY: Sung to the Tune of "Maria"

Come with me to Cyclone City
 Where the air is foul - there's not a house upright
 Where Tracy got her bite over Christmas Night
 There were evacuations and no radio stations
 All the looters run wild and the dogs have been shot
 But Darwin will live on forever,
 Yes, Darwin will live on forever

Gough Whitlam put of his trip round the world and Europe
 There was Alan Stretton and he really was stressing
 But it was for the good of our dear neighbourhood
 We're sad for dead but we're glad for the rest
 Because Darwin will live on forever,
 Yes Darwin will live on forever

Trees are all gone and there's iron on the ground
 Australia's been good and passed a hat all around
 We've blankets and food and had injections times two
 And with Canberra we're sure to have a big blue
 Because Darwin will live on forever,
 Yes, Darwin will live on forever

By Liz Elaine, Sonia and Louise Ball - 27 December 1974

The scale of the evacuation was huge. I went to the airport several times in that week between Christmas and New Year to see off family and friends and to help hand out apples and oranges to the kids so they had something to eat on the planes. I remember meeting lots of wonderfully devoted people from all sorts of charitable organisations but the one person who stands out for me was Senator George Georges from QLD who we sometimes wished would shut up with his bloody megaphone. He was forever telling people enmass to remain calm when it was he who was irritating them. The airport was packed solid with people and they spewed out into the car park where buses were arriving all the time with more evacuees from the schools were they were being held until it "was time." In reality Senator Georges did do a great job because in all honesty there were a lot of people had no idea how to organise themselves. Some were so distraught at having lost every-thing that they couldn't think straight. I remember also that Dawn Lawrie, an independent member of the first Northern Territory Legislative Assembly, was also volunteering at the Darwin Airport. I don't know what her role was but she was busy comforting people all the time. She is another local politician who did her bit for the constituents of Darwin and whose role was downplayed by Canberra generally and Stretton specifically. I spoke to her briefly and told her I didn't want to leave, "*You don't have to go,*" she said. When I told her my father said I have to she said she wasn't getting involved in that! Another advocate for the residents of Darwin against the "new" authorities in Darwin post cyclone Tracy was "Shotgun Nellie" Flynn, a well loved and respected part aboriginal woman who was in her mid nineties by then and not afraid to speak out.

Never-the less she became a very vocal advocate for the rights of families to return to their homes speaking out against the unfairness of the need to have a permit to return to our own homes. I was so impressed with Dawn Lawrie's compassionate approach that day at the airport, and post Tracy, that a few years later I asked her to preside at my wedding. There were women with children who had no idea where their husbands were or men running around frantically trying to find which flight their wives were going to (or had gone) on. I was only there one day, and that was because some-one had apparently re-diverted a truck load of fruit to Darwin and we got word that help was wanted to hand it out at the airport. When the fruit was all gone I didn't have a job anymore. There were many military planes used to move passengers as well as civilian planes and private aircraft. We all went out to have a look at the huge US Army C141 Starlifter cargo plane when it first landed with two huge generators on board that no other plane could carry.

Major General Alan Stretton, Chief of the National Disasters Organisation, was determined to cut Darwin's population by three quarters which he claimed would be a manageable populous. The planes flew in and out non-stop for the whole week. Most planes were way overloaded carrying up to double their normal passenger carrying capacity. They could do that quite easily because of the lack of luggage. There were also several reports of huge cargo planes leaving Darwin empty and this angered people who were desperate to leave. There was also distress when tired and hungry evacuees had to sit in hot planes and wait for the Prime Ministers plane to land. They reckoned he should have been made to circle until they took off and I agreed with them. I bet his plane was air-conditioned!

5. MY EVACUATION

By the end of the evacuation program approximately 26,000 people had been evacuated by air and another 9000 had left by road. Stretton got his wish, by the time the sun set on 1974 only 10,500 people remained in Darwin. The day I was dreading finally came and a Federal Policeman told my mother I had to go that day as it was the last opportunity for me to go. I had another go at begging but it didn't work. My mother was still having her own battles about being permitted to stay herself but she took me to the airport. I sulked all the way.

We were only allowed to carry hand luggage on the flights so I carefully put a couple of pairs of clean knickers along with some toiletries and a couple of sarongs in my dili bag. Every-one in Darwin had dili bags in those days. I also filled a bottle with water and put in a small plastic bag of dried dog biscuits, a couple of pieces of fruit, some salty plums, a dog leash and a small plastic saucer and finally, my little dog Tequila went in. There was no way I was leaving Tequila in Darwin without me. I'd seen other people smuggle their animals out and I was going to have a go. If the dog didn't go I wasn't. My father rolled his eyes. Tequila liked being carried in my dili bag so it was not an unusual experience for him but I didn't know how he'd go with it pinned shut. We made a plan to wear him out playing before we got to the airport so he'd be happy to sleep in the dili bag. I was pretty confident they wouldn't turn the plane around once I was on it and it was airborne. They were more desperate to get me out.

I flew out of Darwin in a huge propeller driven RAAF C130 Hercules aircraft but unlike some evacuees who had no idea where they were going to end up I knew I was going via Adelaide to Melbourne. I was on one of the last flights so I guess it was all easier to manage by then. The plane had web setting the length of the plane and some sort of temporary seating had been put opposite the web seats so we sat in long rows almost knee to knee with the people opposite. There was hardly room to move and it was pretty uncomfortable. It was hot and sticky and noisy. Even though Hercules are pressurized it doesn't feel like it. There is no insulation or temperature control and the noise is horrific. Somebody eventually handed out some earplugs and they were gratefully received. I was scared. I knew checkpoints had been set up to prevent unauthorized people from entering Darwin without work permits and I prayed my mother would be able to honour her promise to get me back home soon.

Within ten minutes of taking off I noticed a puppy down the aisle from me, and then a girl opposite me pulled out a little kitten and snuggled it to her face. Some-one else had a turtle around the other side. One of the crew told me there were six animals on the flight and that on every flight he flew on some-one had smuggled an animal. I let Tequila out and he sat on my lap for the rest of the flight. I found out later that Stretton had instructed crews on evacuation flights to "turn a blind eye" to people smuggling pets on aircraft because they were often the only possession they had left and the people of Darwin had already been traumatized enough. When we landed in Adelaide we were met at a table by the Salvation Army and I was surprised when he gave me \$50 and a small bag with a towel and some toiletries in it and offered me some clothing. I picked out a pair of sandals and a pullover. "What's this for" I asked. "For being brave" he said.

I was surprised again a few minutes later when I heard my name being called out over the public address system saying I had to report to the police counter. When I got there I found it was Mr Phillips, a policeman who we used to live next door to briefly in Turneau Street in Nightcliff when we first moved into Darwin. He'd seen my name on the list of evacuees. After relaying to him that the family was all OK he sent some-one to fetch me a steak sandwich "and another for the dog". Tequila and I then sat on the floor in the middle of the old Adelaide Airport eating our steak sandwiches and waiting for our commercial flight to Melbourne. A hostess came to see me and told me I couldn't take the dog on the flight with me. "That's fine" I said, "I wont go, just put me on the next flight back to Darwin and we'll all be happy". Instead, after Mr. Phillips came to my rescue they found a cage to put Tequila in the cargo hold and he came to Melbourne with me. My Auntie Elaine, who is really no blood relation, was a bit surprised to see I had a dog with me, but didn't make too much of an issue out of it. Auntie Elaine was a larger than life sophisticated lady and I was, the rough and ready kid from the bush going to stay with her.

