

October 3, 1995

Dear Family and Friends:

This is a letter to our family and friends to let you know that we are O.K. and to tell you of some of the things that transpired during the two hurricanes, Luis and Marilyn. Although Luis was considered to be the more powerful of the two, it had little effect on the land part of St. Thomas but a devastating effect on the boating community. When Marilyn came directly over St. Thomas, she had a devastating effect on both the land and boating communities.

Hurricane Luis, which passed by on September 5-6, was forecast as a powerful Category 4 hurricane (sustained winds of 150 mph with higher gusts) whose path was leading directly to St. Thomas. With this in mind, we prepared for spending the hurricane in an old concrete ammunition bunker on the north side of Water Island, near the boat dock. Marisa (who had come down for a little vacation-HAH!) and I packed up everything we absolutely didn't want to lose in trunks, suitcases and boxes, such as necessary clothing, shoes, jewelry, photographs, computer (we had just bought a Power Mac 6100 the end of July), bread machine, Kitchen Aid mixer, and breakable Christmas gifts I had bought the weekend before. I also put valuable papers, checkbooks, passports, etc. into a backpack. All of this we took to the bunker. What was left over in the house, we packed into large plastic garbage bags and stacked them in the bedroom closets on the leeward side of the house.

Cloud Chaser was on a mooring in the eastern end of Elephant Bay, right behind the marker for the coral reef. Oliver put out our Delta anchor with 3/8" chain in addition to the mooring, took off the main boom and sail, and secured all hatches and lockers. (We had removed the mizzen boom, dodger and bimini some time before.) Finally, on Tuesday morning he had our 16' Wahoo hauled out and set on the ground at Crown Bay Marina and took the last ferry back to Water Island. He also prepared food, flashlights, candles, cat food, etc. to bring to the bunker, including the battery and VHF radio from Cloud Chaser. Since there was no seating at the bunker, we brought lawn chairs and finally, of course, the three cats.

We arrived in the bunker late afternoon and spent the first part of the evening waiting for the worst to come. It was very windy, but nowhere near the speeds that would come with the main part of the hurricane. Finally, with hourly weather updates we could see that Luis was veering northward and, thus, away from us. During daylight hours, we could see Cloud Chaser from the bunker so at first light the next morning, we checked and she was still there. The water was very rough because the strongest winds had come from the west, which gave Honeymoon and Elephant Bays a long fetch producing some severe wave action. A couple of the boats in our mooring area went up on the rocks and we watched a 45' ketch go broadside up the channel, crash into the breakwater in front of Sugar Reef, bounce around it and end up on shore. Another power boat went straight through our anchorage and ended up on the reef at the cut in front of the Chart House.

Marisa and I walked back up to the house midmorning to see what the damages were and were very surprised to see that no harm had been done. However, the strongest winds had come from the west, the only direction from which we have moderate protection. Mid-afternoon we packed everything from the bunker into the Sprat Bay pickup truck and made just one trip back up to the house. We unpacked everything again and sorted through everything to determine what should be sent to the States for safekeeping and what should stay here for the year we will be remaining here. Of course, the breakable Christmas gifts were going to be shipped now rather than waiting until December.

When we last saw Cloud Chaser on Wednesday afternoon, she was riding on her mooring on the west side of the reef. On Thursday morning, much to our surprise she was on the east side of the reef. When Catman dove down to check our mooring, he came back with it in his hands. It had pulled right out and the only thing holding us was our Delta anchor. To keep the boat from moving back over the reef, we put another anchor out to the east side.

Several times during Luis I mentioned that we were just beginning the worst part of hurricane season and that there could be more to come. How true. Marisa flew back on Monday and on Friday Hurricane Marilyn arrived.

Marilyn was forecast as a Category 1 (sustained winds of 80 mph) with a very tight, small center. It had been moving directly westward far to the south until Thursday morning when it veered to the north and we began making preparations. Oliver took the afternoon off from work and prepared an additional anchor with chain and rode and after I got off from work we spent the remaining daylight hours securing anchors.

