

Note: The following letter was written by Bernetia Akin 10 days after Hurricane Marilyn hit the Virgin Islands to friends and family living on the mainland. Having worked 15 years on St. Thomas as a full-time journalist, in 1995 she was working days as an office manager in a foreign sales corporation management firm and was also a frequent contributor to many V.I. publications. Her husband, Michael "Mic" Akin, who later served as executive director of Catholic Charities, held several management positions at Marriott Frenchman's Reef ^{Resort} and at the time of the storm was the night manager.

Sept. 26, 1995

Dear All,

As they say here in the V.I. **What a t'ing!!**

Hurricane Marilyn has completely changed our lives. For one thing, it's got me writing this letter to all you family and friends. I figured this might be the best way to catch up with many of you since it is impossible to talk to everybody. In fact, as you probably know, it was impossible to talk to *anybody* outside of St. Thomas for several days after the storm.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The saga really started the first weekend of September when Tropical Storm Iris briefly threatened the islands, but then breezed by almost unnoticed. The next weekend, it was Hurricane Luis. All of the V.I. got pretty nervous with that guy – 150 mile per hour winds, "a perfectly formed eye" that had the Weather Channel forecasters all impressed, and hurricane force winds extending out about 150 miles. We all packed up our breakables, put our photos and papers in heavy duty plastic bags and boarded up the windows. We remembered Hugo in '89.

Mic and I spent Luis at Frenchman's Reef Hotel. Luis got close enough to treat us to tropical storm force winds, but not hurricane force. Room air conditioners in many rooms blew out, but staff said they probably weren't secured in the first place. The windows rattled, but that's about all. At home, our soursop tree was uprooted and it was five days before they got the electricity restored.

Everybody breathed a sigh of relief and started collections of food, clothes, etc. to send to other islands that weren't so fortunate.

Somehow, everybody I ran into seemed to have the same reaction after Luis. We just had the darnedest time getting our homes back in order. The newspaper psychologist assured us it was alright to feel traumatized even though the hurricane basically missed us – our fears had been real.

The day after I finally unpacked the last glass and replaced it in the counter is the day I first the name Marilyn.

Mic called me at work to say the Weather Channel was tracking a tropical storm and it was down around Trinidad, at the bottom of the island chain. Shortly after 11 p.m., Mic's brother, Steve, called from Florida to chastise us for failing to assure him we were okay after Luis, and to tell me there was a hurricane near Barbados.

I thought he had it confused. These systems don't move that fast, and it was only a tropical storm anyway.

By 8 a.m., we were in a watch, and by the afternoon, it was a warning.

Marilyn was barrelin'.

But, the forecasters were rather dismissive of this little, Category One hurricane. She only had winds up to 79 mph and those extended out a mere 35 miles from the eye, which, incidentally, was anything but perfectly formed.

"Not again" was the general reaction. That's "not again" without an exclamation point, because people were almost more annoyed than afraid. "I just got my stuff put back." "I can't go through this again." And "It's going to go north."

Mic and I went through the drill. He packed while I was at work in the day; I packed while he was at work that night. When he got home about 3 a.m., we finished up and drove back to the Reef.

"I'm beginning to feel like a fool," I said. "Nobody else is taking this thing seriously."

"Let's hope we feel foolish tomorrow," said Wise Mic.

By 11 a.m. Friday, Marilyn had been upgraded to Category 2, with 100 mph winds. There was a good chance it would make it to a 3, but, they said, not 'til it was passed us. And besides, it's so-o-o small. It would have to go right over us to do any real damage. A little later, one radio station reported a computer projection showed the storm would slip past to the north of St. Thomas (which is northwest of St. Croix.) Just complete your preparations, folks, and relax.

At about 8 p.m., as we had dinner with friends in the hotel's Windows on the Harbor restaurant, we began to think they should clear people away from the window seats, since the windows were visibly shaking. I guess it was about 9 that I joined a line of staff in trying to keep guests away from an area in the main restaurant/entertainment section (L-3) because a floor to ceiling section of glass was buckling.

When it shattered, we all knew were in for it.

From that point on, it was sort of one of those disaster movies. Except, people didn't panic. They weren't screaming and running and falling all over each other. And I'm happy to say there was only one injury – the No. 2 manager, Andrew, was cut by flying glass. (The GM, Nick Pourzal, happened to be off island.)

I'm also proud to say that all the staff, and particularly the night manager, Mr. Akin, were professional, calm and downright courageous. (Later, some guests told me my husband was a hero. Hey, don't tell me, write to Marriott.)

But the night was not without incident. I saw the lobby doors blow out. Checking guest rooms where doors were being sucked in and out, I discovered people in two rooms in which the windows had blown. The man in one was happy to vacate. But a woman in another opted to stay in her room because she had two kids asleep in the bathroom and felt safe there – we had to work together to get her room door shut again.