Auntie Elaine, who was a well to do and very cultured spinster with no children of her own, had always been a bit of a benefactor to our family. She had spent a lot of years looking after her invalid mother and her brother, Uncle Hugh, (Phillips) who was also a bachelor. They had a magnificent house in Beaumaris with an indoor garden and a waterfall that cascaded down the inside staircase. I couldn't believe it and felt like I was inside an old Hollywood glamour movie. My room had its own ensuite and was fitted out with dark wooden antique furniture with velvets, laces, silks and expensive little nic-nacs everywhere. It even came complete with a cleaning lady who came in every morning. You can take the girl out of the bush but you can't take the bush out of the girl and I yearned for home.

Until then, I had never really spent any extended time with Auntie Elaine. She came to Darwin to see us periodically and always spoiled us rotten. Every Christmas or birthday we could expect something amazing to turn up like an ice-cream machine, life sized

teddy bears or huge boxes of games the likes of which we could never expect from our parents. One year she sent us all little pastel coloured transistor radios with earphones and we were the envy of every kid in Darwin. Another year it was a fairy floss machine and we couldn't believe our luck until Mum decided ten kids on a sugar high was more than even she could stand. Both Elaine and Hugh loved outback travel and had taken my mother under their wing when they visited Coolibah Station (near Katherine) in the mid 1950s in their private aircraft.

Auntie Elaine did likewise with Mums three daughters as we were born. I was her god daughter, Elaine was named after her and Sonia boarded with her to attend school in Melbourne. As expected, Auntie Elaine had my life planned out and with hindsight, I probably could have been a bit more gracious about my ungratefulness for not being excited about it. She had me booked into night school for business studies (and some elocution) and had arranged for me to talk to the manager at the salon she had her hair done to see about continuing my apprenticeship.

She had my hair styled, bought me a new clothes and took me to the theatre and an expensive dinner at their local yacht club. It was probably every other girls dream but all I wanted was to go back to Darwin and get my hands dirty. The one thing I did like about Melbourne was that I got to go a Daddy Cool concert. I went with a friend from Darwin, a bloke we called Morse Code, who also evacuated to Melbourne. My Auntie wasn't particularly happy about it but I was then, and still am, a real Daddy Cool devotee. Never-the-less I almost turned myself inside out with excitement when Mum rang and said Diane and I could come home as she had got us Work Permits. I wanted to charter a plane that night. My Auntie Elaine was very distressed and could not understand why on earth a young woman would want to return to the mayhem and mess in Darwin when I had so much going for me in Melbourne. And I know she would have given me the world. "*Its my home Auntie Elaine,*" I said "*its my home.*"

THE FIRST EIGHT WEEKS

The Natural Disasters Organization, at the insistence of Mayor Tiger Brennan, had flown in about 1500 x 1-1/2 hp generators and these were aimed at getting at least one refrigerator and one light in households - both of which were very important to managing the health and morale of householders. The various committees and authorities working in Darwin were often at odds with each other but there was a common belief that keeping the morale of residents high was a priority. My mother used this argument to get Yvonne's Beauty Salon operational again. It was the first salon open after the cyclone. The fact that it was opposite the Darwin Hospital and the largest group of women (nurses) in Darwin helped. Naturally she needed Diane and I back in Darwin to run the shop. It took her about three minutes under the old tried and true Territory rule of "*its not what you know - its who you know*" to have Diane and I certified as "essential workers" and we on the first available plane back. Mum told us the Navy had agreed to help us open the shop.

Once the word about Cyclone Tracy got out the RAN immediately enacted "Operation Navy Help Darwin" and Navy personnel all over the country were called back from Christmas leave. Within two days seven ships in the Australian fleet had been mobilized and headed to Darwin. These were the Melbourne (ii), Brisbane, Stuart, Vendetta (ii), Hobart, Supply and Stalwart. There were about 3000 sailors in Darwin Harbour including a handful that we knew who turned up to see if we were okay.

Dad had been very involved with the sea cadets in Darwin in earlier times. We worked mainly with the blokes from the HMAS Stalwart. They were tasked with many jobs including electric and communication repairs and installing generators in houses and essential businesses. They also re-roofed and repaired important buildings like the technical college, the Darwin Hospital, the Red Cross Centre, a public laundry in Rapid Creek and our hairdressing salon in Mitchell Street. They had huge Wessex helicopters operating back and forwards from the ship all day carrying building material, huge generators and all sorts of plant and equipment and we had to go outside and wave to them every time it went over or they'd come in later in the day wanting to know what was wrong. It was not unusual to see navy personnel of one trade or another being winched down from helicopters onto the tops of buildings or power poles to undertake repairs. The Navy's "can do anything" attitude and willingness to help in any way they could was a magnificent morale booster for Darwinites in those first few hard weeks after Tracy. Words are simply not enough.

The hairdressing salon was of course was a total mess. A group of Navy "volunteer" carpenters fixed the windows and roof enough (supposedly) to stop it falling in and then tied a massive tarp right over the top of the building to make our workspace waterproof. The Navy then took all our equipment on board their ship, cleaned it up and put it through their workshop to certify it safe and then came and set it up for us in the shop. The Lions Club blokes (some local and some from interstate) came and set up generators to give us enough power for lighting and to allow us to run a refrigerator and a hairdryer. We ended up with three noisy little 1.5kva generators each running various equipment until later the Navy tracked us down a much quieter 5kva unit. Unfortunately it was later stolen by looters but it was only a matter of days before we had "real" power reinstated. Dad was "*pissed off*" because he thought he might get to keep it! The Lions Club men showed us how to stop and start the 1.5 kva's and showed us what we had to do to refuel them in the middle of the day. I always thought I knew more about living with generators than they did but I never said anything. Needless to say everyday about twenty enthusiastic blokes, from both the Lions Club and the HMAS Stalwart, would turn up to refuel and start the generators for us. They did this up to good times a day. We spent as much time making cups of tea and coffee for them as we did cutting hair. Mum said this was good because they were working very hard to restore our city under very trying circumstances and we had to be hospitable but Dad said "*as long as a cup of tea is all they're bloody well after.*" I can honestly say not one of the sailors we worked with made an inappropriate advance and in fact were very protective of us when others came looking for opportunity that didn't exist. There was talk at one stage of locking the few single women of Darwin in with the nurses at Darwin hospital under curfew every night but it never eventuated.

If we thought we were in for an easy time we were wrong. It was hard work and we worked most days from daylight to dark. We spent a lot of time cleaning and mopping up after rain because the roof still leaked and the floor still flooded. We'd been given instructions on how to manage a torrential downpour and there were plenty. We'd shut down the generators, wrap tarps over electrical goods, pull out extension cords and wrap the ends in plastic and place buckets under the biggest leaks. In one section the tarp would fill up with water and I'd have to push it upwards with a broom to get the water to splash out onto the footpath out front. One day I successfully managed to drown a passing important official, he was a politician from somewhere, but he came in and shook my hand and thanked me for the job we were doing and dripped water all over my freshly mopped floor. My mother couldn't believe I had the audacity to be cranky with him when it was I who soaked him and thought the situation funny. We were worried this canvas bubble may burst and drown the salon but it never did. If it had rained all night then we were glad to see our helpers waiting there in the morning as they'd get rid of the water for us. We had a big plastic 60 litre drum and we'd keep that filled with rainwater for making coffee and the rest would run down the street. We became an unofficial rest stop. The Navy gave us the biggest tin of coffee you'd ever seen as well as plenty of powdered milk, sugar and paper cups to cope with the demand for coffee.