Friday morning, we hauled the Wahoo out on Water Island putting it on some tires way up behind the dock house at Spray Bay. I spent the day once again packing everything. I had not been able to get the designated stateside shipments off Water Island and to the post office yet, so I still had those breakable Christmas gifts to deal with! Since Marilyn was only forecast to 85 mph, I didn't go to the degree of packing and moving furniture we had done with Luis. And we made no preparations to go to the bunker. In fact, Oliver said he didn't see why I was going to all the work I was

because the winds were only 85 mph and the house wasn't going anywhere. Of course, I just continued to pack and stash away.

By 5:00 pm, the front half of the house was beginning to shake from the gusts and water was pouring in under the front door. I had three towels mopping up continuously and couldn't keep up with it so I gave up. By this time, the linoleum in the kitchen had also pulled loose in the area of the door. Finally, I couldn't stand being in the living room anymore and went back to our bedroom where Oliver and the cats were and shut the door.

For those of you who haven't visited us at the house, the building is located on the very top of the eastern end of Water Island and is an octagonal, two story wood structure with decks encircling the house on both levels. Under the house and facing the east the front half is basically open with storage shelving and the washer and dryer against the cistern wall, and the back half is a poured concrete cistern. We rent the first floor which has an interior wall dividing the front and back halves. The rear of the house is again divided into two bedrooms and this rear floor section is bolted to the cistern.

Winds continued as they were until 9:30 pm when the house began to shudder and tremble with the increased force of the winds. I told Oliver that the house couldn't take this much longer and that we should get our Cloud Chaser squall jackets and shoes on in preparation. I sat on the bed facing the rear wall holding the backpack with paper valuables ready to leave. We had decided that there were two options if the house should begin to come apart: one was to go under the rear of the cistern, however, there were sheets of corrugated metal back there and I was afraid they would blow around and cause us harm; the second was to go to our car, which we had parked just at the top of the rise facing downhill. If we couldn't make it in the wind to the car, we would have to go behind the cistern.

Oliver had moved the VHF radio back to the bedroom and we got the 11:00 pm position, which was just east of Vieques. By this time, I was very frightened and I asked Oliver if he wasn't frightened also. He replied that he was not scared but had a high level of anxiety. He also said that things weren't as bad as they could be--at least we didn't have anyone shooting bullets at us. This was true, but it didn't lessen my fear at the moment. I continuously checked my watch for the time, because I knew that it should be all over by morning and if morning would just come we would be all right.

At 11:30 pm, there was a loud cracking noise and I said, "What was that?" Oliver opened the bedroom door a crack and saw that the front door glass was pushed in. At the same time, the air coming through the bedroom door caused the window I was facing to blow out. Oliver managed to get the door shut again and I pushed a small dresser in front of it. We let the cats out to fend for themselves, I grabbed the backpack and we stepped out through the missing window onto the deck and turned toward the steps leading to the driveway. At just this time, the entire wall of the other bedroom blew out in one chunk and the bed flew out on top of the wall with bedding and everything else flying all over. Oliver stepped over the bed and tried to close this bedroom door also, but the winds were too strong and he had to leave it open. While waiting for him to come back, I grabbed a bed pillow as it flew past and then we headed for the car, crouching down to withstand the winds. The rain felt like needles in our bare legs.

We managed to make it to the back seat of the car without anything hitting us, which in retrospect was extremely lucky. The winds were rocking the car pretty severely, so Oliver said he wondered whether he could get the car to start. It is notorious for not starting when it rains which was why we had parked it facing away from the wind and pointing down the hill. Oliver climbed over the seat into the front and the car started! He drove about 30 yards down where it appeared to be more protected, so we stopped there for awhile. We soon realized, however, that this was not as protected as the neighbor's driveway whose entrance was another 20 yards down the hill. We drove the car down and were going to then back it down her driveway, but there was a small rise at the beginning of the driveway and the mud was so slick we couldn't get the car to go up the rise. Now we were sitting with a pile of sheet metal in the woods to our left and a power pole just ahead of the right front fender. We hunkered down as low as we could in the car seats and knew that if something flew through the air and hit the car we were in extreme jeopardy. It was at this time that I said, "We just might die," and Oliver replied, "Yes, we might."

