

“I FEEL SO LUCKY THAT I SURVIVED THE TSUNAMI”

In 2004, Lou Harrand was on honeymoon in Thailand when the devastating tsunami struck. A decade later, she looks back on the day that changed her life



EVERY BOXING DAY, LOU MARKS THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE TSUNAMI BY GOING TO CHURCH

“ I will always look back on Christmas Day 2004 as one of the best ever. My husband Greg and I had just got married and were travelling around Thailand on our honeymoon. We'd spent Christmas Eve with friends on the beach having a barbecue, and Christmas Day island hopping, scuba diving and swimming in the beautiful Andaman Sea. Danger could not have been further from my mind. I certainly didn't expect that in less than 24 hours, the most exciting time in my life would turn into the most terrifying.

On the morning of the 26 December, at about 8am, we were woken by our room gently rocking. It was odd – like a train passing close by – but we thought nothing of it; we were staying in a rickety beachfront bungalow on the island of Phi Phi Don, about 50km from Phuket, and even a neighbour stepping onto our balcony was enough to make it sway. So we both rolled over and went back to sleep. When we got up an hour later, the weather was glorious; beautiful clear skies and just a whisper of a breeze. After

breakfast, we went to the hotel reception to book some flights. But it didn't take us long to notice that something wasn't right.

It started with a few people rushing around, looking confused. Then the crowds started to build, and the atmosphere became tense and panicked. We left the

reception area to see what was going on and saw water lapping at our feet, then all of a sudden, people started rushing past us shouting, “Water, water, get high.” Greg grabbed my hand and pulled me with the crowd. He was screaming at me to run faster but my sandals kept falling off. Eventually we came to a staircase at the side of a hotel, but there was a bottleneck of people trying to climb it, so we became stuck at the bottom of the stairs, helpless.

I didn't see the wave come in. But it hit me from behind with such colossal force I was immediately separated from





Greg and dragged under 10 feet of water. I couldn't see anything; I could just sense a tangle of bodies above me, crushing me as I battled for breath. The strength of the water was unbelievable. I was thrust about, as if in a huge washing machine, colliding violently with the other debris in the water – furniture, suitcases, huge pieces of wood, bodies. At one point the water pinned me against a large structure, trying to squeeze me through an incredibly narrow space. I could feel an immense pressure on my front and my back then, all of a sudden, I felt my ribs 'pop' as they broke and I was whisked through.

There was nothing I could do to fight against it; and as I realised that, emotions flooded me. Despite being under water, I remember feeling enraged, thinking, 'I have been married less than two weeks, this is my honeymoon and it's meant to be perfect.' Then came a sense of fear, followed by confusion, then rage again. I can't have been under the water for long, but it felt like hours, and as the pressure in my chest became unbearable, I accepted that I was going to die. I told myself it was OK, because drowning was probably a peaceful way to go. After all these thoughts had rushed through my head I felt, in a strange way, calmer than ever.

It was then that I broke the surface, taking a huge gulp of air as I burst through. I knew I had to act quickly so, spotting a table floating nearby, I grabbed onto it and hauled myself up. Suddenly, I heard shouting: two men on a rooftop to my right were calling to me frantically. Luckily, they were able to reach me and pull me out of the water. We didn't say much to each other. We just sat there in silence staring at the filthy water and the devastation that was unravelling below.

I will never forget the smell; it was heady and putrid. I could see other people clutching window ledges and the roofs of buildings. There was a lot of screaming. As I started to rearrange my clothing – my skirt and a bikini top had been ripped to shreds – I noticed a pool of blood spreading over the tiles. I raised a shaking hand to my face: my chin was torn open



and there was a large hole under my mouth which went through to the gums. I hadn't even felt any pain. I was numb.

At that point, I refused to believe anything had happened to Greg. I thought, 'I'm alive, so he must be.' So an hour or so later, when the water subsided – like someone had pulled a plug – I got down from the rooftop and picked my way across the detritus to a nearby hotel. I still didn't know what had happened; I just knew I had to get to higher ground in case another wave struck. That was the first point at which I saw dead bodies, laid carefully at the bottom of the stairs in the ruined lobby. Some of them had been covered with sheets. They almost didn't look human, as if they were dolls. It was harrowing, but I had to

“I ACCEPTED THAT I WAS GOING TO DIE, AND STRANGELY I FELT CALMER THAN EVER BEFORE”

keep moving; I had to get up high.

Going up the stairs, I glanced at my reflection in a mirror and stopped in my tracks. I didn't recognise that woman. My face was grotesquely swollen and my hair was tangled, full of debris.

Eventually, a German man came out of his room and introduced himself as Tossen. He invited me in and gave me sheets and towels to stop the bleeding. There was a Scandinavian woman in there too with a small child. The atmosphere was tense and fraught with confusion. She was looking for her parents and her husband kept going outside to try and find them but returning with nothing. She was hysterical, but her child was silent, as if in shock. After a while, Tossen asked me my husband's name. I was still numb and convinced nothing could have happened to Greg.



I told him and he went outside, and for the next hour called his name over and over. Eventually, a man stepped out of the devastation, 'I'm Greg Harrard,' he said.

ON THE GROUND

After three desperate hours, we were reunited. Greg was overwhelmed and in floods of tears; he'd seen a lot more devastation than me. He'd been trapped underwater too and when he'd emerged he'd started

to help with the rescue effort. He'd found a lot of dead bodies – all the while expecting the next one he pulled from the wreckage to be mine. He'd lost his shoes, was covered in cuts and the wounds were becoming infected.

We knew we had to get off the island and get help, so after hurriedly sending a text from Tossen's phone to let our families know we were alive, we left the room. Outside people were in an awful state; many had lost limbs or large parts of their faces. One girl's entire left buttock had been torn off; the back of her leg was open and pouring with blood. What was most unsettling was she wasn't even screaming; she just laid there with a glassy look in her eyes. I met another woman whose two children and husband had died. She was just hysterical. Nothing anybody

could say or do could help her.

That evening, we managed to board a longtail boat leaving the island. As we departed, we moved slowly through piles of floating wood, ruined boats and bodies that were starting to bloat. Eventually, we made it to a fishing trawler, which took us to Phuket and then we were taken in

a pick-up truck to Phuket International Hospital where we stayed for the next couple of days. I will never forget looking at myself in the mirror and seeing nothing in my eyes, as if someone had turned out the light. I felt numb, like I was on autopilot.

We had lost all our belongings, but the Red Cross issued us with emergency passports so we could fly home. Our return was incredibly emotional – our families were visibly moved with relief.

The Boxing Day tsunami is still one of the deadliest natural disasters in human history. Over 230,000 people were killed in 14 countries. Greg and I hadn't planned to have a family but we felt as if we'd cheated the odds to be alive so as soon as we got back we started trying. We now have three children. We still meet up with other survivors and one of them, Denise – who sadly lost her husband in the tragedy – has become a great friend. This year, she's going back to Thailand with her daughter, so I've told her we'll make a wreath and take it to her husband's memorial grave.

The tsunami is always in the back of my mind, certain smells and loud noises trigger flashbacks. I have a recurring nightmare about the wave but now my worry is about making sure the children are safe.

Looking back, I know that Greg and I are extremely fortunate to have each other. I can't imagine having to go through it alone. I've never been massively religious but something looked after us that day, because I have no clue how I survived. So every year on Boxing Day, I mark the anniversary by going to church. It has changed our outlook on life. We live it to the full, enjoy ourselves and try not to get fixated on the little things; you never know what's around the corner.”