Part of our job was to keep the short back and sides in check for the military and we did number 1 to 4 clipper haircuts all day every day. Occasionally a lady would come in for a shampoo and set and we'd fight over her. As time passed more and more women moved back into Darwin our customer based became more gender balanced. We were shocked one day when a visiting female dignitary came in asked for a perm. "A what???" Hell we hadn't even thought about a perm for three months but it signaled that times were normalising and we needed to increase the services we were offering. We rang an interstate supplier who we'd purchased some product off before Tracy and she was so excited that we were alive and operating that she sent us two big boxes of product at no charge. Wrapped up in the middle was a big bottle of champagne and a bigger box of melted red tulip chocolates. We enjoyed both with equal enthusiasm and had to unpack the rest of the box the next day!

Because it was the Navy that got us started they claimed us as their own and stuck Navy stickers from all the various ships all over the shop including on the windows and the doors. When the Army came in force a month or so later they also used us to keep their hair growth at regulation length (very important in any emergency situation apparently). The Army men were very competitive with the Navy and tore down all the Navy stickers and put Army ones up. If the Navy boys bought in a tin of biscuits we had to promise we wouldn't give them to the Army and visa versa. One of the sailors bought in a huge box of biscuits, about the size of a tea chest, just before the Stalwart left Darwin. He had painted very blackly and thickly a message for the Army on the side of it that said "GRUNT OFF". This became a bit like a cat and mouse game and went on daily until the HMAS Stalwart sailed out of Darwin in February. Our Mayor, Tiger Brennan, echoed all our sentiments when he said in his farewell speech, "*I will not forget you. We owe the Navy the greatest debt of all*".

We were genuinely sad to see her go but before long, the Army (5/7 RAR) under the direction of Lt Colonel O'Donnell, moved and rose to the task of continuing the cleanup. They stayed for about four months and once again we made many friends. During that time they cleaned up some 2000 residences in Darwin. The phrase "cleaned up" does not do justice to what they did. They searched through rubble and debris for dead bodies (human and animal) and removed rotten maggot infested foodstuffs. They retrieved items of value that were salvageable and catalogued them for absent owners and then arranged for what was left of peoples lives to be moved to the land fill. As they completed each residence the letters "S & C" were scrawled or painted on walls visible to the street. S & C meant "Searched and Cleared" but we knew it meant "No Bodies Found Here."

One of our neighbours was the larger than life eccentric character Colin Jack Hinton (Dec 2006) who founded the Maritime Museum in Darwin in the 1970s. We were good friends with his two daughters Fiona and Margaret and we spent a lot of time at each others houses. I loved the Jack-Hinton household. It was like a mysterious museum in its own right. It was kind of dark and in every corner or space was a totem pole, a death mask or feathered head dress, some aboriginal beads and baskets or Asian artifact of some kind. At one stage we used to have to step over a huge decaying dugout canoe from Arnhem land that he'd managed to some-how drag up the stairs into his lounge-room while he studied it. We used to have to climb over it, without touching it, to get to the kitchen or the girls bedrooms. From memory it came from Lothar Paschon who operated the buffalo meatworks at Jimmy's Creek on Point Stuart (roughly where the Point Stuart Wilderness Lodge now is) not far from Wildboar.

Colin was extremely proud that his chook-house and chooks survived Tracy relatively unscathed. He was subsequently not very happy when an Army team cleaning up Auntie Beth (Hogan)'s house next door at 34 East Point Road, somehow managed to demolish his chook house with a runaway machine leaving his much loved chooks "home-less". He ranted and raved for days and we all kept a lookout for his chooks until he erected another pen for them amid many loud and lewd protestations and intermittent liquid refreshments. This was, in Colin's mind, such a travesty of what was meant to be happening with the Army clean up teams that ultimately decided he needed to write to the man in charge of the 5/7 RAR clean up team and many years later I with thrilled to find a copy of the following letter in a Soldiers Newsletter amid other memoirs from Cyclone Tracy.

"Dear Jake,

When you come to write the chapter in your Regimental history of the very considerable and magnificent role which you played in the reconstruction of Darwin, I hope that you will not fail to add at least one qualification, perhaps to be known as the Jack-Hinton Chook-house Stuff-up. My chook-house, erected at considerable pain by my wife, survived the cyclone, bar its roof. Fourteen of my 15 chooks also survived.

Immediately after the cyclone the roof was replaced by one of my staff. I did not seek assistance of the military in tidying the surrounds to my house, and their presence was unnecessary. However, they did visit my next-door neighbour to tidy her garden. In the process, one of your drivers, who may perhaps not have been au fait with his machine, succeeded in demolishing my chook-house. How he managed to do so, God only knows. My chooks are now homeless, a matter of considerable tragedy to me and them, and subject to depredations of the local vermin – canine, feline and human.

*Yours very sincerely,
Dr Colin Jack-Hinton.*

Occasionally we'd see the odd RAAF man but there weren't too many of them. It was Navy initially and Army after that but we knew the RAAF were responsible for flying in supplies and flying out evacuees. In those first couple of months, despite the fact we were there as an "essential" service for the morale of the women of Darwin, our clientele was 99% military personnel. After they moved out of Darwin our client base was still primarily men because we had thousands of tradesmen move into Darwin for the reconstruction phase once the emergency was over. By the middle of 1975 the population of Darwin had increased back to 33,000. Most of these were construction workers and trades people employed under the umbrella of the Darwin Reconstruction Commission (DRC). They had given four firms contracts to construct 2000 new houses in May so the population was not made up of the same people who had fled the city after Tracy. Some old Territory families did come back to the only home they'd known but the dynamic of Darwin, Australia's northern capital, was forever changed. There were some politicians and bureaucrats who felt Darwin wasn't "worth" rebuilding as its destruction was so great and they argued with the people who thought Darwin should be rebuilt at any cost. Then there were those who wanted to relocate the city and those that wanted a city of concrete bunkers to withstand future cyclones. This infighting and indecision caused a lot of angst for locals who'd been evacuated ultimately causing many to settle permanently in other states. This tore unmercifully at the social fabric of Darwin literally wrecking families. To me its not the material or financial cost that counts. Material things are replaceable and at the end of the day its only money. It's what Tracy did to our families that we can not forgive her for. Sadly she had many allies. Many people in high places thought they could and should just wipe us off the map and start again with a new northern city. Senator Grant Tumber won many hearts when he said at the time, "*This is an existing community with an existing social network; it is not a growth centre, a 'new' town or an experiment to be played with.*"

We tried to live as normal a life as possible. Mum and dad were in and out to Marrakai trying to resurrect the meatworks. My grandparents still lived in their caravan in our yard as did life-long family friends Bev and Pat Crosby and their three little boys who were like brothers to us. Dean and his wife Dale still reside in Darwin They had a huge Labrador cross corgi called Ben; Ben was the funniest dog I've ever seen. He was long, fat and black with huge ears and short legs but he was lovable to boot. I remember being heartbroken when he ate my pet rabbit AB NOB NIBBLE. This was his name because I couldn't say ABOMINABLE (as in snowman - he was a white rabbit). My father told me to think of the bull that swallowed a bomb and I'd just got the hang of BOMB IN A BULL when he was devoured. Uncle Pat asked me how I knew his dog had eaten the rabbit and I remember telling him it still had white fluff on his mouth. He agreed that was a pretty good indicator and my father said he must have been delicious because there was nothing else left. In my fathers world if you fed it or watered it and it didn't perform some kind of work for you in return then you ate it. Diane and I shared the end room of the house which still had a pretty solid end wall. Some volunteer carpenters fixed the roof and walls. It was the main room and dad had put a wall divider through the middle of it making it essentially into two very small bed rooms. Before the cyclone my sisters Elaine and Sonia had shared this room and I lived alone in a room at my parents other house where my mother owned a child care centre prior to the cyclone.