At 12:30 am the eye of the storm passed and it was calm for about 5 minutes. Since I had fed the neighbor's cats when she was away, I knew the layout of the underside of her house and I suggested we go down there behind her cistern. Her house was also a little farther down the leeward side of the island and would give us more protection. We had just gotten there with the backpack and pillow when the winds began again with a fury. However, toward the middle of the cistern wall we found a small metal chair on which Oliver could sit with me next to him on the concrete pad for the washer and utility sink. By this time, we were soaking wet and cold but we felt sure we were going to make it through alive. We found a half sheet of plywood that we could lean against Oliver's side and he could hold in place with his hands to give us a little windbreak. We huddled together there until 2:00 am when her cistern filled up and the water began pouring on us from the overflow pipe directly over our heads!

The winds had turned more westerly so we went around to the east side of the cistern where we found a small workbench wide enough for Oliver to lie on. We propped some plywood against the wall which gave the bench some coverage. Oliver crawled up on the bench, lay on his back and I laid on top of him. We stayed here until 5:30 am when the winds slowed down enough for us to go back to the car where we finally slept for about 45 minutes.

When we awakened, all was calm, or so it seemed to me. Oliver says the winds were still about 30 mph, but compared to hurricane winds that sounded like 727s taking off from the airport it seemed peaceful. (In the aftermath, we have found out that sustained winds were over 125 mph and gusts, which were extremely plentiful, were between 205 and 225 mph. Those who went through Hurricane Hugo say that was a cakewalk compared to Marilyn.) We got out of the car and started to walk back up the road to our house. Trees and bushes had been stripped bare of leaves so we could see out to the bay where Cloud Chaser had been anchored. We were not surprised to see nothing there and we assumed the boat had been lost.

As we walked along the road, debris from the house (2x8s, clothing, fabric bits, empty bottles, the dryer, portions of the roof and the outside case of the washer) littered the area. When we first glimpsed the house, we saw—a mess! Entire walls either blown out or in, windows broken, some decks and railings completely gone. Two 2x10s laminated together were bent in a graceful arc and jammed between structural members. One-fourth of the roof was gone. The second floor had one wall missing, many doors and windows blown out, two sections of deck and three sections of railing gone. We still have not found any trace of two of the railings, and you can see for a great distance now with no foliage to get in the way. On the first floor where we live, there were only two walls remaining in their entirety and one of these had been moved out of place about 1/2". Another two walls were partially there. The remaining four walls were completely gone. Three had blown out and one of the living room walls had been driven in by a 2x10 that broke loose on one end from its lamination with another 2 x 10. This wall was lying on top of our tv/bookcase units and sofa bed. The bookcases were completely destroyed and all of the sofa legs had been broken off.

When we called for the cats, we found Henry and Little Joe huddled and trembling on top of the cistern between the floor joists. They wouldn't come out even for us until later in the morning. Millie we think had spent most of the time under our bed because she came out from there shivering and dripping wet with much to say. We were very happy to see they had made it and were not injured.

When we again turned our attention to the house, we saw that everything was dripping wet, there was broken glass all over the entire house, both inside and out, bits and pieces of fiberglass insulation literally were sprayed over all of the furniture, exterior and interior walls, ceilings and floors. We had to negotiate our way over walls, doors, windows and pieces of lumber on the deck in order to get inside the house. Our computer desk in the living room was protected on one side by a closet wall and the bottom portion was still in place. However, the bookcase top had apparently been torn off, taken apart, blown eight feet to the right, made a left turn through the bedroom door, and all of pieces stacked neatly in the far corner of the bedroom. The exterior closet wall in our bedroom was gone and anything that I had not packed and placed inside plastic garbage bags was either missing or wet. I had storage boxes under our bed filled with fabric and this was flung all over the deck and ground. A plastic container of bread flour had been opened and the flour blown all over the kitchen leaving a nice glaze of flour paste along with fiberglass bits on everything. Kitchen cupboard doors were missing, the oven door and drawer had both been opened, contents blown out, and bits of fiberglass and paste thrown in, and then the door and drawer closed again. The interior paneling was all wavy from being soaked, the carpeting was completely soaked and filled with broken glass, and the ceiling was leaking like one big showerhead from water on the second floor.