At one point, something must have blown out somewhere on the 4th floor because all of us who were in the hallway by the guest rooms there were suddenly being blown down the hallway; one woman was even knocked off her feet. Fortunately, Mic and another manager had just arrived in that area when the wind hit. They opened a door to an office and told us all to go it there. I was there until an interior wall started to go. Then another manager led some of us down to the bowels of the hotel.

It was probably about midnight then. I spent the rest of the storm there, as did hundreds of hotel guests. They were in chairs, on beach lounges, and on the floor in the hallways. I did my bit by circulating and talking to guests, handing out folded bath towels for use as pillows. Mic was still active moving guests (and staff) from unsafe areas to safer places. He'd come back down every so often and check on me.

With dawn, the winds abated, although they were still powerful until well into the afternoon. The sight that greeted us was – I can't think of the right word.

Horrifying?

Depressing?

Heartbreaking. That's it.

Cars in the main parking lot in front of the hotel were scrambled; most had broken windows. (Smart guys us, we parked in the protected lot and our two cars were fine.) The long row of towering palm trees that Pourzal had planted a few years ago to dress up the approach to the Reef was a sorry stand of mangled fronds, twisted trunks and stumps no more than two feet high.

More than 100 guest rooms lost their windows. On the upper floors, interior walls had huge bulges in them. In some places the bulges had been blown into gaping holes; you could walk down a hallway and get a side view of the bathrooms in some guest rooms. Fiberglass was strewn like holiday garlands everywhere you looked. Soon the tourists started taking pictures and video of the destruction. Mic said, "I can't stand to see the Reef turned into a sideshow."

An old acquaintance and his wife came to the hotel looking for a room. They had spent six hours under a bed, in several inches of water, as their home was destroyed bit by bit. Theirs was the first horror story I heard. But in the next few days, it was matched many, many times. The boating community was especially hard hit. I blame the forecasters for at least some of the loss of life. One guy told me had only gone to his boat to secure it, but when he tried to leave, about 8 p.m., he discovered his dinghy had been swept away and he was trapped aboard. He said he watched two people drown while he fought for his own life.

Mic and I didn't get to our place (at Mountain Top Condos) until Sunday because the roads were impassable Saturday. We had seen enough on the way up (including a stop at our good friends' – Peter and Bodil's – now roofless house) that we were not surprised at the sight. Seven buildings, seven roofs substantially or completely gone. Every unit had missing windows; some had lost their front doors. Our door was intact. We had windows in the back third of the house (which backs up to a hill) and everything we packed and stored in the back rooms had made it through OK. Anything not in the back rooms had not. The porch sliders and all the front windows were gone, turned into shards. A love seat was in the yard on one side of the house. A table was in the yard on the other side. In between were smashed lamps, broken chairs, rain-soaked cushions, six inches of water, and glass, glass, glass.

But we are well aware that we are among the lucky ones. We're on a bottom floor, so we've a ceiling above us. We saved most of the things that were precious to us. We didn't spend five hours in a closet by ourselves listening to the wind howl. Both our jobs still exist (my office was hardly damaged.) And we have been staying at the Reef since the storm.

Here, thanks to the hotel's total energy plant, we have electricity, running water, and an icemaker in our room. We've had phone service since late last week. We eat in the employees' cafeteria. And, of course, we have lots of companionship. Elsewhere, people stand in line for hours to buy ice, in another line to get bottled water, in another to get their turn in a grocery store. And maybe in the unemployment line if their job was blown away. They get home before curfew (now 8 p.m. – it was 6 p.m. the first week,) haul water from someplace to wash and flush and, unless they have a generator, they cook and eat by candlelight. Looters have created an atmosphere of fear although it is not nearly so pervasive as what gripped St. Croix after Hurricane Hugo.

One of these days, we will have to step out from this cocoon and join the rest of St. Thomas in the dark. The management has set several deadlines for staff to vacate, and continues to extend them. But each time, a few more people go. The most recent deadline is Friday, and Mr. Pourzal told Mic today that we don't have to go by then.

We have had offers from several generous friends to share their quarters. We also had an offer from some friends to rent their undamaged condo at a reduced rate. So we are hardly homeless. At this point, we are thinking we'll move back to our place once the condo association gets tarps on the roofs and boards up the missing windows with plywood. Mic has a line on a generator.

It's going to be a bit rough for a few months. If you were finally planning that trip to St. Thomas, you might want to wait until next year. But we sure would love to hear from you. We are in Room 708 at the Reef. And even when we leave, Mic will still be working here nights. The number is XXX. I also have a working phone at my office. (It was a BIG surprise to hear it ring yesterday; I had to take it out of a drawer – where I'd put it for safekeeping before the storm – to answer it. That number is XXX. Of course, our P.O. Box has not changed.

I hope all is well with all of you!