The partition in what was now Diane and my room stopped short of reaching the ceiling by about 18 inches because dead centre in the room were both the light and the ceiling fan. This was not an issue when we had no power but caused us some drama once power was reinstated. I liked to read all night and wanted the light on. Diane wanted it off. I had grown up in the Top End so the stillness and humidity didn't worry me. Diane had moved to Darwin from Mt Gambier so she wanted the fan running full blast all night. I didn't. We had a single bed each side of the partition and Tequila and I slept on one side and Diane and her dog Whiskey on the other. Most mornings were woken by the malathion plane which always seemed to be just about to come through our louvres it flew so low. Once things settled down a bit and some running repairs were done on the house where Diane lived at Meigs Court she moved back there but we remained best friends .

In order to help accommodate thousands of workers the ocean liner SS Patris, which had previously been laid up in Singapore, was chartered by the Federal Government and bought to Darwin Harbour. The Chandris Shipping Company were paid \$15,000 a day for the period it was in Darwin. For about nine months it provided emergency accommodation for construction workers. She arrived in Darwin on Valentines Day and we went down to the wharf and watched her come in and berth at the "patched u" iron-ore wharf. Exactly nine months later, on 14th November 1975, she sailed on to Greece and became a passenger car ferry. Tracy Village was also set up with nearly 2000 demountable dwellings and caravans were brought to Darwin to house construction workers. I cant remember ever going to Tracy Village in those early days after Tracy but we certainly snuck onto the SS Patris more than a few times to enjoy a glass of something as the sunset over Darwin Harbour which is a glorious sight. I think in those first few years after Tracy we treated the sea with a fair bit of reverence because of all the good men, 16 that we know of, who went down with their ships during Tracy and are still on duty. Sometimes when we were on the SS Patris we'd throw a couple of stubbies into the sea for the lost sailors. While I wasn't good friends with any of them I did know a couple who were friends of

friends and that I'd often run into around the place. Darwin was just that kind of place; we were like an extended family and I still can't help but spare them a thought whenever I visit the sea in Darwin.

Nearly 1000 people lived on the SS Patris and you had to pass through a police checkpoint to get in but it was so easy to foil it was almost embarrassing to keep getting away with it. Some nights we moved whole parties on board. The eight hour working day scenario had blown away with Tracy. We all worked from daylight to dark at best and we needed to unwind occasionally. And we did some pretty good unwinding at times. In the years since I've heard talk of the SS Patris being called the Hell Ship of Darwin and maybe it was for some of the 5,500 people who lived on it at various times of its stay in Darwin but I personally never met any-one who had any major problems with living on it; certainly conditions were no worse than they were for us lowly land-lubbers who were living under canvas in unlockable dwellings.

A local bloke nick-named Tree-house was involved in the cleanup and found himself on a front end loader at a severely damaged liquor outlet amid thousands of loose beer cans and bottles and other alcoholic beverages (cardboard cartons long disintegrated). He reported that while Santa may not have made it into Darwin on Christmas Day he had found him now in the most spectacular way. All such debris was of course meant to go straight to the landfill but a few tipper loads found their way back to Tree-house's yard and were hidden under building material in a big hole in the backyard. The whole of Darwin had been aerial sprayed at least twice a week with malathion from a little crop-dusting type plane to control flies and mosquitoes so apart from being exposed to alternate bouts of hot sun and torrential downpours for a month these cans and bottles had been sprayed continuously. Malathion apparently has a low human toxicity but it does have a strong odour. None of these factors impacted Treehouse's decision to keep drinking it till it ran out. We were sure he'd get sprung and into trouble because you could smell his backyard from a mile away. It smelt like a brewery because quite a few cans burst as they were being tipped into the hole. We did learn however that you can't boil cans of beer without them exploding. One of the blokes who was just as keen to drink Tree-house's stash but a little more health conscious decided if he boiled the cans before he cooled and refrigerated them then he wouldn't get sick from the spray. A dozen or so were put in a huge boiler pot and left to simmer on the gas BBQ. When they went off like fire cracker night we ran for our lives out of the yard past those who were running into the yard to see what had happened. Beer dripped off the makeshift ceiling for days and the boys mourned the loss of those dozen cans by downing an unboiled dozen. Thankfully I have never been a beer drinker.

Another friend, Rob, found two very old stone bottles of whiskey at the landfill and thinking they'd be nice for growing water plants out of he grabbed them. He was surprised to find they were still full. I can't remember the date on them but they were so old we decided they needed to be kept for a special occasion. When that occasion arrived and one bottle was consumed all hell broke loose and a huge all in drunken brawl erupted that went on for hours. The next morning Rob emptied the other bottle down the sink despite howls of protestation from his black-eyed, split lipped, sad and sorry bunch of drinking mates who claimed it the best whiskey they'd ever tasted. We never went without grog. Even when Stretton tried to keep us under control (like News Years Eve) we always found some. There were plenty of blokes around Darwin with stashes they'd retrieved from the rubble of broken homes or "saved" from the landfill. As a last resort, if I had to, I'd beg my mother for a bottle of Southern Comfort or Cold Duck wine, both of which she kept in plentiful supply in the station store at Wildboar. She unknowingly donated me about double the quantity she actually gave me.

Rumors also abounded about the group of Aboriginal men who sought refuge on Christmas Eve in the cellar room of the Dolphin Hotel and pushed a wonky tireless wheelbarrow back and forwards across the road to the Bagot Reserve loaded to the hilt with grog after which they spent the second wind drinking it. They must have woken on Christmas Day thinking they'd had a hell of a party. Another man, a ringer with "a belly full" who was in town for Christmas, pulled his old landrover under the awning at the Parap Hotel for protection from the storm and flaked. He was woken suddenly by the sound of smashing glass only to find his windscreen smashed and a couple of cartons of green cans on his lap. He thought his mates had taken a joke too far until daylight revealed to him the total devastation he had mostly slept through. We didn't drink, VB, Carlton or XXXX in those days; we simply drank green, white or yellow. While beer was an integral part of our life in Darwin in those days I never drank it myself. I still can not drink it. I was (and am) a "*Poor excuse for a Territorian*" my friends would tell me.

There was a bit of an underground subculture in Darwin for parties among the younger locals immediately after Tracy. Despite there being no official curfew we were always sent home by some-one so it became a bit of a habit that we spent the night at wherever the party was. If somebody said "*there's a party on at such and such a place*" that generally meant that some-one had "*sourced*" a free supply of grog and it didn't matter if you knew the people or not we all went there. One such party occurred in Liechhardt Crescent one street away from our house. Somehow or other the people in the house had found and filled an above ground pool. Some-one turned up with a pool-table and a motley incomplete set of pool cues and balls on the back of his truck and another bloke nailed a dart board to a tree and we threw tennis balls at it all night because we had no darts. People turned up with cartons of cigarettes and salt and vinegar chips and jars of pickled onions. It was by no means a gourmet function but we just threw in whatever we had and everybody shared everything. Some-one else delivered six or so bags of ice, unofficially donated by the military, so we had, for the first time in a month, ice cold beer.

We had the party of all parties that night with loud music, plenty of food and grog and all sorts of hilarity going on both on the dance-floor (as we came to call the floorboards – the rest of the room was gone) and in the swimming pool. If you were game enough (and I wasn't), you could run up what used to be an internal staircase, charge across what used to be the lounge room floor and take a running leap off the floorboards into the swimming pool. With hindsight I think for many of us it was the stress-breaker

we needed after those first few traumatic weeks. We soon learnt not to invite our newfound Navy or Army friends to any of these gatherings because the Military Police would inevitably turn up to shut things down. Never-the-less, there's always a party pooper in the crowd and somehow or rather the police were notified and in the early hours of the morning we were "raided". I managed to make good my escape that night through a couple of abandoned houses and across the road, up the fire-escape and into my bed. I lay there listening to the sounds of arguments and sirens and vehicles squealing off into the distance when there was a knock at my door. I nearly died and felt for sure I'd been sprung. It was my grandmother who'd been woken by a local policeman to see if I was all right as apparently the squeals of delight coming from the swimming pool had been interpreted by a neighbour as squeals of distress. There had been a couple of rapes reported in the preceding weeks the police-man said. I did not know him but he must have known my family to check up on me. They were relieved to see I was safe and sound in my bed and I heard my grandmother tell the policeman as they left my room that I was "*such a responsible young woman there was no way I would be out that time of night.*" My grandmother has long since passed on but this is probably the first time my mother or father will read this story. Other than that instance, I never personally heard of a rape or sexual assault in Darwin in the immediate months after Tracy so they were kept fairly quiet if indeed they did occur. Perhaps that is why young women like myself were escorted home by the authorities every-time we were caught out after dark.

Two of the biggest injustices of the Commonwealth Government bureaucracy that irked locals more than anything in the months immediately after Tracy were the R&R system whereby the Government decided to give all its employees three opportunities to go "south" for paid "rest and relaxation" and the dreadful re-entry permit system that prevented locals from returning to their homes. It was a joke. Government employees, police in particular, who were struggling, working long hours and living in substandard accommodation still had their wages and other special hardship benefits guaranteed every week. That could not be said for Darwin business' and families who were struggling the same hardships but had little or no income and huge debts accumulating daily. Likewise, thousands of volunteers worked in Darwin for months on end with no income other than rough keep. It was not fair and caused a fair bit of divisiveness in the community. Eventually it was decided that all other workers could have one return airfare south. I had nowhere to go and didn't want to risk not being allowed to come back so I didn't use mine. My parents used theirs to go to Canberra and visit good family friends David and Robyn Burke who took in my two little brothers after Tracy.

Re-entry permits were a big problem and as far as I am concerned were a waste of time. All it did was keep the good and honest citizens of pre-cyclone Darwin isolated from their homes and families for longer than necessary. This was often at considerable financial expense as well as causing the breakdown of social networks and family units. For those prepared to buck the system or use a little initiative, getting in and out of Darwin was easy, real easy. I know plenty of people who just said "*stuff it, I'm coming home*" and did and nobody did anything about it. The unfortunate thing was that a lot of undesirables bucked the system and turned up in Darwin and nobody did anything about that either. Most local politicians and the Mayor were dead against it but their protests fell on deaf ears. So while we were busy keeping out good solid Darwin people with sound financial and strong family investment in our city we were allowing hippies, bikies and degenerates in willy nilly because they didn't bother to apply for an entry permit and no body bothered to send them home. A lot of people complained about the "bad" people being let into Darwin while the "good" ones were not permitted to return. Before Tracy it was pretty easy to buy marijuana in Darwin and while there was no doubt some hard drugs around it wasn't something that was under our noses. Within two months of Tracy hard drugs of all manner were easily purchased on the street. The ineptitude of the authorities changed the drug scene for the youth of Darwin and it wasn't for the better I can assure you. I readily admit to having tried marijuana a few times but to be perfectly frank it did nothing for me. I much preferred alcohol and admit I drank for too much for a young lady.

One such group of "undesirables" moved into the house next door to where we lived (13 McKinley St) which my parents also owned at the time. Initially we didn't care because who was going to deny any-one a roof (partial as it may be) over their heads in cyclone ravaged Darwin. As Darwin returned to normal and we needed access to the house for insurance reasons and reconstruction purposes the tenants refused to budge. After a bit of legal to-ing and fro-ing was of no avail it was decided that a more lateral approach was needed and my father had a few of the local wild boys move in with them. They soon moved out because as illegal tenants themselves they could not do anything about other illegal tenants who moved in with them. They were hippies who had heard that Darwin had been abandoned and that in order to re-populate the abandoned northern city the Commonwealth was going to allow people to claim squatters rights. They sold the house soon after.

My father was always warning us to be careful and we tried to be (honest) but despite our best intentions we managed to get ourselves into a bit of trouble albeit innocently. After the Navy moved out and the Army took over "looking after" us and our shop we made friends with a couple of the blokes and often went for a drink at the local hotel after work (it was where I'd worked prior to the cyclone). Even though there was supposedly no official curfew in Darwin it was deemed to be dangerous out at night and the Military Police and Federal and local cops would tell us it was time to go home and make sure we did. We never disobeyed them when we were told but unless they actually told us to we didn't go home. Chad and Adrian were two Army men that befriended the family and had spent a bit of time at our place. On one of those visits Chad had witnessed my father unloading some of his high powered rifles from his Toyota to lock away as he did not want to leave them at the station unattended as looting was going on out there as well. These were his tools of trade, his shooting guns, and ranged from a vintage muzzleloader to 22s and 303s up to high powered Holland and Holland .300, 308 calibre Shultz and Larsens and an SLR (unregistered) of the type used by the Australian Army in Vietnam. We didn't think anything of it. Respect for guns was mandatory in our family and we would have assumed it was for Army personnel as well.

One night long after the police had sent all the women home a brawl apparently broke out in the bar of the Koala Hotel and Chad threatened to shoot some-one telling them he knew where he could get some firepower that would blow his opponents head off. The Military Police were called and some-how the story became that the “*buffalo shooters daughter*” had gone home to get a gun. I’d actually gone home to bed. Next thing you know the Military and Federal Police are storming our house confiscating Dad’s rifles and dragging me out of bed to question me. I had no idea what they were talking about and was distraught. To say my father was furious would be the understatement of the century, no, make that millennium. He’s always had a mighty fine temper but fortunately he believed me that night and stood his ground on my behalf. I have always been thankful he was actually in town that night and had known first hand that I’d been home for hours.

That didn’t alter the fact his guns had been confiscated and that both he and I looked like being charged with fire-arm offences. The next morning we found out that Chad had been arrested and was apparently being held in a classroom at the Larrekeyah School which was being used as an Army holding cell. My father didn’t want me charged with anything and was straight on the case in the morning a) at the Darwin Police Station trying to get his guns back and remove my name from the incident report and b) tracking a solicitor down in the event that we were to be charged with something.

At that stage I was crying more because I knew Dad was angry about his guns and because I thought I’d be “*deported*” from Darwin than what a fire-arms offence might do to my future. My mother and I went to Larrekeyah Barracks to find out what had actually happened and during the course of the conversation one of the MPs told her that Chad was being flown back to Holsworthy that afternoon and had not, nor would be given the opportunity, to change the statement he had given to the civilian police. It would all be dealt with at the other end they told her. They also told her that it had nothing to do with them what I was charged with as that was in the hands of the civilian police and pretty well just shrugged her off. “*Like hell,*” My mother said and off we headed for the airport just in time to see a group of Army men boarding an aircraft. I could see one of them was Chad and he was handcuffed and being escorted by MPs so it was serious stuff. I found out later he’d been charged with several things including aggravated assault.

I’ve always known my mother has no fear of authority and that it does not intimidate her in any way but even I was surprised when she marched up to two huge gun toting military policemen and demanded she wanted that flight stopped and Chad XXXX removed instantly. I could see they were surprised and must have thought she had some sort of authority because they immediately went to get a superior officer. When they didn’t come back after five minutes my mother surprised me again. She told me to stay put and large as life walked through the airport door across the tarmac and straight up the stairs into the plane looking for every bit of it like she full authority to do so. When the two original MPs came back they asked me my mother’s name. They thought she was either a policewoman or solicitor and were shocked when I told them she was none of those but had just boarded their plane anyway. Next thing I know my mother is walking back across the tarmac in between two military policemen. There was no friendly banter going on. I thought she’d been arrested but then, immediately behind her came Chad escorted by another two MPs. We were then joined by a couple of Federal policemen and went to a room at the airport where Chad wrote out a statement saying he lied about my involvement and that I had nothing to do with the incident and no knowledge of it brewing before I went home. After it was written out to my mother’s satisfaction she told the sombre group, “*OK, you can proceed with your flight now,*” and away we went. “*Thank you Mrs Ball,*” they replied as if she really *did* have some control over their flight. I couldn’t believe it. My mother had actually stopped an Army flight with nothing but bluff but she was pretty blasé about it all. “*Its all about front,*” she told me when we got back to the car, “*The last thing they want is a national scandal about one of their soldiers and a young Darwin woman*” and she added “*Your father can sort you out when we get home!*”

I didn’t get deported or charged with anything but had learnt some very valuable lessons. Dad got most of his guns back. Like most station people of the day he had a few unregistered guns he’d gathered up over the years and they were destroyed. He eventually got his good shooting rifles back but he couldn’t look at me without shaking his head for a month after that. I had some serious ground to make up.

I got the mother of all father-daughter lectures and totally banned from having anything to do with any-one in the Australian Army for the rest of my life. My father would be pleased to know I’m still obeying that order to this very day!

7. LIFE GOES ON

The Cyclone Tracy death toll officially sits at 71 but many rumours abounded then, as they still do today, that it was actually a lot higher. I am caught between a rock and a hard place with this one. I have heard convincing argument on both sides but I really wouldn’t be surprised if it was higher for many reasons. The booklet, “*The Wild Months of Darwin*” by Top End journalist Noel Harley, (whose good-looking son Garry was a bit of a heart throb for Darwin’s young ladies at the time) puts up some convincing argument for a higher death toll. Noel was a man of integrity who I respected greatly at the time for his support of the local East Timor pro-independence group. I know in those first few days after Tracy my parents were approached by a group of police men wanting to know if they could bring our generator from Wildboar into Darwin as they needed to power a makeshift morgue to cope with the dead that were being stacked in an office at the police station. Some bodies were apparently also kept in the Casuarina Post office I distinctly remember one of them saying, “*We are running out of room fast*” but it may well have been that they were anticipating more bodies that never eventuated – I honestly don’t know. There was no way we’d get the heavy buxom old diesel powered 19kva we had through the muddy quagmire that was the Wildboar Road at that time so that idea was abandoned.

Darwin was also a bit of a haven for people hiding from the rest of the world so I have no doubt some people listed as missing from other parts of Australia may well have died in Tracy. They are not listed because their bodies have never been found or their whereabouts confirmed. I think this is particularly true for the hippies who lived on Lameroo Beach since the early 70s in makeshift humpies and crude tree houses. It was where the “alternate lifestyles” lived and I’d been there a couple of times because some of the East Timor group lived there but it was also known by the young people of Darwin as a place where those who indulged (not me – I tried it and didn’t like it) could buy a cheap joint (as in marijuana not a house). We used to like Lameroo because we could purchase cheap Asian fare such as sarongs from Bali, carry bags from Dili, long dangly hippie earrings and colourful beaded bangles from Thailand. We’d talk to alternate life-stylers who’d tell us all about where they’d come from and where they were going and why they felt certain ways about hot political issues like the land rights movement, the Indonesians in East Timor and the Vietnamese boat people. These opinions were quite often the exact opposite of what the establishment (our parents) espoused. Lameroo was like an unofficial illegal market as hippies saved their money to travel to and from Asia or their hometowns and it gave us a bit of mental stimulation as well. In the wet season many left for better climates because they couldn’t cope with the humidity, sea-wasps and monsoonal downpours but to my knowledge it was never actually unoccupied in totality. There was always a stoic few hippies still living there along with some Larrakia people, traditional owners of the area, who camped there throughout the year. Whenever I went down there the Aboriginal people would be all laughing and playing cards. They loved it. Lameroo Beach was totally annihilated on Christmas Eve. Not a single trace of the camps or the people remained. I had goosebumps and felt a deep sense of loss when I saw what Tracy did to the shoreline at Lameroo even though I personally didn’t know any of the people other than by sight. No-one will ever convince me we didn’t lose people at Lameroo Beach.

Apart from the Larrakia people Darwin has also always had a moving population of indigenous people who move in and out of the city for various services and recreational purposes. Some of them lived in small camps along the cliffs and on the beaches all around Darwin’s shoreline. Myilly Point (where the Kahlin Compound once was), Doctors Gully, Cullen Bay and Mindil and Fannie Bay Beach were all places I was familiar with. These were no different. We’d often see these groups spearing fish and cooking sea slugs on their campfires in the beach dunes and they were always friendly and happy and the children playful. Larrakia people are saltwater people so it is expected they would live along the shoreline. Where did these people end up on the night of Tracy? We were told that an aboriginal woman’s body had washed up on Mindil Beach a few days after Tracy but because it was so badly decomposed and could not be identified it was doused in petrol and burnt on the beach. The ashes were left to scatter in what hopefully was her traditional lands. To the best of my knowledge this woman’s death was not recorded on the official Tracy death toll and who knows if it was ever recorded at all.

There are also reports of policeman who died in Darwin several days after Tracy as a result of complication arising from injuries sustained in Tracy and his name was not added to the list because he did not technically die during the “official” eight hours Cyclone Tracy wreaked havoc on the city. The same, we are led to believe by some, applies to people who were flown out of Darwin with serious injuries and who later died in southern hospitals. An old timer who died of a heart attack on Christmas Day is supposed to have his cause of death listed on his death certificate as “natural causes”. It probably was – but there’s a fair bet Tracy caused it. There were also rumours of mass burials going on outside Darwin and I have no knowledge of this occurring. I know whenever we’d see a huge plume of black smoke in the distance some-one with out fail, always muttered, “*funeral fire?*” which would in fact indicate mass burnings rather than mass burials.

Some of these accounts may be rumours and myth but some I know are not. Maybe the truth about the death toll in Darwin is not even known by those accused of covering it up. Darwin journalist Noel Harley (author: *The Wild Months of Darwin*) is convinced there was a cover up about the death toll to prevent a national panic. I am not as convinced as he about a cover-up to that extent but I certainly think there are some un-answered questions.

I met Noel a few times socially in the Darwin Hotel where he was very vocal about his support of the East Timorese Fretelin leaders and their concern about the imminent (and eventual) assault by Indonesia. In our young and newly politically active minds we could not believe that Henry Kissinger and Gough Whitlam (and later Malcolm Fraser) were apparently supporting an Indonesian invasion. There were a lot of Timorese families living in Darwin and the plight of the East Timorese people was of great concern to us all. My boyfriend, immediately on leaving school, was a young man of Timorese descent called Tony and I know first hand his immediate family were distraught for their extended family in Dili and beyond.

The East Timor pro-independence group was very active around Darwin both before and after Tracy and there was much whispered banter about the clandestine radio network operating between Darwin and East Timor and the cat and mouse game between the radio group who operated with WWII transmitters and receivers out of an old kombi volkswagon while ASIO, the Army and the PMG (Telecom) tried to track them. It was, in Darwin’s unique way, our version of a mini French Resistance until it was eventually confiscated by the Commonwealth police. It didn’t take long for the group to source more equipment but in early 1976 it was confiscated again. Later that year the Commonwealth Police ceased a third set of illegal transmitters and receivers that were being used to receive news from East Timor. A lot of Darwinites, including local Customs, Telecom and Police, were really angry with the stance taken by the Australian Government, particularly Fraser, on these radios. Remember, this is all going on behind the scenes in cyclone ravaged Darwin and there was much distress over the infamous murder of the five journalists in Dili, including the death of the Darwin based Roger East in 1975. Darwin took in many Timorese refugees in the mid to late 1970s. I consider myself privileged to have once met Hose Ramos Horta, Timor’s Foreign Affairs spokesperson of the time and two men who were later implicated in the infamous 1976 “*Dawn in Darwin*” affair, Manny Manolis and Robert-Wesley Smith. I may have met the others but I don’t recall doing so. The Darwin Hotel, a legend in its own right, was a bit of gathering place for those with a cause whether it was public servants, politicians, journalists, artists or activists it was a place we could go and get caught up in

local politics and inside information. Located on the Esplanade in Darwin its Green Room and beer garden were popular places to meet for drinks after work or a Friday night.

The “*Dawn in Darwin*” debacle occurred on 17 September 1976 when Wesley Smith, Manolis and another two Australian men were arrested and charged with gun-running and smuggling within minutes of their small fishing boat, *the Dawn*, leaving Darwin Harbour. These activists had decided to attempt to get food and medical supplies to the desperate peoples of Dili despite the Australian government forbidding them to do it and Indonesia’s threat to sink any boat delivering humanitarian aid. They were escorted unceremoniously back into Darwin Harbour under direct order of a 50 calibre gun mounted on the Australian Navy’s patrol boat, the *HMAS Adroit*. Three old guns were found aboard and that constituted the gun-running charge. A fire-arms expert bought in for the Defence is purported to have told the presiding magistrate that one of the old shotguns “*wouldn’t blow the arse off a duck.*” and that it was normal in the Territory for fire-arms to be carried on a fishing vessel. Which was, of course, all true and the whole of Darwin was prepared to back them up.

One incident I remember well occurred a few years later when activist Wesley-Smith decided to hold a protest rally supporting Fretelin sympathisers in the Darwin CBD. Wesley-Smith was a bit of a radical albeit one with a very worthy cause and sometimes he over-stepped the mark according to some of the more staid members of the Darwin “establishment”. My mother could hardly be called staid but she took Wesley-Smith head on one day after he appeared in the news telling Darwinites he was going to napalm a dog in Raintree Park to highlight the plight of the East Timorese who were claiming that Indonesia was using napalm in its aerial bombing campaign. Raintree Park is a beautiful park located in the heart of Darwin’s CBD and its huge rain trees (Samanea saman) have bore witness to many social and cultural events and happenings over the years. In those days it was “the place” to air your concerns or stand up for what you believe in and I understand it still plays that role today. On the day in question Wesley Smith is there with all his pro-independence banners and leaflets and my mother, herself a very keen supporter of the East Timorese cause, turned up with her entourage (including me) and a huge banner (If I recall correctly it was a double bed sheet) on which she had printed in bright red paint, along with dog paw prints, words to the effect of

“Save the East Timorese by all means – but LEAVE OUR BLOODY DOGS alone while you do it”

A small group were immediately deployed to keep her away from Wesley-Smith and the television crews. Several members of the pro-independence group tried to explain to her that the assertion by Wesley Smith was an attention getter designed to attract national media and that they really had no intention of napping anything. This was a period when the only information coming out of Timor was via the clandestine radio networks in Darwin so the group had to resort to sensationalism to get the national media interested. My mother was having none of it. She was interviewed by the local radio stations and several interstate journalists as she went to battle for the dogs. My mother, in her one woman campaign, was surprised to find the SPCA present with a petition calling for the Chief Minister, Paul Everingham to sack Wesley Smith from his government position. Several other people had turned with banners and signs and there was a fair bit of scuffling and heckling going on. Around 600 people turned up that day which was exactly what Wesley-Smith wanted. He stood and addressed the crowd, toy dog in hand, and told every-one it’s a pity they weren’t as concerned for 50,000 Timorese as they were for one dog. It worked; Wesley Smith made the front page of the Northern Territory News as well as considerable interstate coverage.

As we left the rally every-one was promising my mother that no dogs would be hurt but also asking her to *please* vent the same anger on the Australian Government for its disregard to the East Timor predicament. “*East Timor has you and the dogs have me and don’t you forget it- threaten to napalm a few politicians next time,*” she told the group.

It is really exciting to know that the Darwin to Dili yacht race will re-commence in 2010 and I hope it becomes an event of international significance. The event, started in 1973, was cancelled in 1975 partly because of Cyclone Tracy but mainly because of the unrest in Timor. Australia owes much to the support of the Timorese in WW2 and it is testament to the forgiving and generous spirit of the East Timorese people, that despite Whitlam turning his back on them, they were the first country to offer international aid to Darwin after Tracy. Darwinites should be supporting the Government of Timor Leste 100% with this exciting initiative.

It was so easy for Darwin to get caught up with the plight of the Timorese because they were our neighbours and our friends it was a bit of a shock to us when boat people from Vietnam started to arrive. We all knew about the Vietnam War of course but irrespective of what we felt about Australia’s role in that war it was, in our minds at least, a war on the other side of the world. After a period of conflict that had lasted nearly 120 years the Vietnam War “ended” in 1975 leaving southern Vietnamese living under a communist regime they did not support. Many chose to flee the country in small wooden fishing boats suffering horrendous hardships before they docked at various ports around the world. We were shocked when a small fishing vessel arrived unannounced in Darwin Harbour with five refugees aboard. Another fifty refugee boats arrived in the three years that followed giving rise to the name that is so commonly used today – “boat people”. It is estimated that over one third of Vietnamese refugees died of thirst, starvation, illness, weather implications or were murdered as a result of robbery, assault or rape enroute to their new lives. The decision for Australia to accept more Vietnamese refugees, as requested by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees signaled the end of the infamous White Australia Policy. Like the Timor situation, Vietnam boat people and what to do with them soon became the hot topic for discussion and debate around the town. I have read in many places that the arrival of the Vietnamese also signaled the start of multi-culturalism in Australia – maybe so in the southern states, but it had already been in the Territory for hundreds of years and maybe more.

On 1st July 1978 the Northern Territory attained self government under the Northern Territory Self Government Act 1978. This saw the Commonwealth of Australia transfer some of its powers to the Northern Territory Government. One of the growth industries identified as having great potential as a major contributor to the Territory's economic structure was tourism. "How stupid" is that we thought. In 1979 the laws controlling the operation of casinos are amended allowing the first Darwin casino to operate in the Don Hotel while a new multi-million dollar casino is being built on Mindil Beach. We couldn't believe they were going to build a casino on "our" beach. 1979 was also the year giant in which giant crocodile "sweetheart" was accidentally killed whilst being captured by park rangers. We are all horrified there was no retribution because Roy Wright, who had accidentally killed another famous Territory croc, "Charlie", a few years earlier had served time in Fannie Bay for the offence. By 1980 the Northern Territory Tourist Commission had been formed and tourism was generating in excess of \$220 million annually. Pretty incredible considering all the things we did at Wildboar to discourage tourists.

Darwin changed significantly in those first few years after Cyclone Tracy. We referred to things that happened before Tracy as BT and afterwards as AT. It was a point in time from which we could measure how our lives were before and how they were after. Tracy was severe and had a huge impact not only on the psyche of Darwinites but on the whole of Australia and beyond. As genuine Darwinites we were a bit of a rarity. Most people who lived in Darwin were there on two year transfers and this was blatantly obvious at school where we'd no sooner make friends with some-one and they'd go home. We became an ever rarer breed after Cyclone Tracy. A study undertaken by Charles Darwin University, using Bureau of Statistics data, has found that of 22,000 people living in Darwin in February 1975 less than 25% (5,400) were actually residents. By 1977 the population of Darwin was back to what it was in 1973/74 but over 65% (discounting children) were people who did not live in Darwin pre- Tracy. By the time the applications for compensation for damage caused by Cyclone Tracy had closed at the end of 1976, some \$26 million had been paid out to Darwin residents by the Darwin Cyclone Damage Compensation Act. Many people are still disillusioned by the inequities and injustices of some of those payments.

Over the next ten years most of my family left Darwin for one reason or another including myself. Most of the people that left in that period were old Territory families who could not cope with the "new" Darwin or for one reason or another couldn't get their lives back together after Tracy devastated it. In the period from 1976 to 1981 the annual rate of population increase for the Northern Territory was 4.5 compared with the Australian figure of 1.24 at the time. By 1983 the population of Darwin was just over 70,000 with 80% of those under 40 years of age. Who'd have believed it! Our population and our workforce were both growing four times faster than the national average and the buffalo industry was living again through domestication and export.

I personally think Tracy was the last straw for my family at Wildboar. Every-one in the meat industry were already struggling financially because of the national meat slump and low export prices culminating in the "roo in the stew" debacle of the late 70s. It was a tough time, over 35 small abattoirs closed down around Australia between 1979 and 1982. It was so bad that my father said Managers of banks he'd never even been into used to hide from him at social functions in case he asked for money. This was also a time the Northern Territory Government started looking seriously at implementing its Tuberculosis and Brucellosis Eradication Campaign (BTEC) having monitored these diseases in cattle and buffalo since 1970. This would see major reductions, to the point of almost total eradication, in the Territory's buffalo herd. Additionally, with Kakadu National Park being proclaimed in 1979 (Stage #1) there were widespread (justifiable) global concerns about how buffalo, as an introduced species, were decimating this most fragile and beautiful of wetland environments. Even though it would be a couple more years before the Jay Pendarvis versus the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU) industrial dispute at Mudginberri Buffalo Abattoir would make national headlines, the battle for control of smaller abattoirs like Wildboar was already underway. By 1981 only two buffalo abattoirs were operating in the Top End. These were Point Stuart and Mudginberri but their days were numbered too.

There was great conflict between newer union minded employees (whom my father always said were "plants" from the AMEIU) and the itinerant contract workers who had been coming for years to work at Wildboar and other meatworks through out the area. flat out for the 6 months of the dry season making their big bucks based on output of meat not the number of hours worked. Finally, like thousands of other people in Darwin my parents were greatly under insured. This was compounded by the fact that despite the massive damage at Wildboar it was officially outside the cyclone zone (some-one forgot to tell Tracy that!) and they received no financial compensation for those damages. Inside the "zone" people were paid half the uninsured value of their damages. Simply put, my mother wanted to cut the losses and get out. My father wanted to stay in and weather the financial storm. The bank had no confidence in either Darwin or the buffalo industry and just wanted their money. The cards were stacked. Wildboar ended as did their marriage. It was a sad time for all the family and we felt the loss deeply, each of us in different ways. I genuinely believe it was the end of an era, not only for my family and Wildboar, but for the Northern Territory as well. That is part of why I feel compelled to tell my story. I was a young mother with two babies by then and while the eldest, Trin, did spend a lot of his first couple of years at Wildboar he does not remember it at all.

I call Alice Springs home now and love it so much I can't imagine ever leaving but I felt like that about Darwin once. While I don't think I will ever live there again I enjoy visiting at least once a year and it will always hold a special place in my heart. I wonder some-times what would have become of us all had Tracy not blown our hopes, our dreams and our aspirations away that fateful night along with our homes, our neighbourhoods and our jobs.

Cyclone Tracy has gone on to become a part of our national culture. New Zealanders Bill Cate and Boyd Robinson wrote the now famous song "Santa never made it into Darwin" to raise funds for the relief effort. The first time I heard it I was struck speechless and the hairs on my neck stood on end. Thirty years later it still has the same impact This song was so popular it became a bit of a cult song for a while and every time we had a family gathering, a bbq or a few drinks we'd sing it along with all our own cyclone

songs that were known by no-one other than family. Several years later the Hoodoo Gurus released their take on the song titled “*Tojo never made it into Darwin*” based on the fact that despite the severe bombing of Darwin (as ordered by Hideki Tojo) by the Japanese during World War Two a land invasion never eventuated. In the years since several mini-series, movies, books and articles have been produced but whenever I see one or read one while I can relate to much of what is portrayed it has never been told the story from the perspective of what was experienced by people like me both BT and AT.

Santa Never Made it into Darwin (Bill Cate 1975)

On Christmas Eve of '74, a warning sounded out
 On all the broadcast stations, a great storm was nearabout
 The boys and girls all sleeping there, tomorrow was their day
 The Mums and Dads all praying the storm would blow away

Chorus:

Santa never made it into Darwin,
 disaster struck at dawn on Christmas Day ,
 Santa never made it into Darwin, a big wind came
 and blew the town away
 Many boats set out to sea and very few returned
 Most were foundered on the rocks, or in huge seas overturned
 Australia was shocked and saddened as the news came through,
 A devastated city that must be born anew

CYCLONE TRACY FACTS

Category 4

Winds 217klms/hr when wing gauges failed.

Reports range from 250 to 300 after that

Gales extended approximately 40 klms from the centre

The diameter of the eye was about 12klms at Darwin

71 people are known to have died.

35,362 people were evacuated (25,600 by air and rest by road.

200 homes were damaged and 5000 destroyed – only 400 of 11,200 remained intact

It was the largest ever evacuation and reconstruction operation in Australia