I then remembered that I had forgotten the backpack down in the car so I went back to retrieve it. When I got to the car, I looked again out at the bay and did a doubletake when I saw Cloud Chaser still afloat, albeit with her masts missing. I ran back up the road to tell Oliver the good news and that he needed to come down and see. We hugged each other and were so proud of our little boat that had struggled through all of this and made it. Of course, it had once again crossed over the reef, but it appeared as though two anchors were still holding it.

Oliver tried to start the car without success and on the way back we picked up a blue plastic tarpaulin that was big enough to cover our bed. The sheets and pillows had all blown off and were scattered all over the yard, so we put the plastic on the mattress and covered it with a couple of new beach towels that had never been taken out of their plastic coverings so that we would have something dry to sleep on that night. We lifted the living room wall off the sofa and propped it in place with the 2x4s and removed the carpeting from the floor so the floor could begin drying out. We had put the computer terminal back in its original carton and wrapped the hard drive and keyboard in plastic and stored them in the bathroom. The walls were still standing but the ceiling had leaked and they had gotten wet. Oliver brought them out to the living room desk to a spot where the ceiling wasn't leaking and left them to dry out. (When he started it up on Sunday, the Mac logo came up with a "?" so we knew it couldn't read the hard drive. Oliver opened it up, used my hair dryer on a cool/low setting to dry it out, and left it covered with a dry towel for another day. On Monday, we started it again and rejoiced when we saw the Mac smiling face. No problems—all of the data was safe.)

We propped the 1/3 of the kitchen wall that was remaining back up next to the refrigerator, and found that luckily the propane grill and portable generator were still in working order. We were among the very fortunate in having a generator at all. Oliver got it started and plugged in the refrigerator so we wouldn't lose the meats and vegetables we did have.

We also noticed that our local birds, the banana quits and hummingbirds, appeared to be looking for nourishment. We put sugar water out on one of the deck railings and within 10 minutes we had several dozen trying to maintain their position at the well. We realized that with all the leaves and blossoms blown off, there was no nectar available for them. Over the next two days, we fed about two quarts of sugar water to them.

As we began looking around us at the houses on Water Island and those on the main island of St. Thomas, there was destruction everywhere. The mountainsides were littered with parts of houses. Great gaping holes in buildings were everywhere. Those of you who have visited here will recall all of the boats in the main harbor of Long Bay. Well, there was not one single boat remaining there. Not one! From our house we could see sailboats up on Waterfront Drive, alongside the federal buildings and on Hassel Island. They weren't just up on the harbor at the water's edge either; they were across the street and up against the buildings. One boat was up against the storefront with its mast into Drake's Passage. The Coast Guard cutter, coincidentally named Point Ledge, was even up on the ledge of the waterfront bulkhead. Many, many boats had been sunk in the harbor and bays. Others just disappeared. The top of an oil storage tank had been ripped off, crushed like it was a piece of aluminum foil and thrown over a hill to the Emerald Beach hotel. We had binoculars but couldn't stand to look at the destruction for more than about fifteen minutes. It was too overwhelming.

In Crown Bay Marina, twelve boats were sunk at the docks, some on top of others. Our friends, Ernie and Sandy, had tied their 44' Mason in the corner of the fuel dock. Two of Tropical Shipping's containers had been blown over the wall landing on their stern. Fortunately, it didn't sink the boat but did do serious damage. Even the crane at Haulover Marine, which is capable of lifting 25 ton boats, was moved three feet.

The red buoy marking the point of Hassel Island was moved northwest halfway down East Gregorie Channel. The green buoy marking the other side of East Gregorie Channel and the southeastern point of Water Island was moved at right angles to its position several hundred yards to the east. The range lights for entrance into Long Bay were destroyed and almost all of the communication towers on St. Thomas were blown down. For the first two weeks, a Coast Guard cutter was stationed just outside the harbor entrances to monitor all traffic, since the harbor was on a dusk to dawn curfew. In fact, the entire island was on the same curfew.

Needless to say, there were no power or phone lines remaining in working order. As of today, October 3rd, two and a half weeks after the hurricane, at my office downtown we have two working phone lines for which we are most grateful, we have water for the bathroom only in the mornings, and we have no power at all. I am working from 10:00-2:00 Monday-Friday with no opening windows and no air conditioning. The good news is I still have a job. Our working phone numbers are 809-774-1884 and 809-776-5688. Predictions are that there will be power downtown in three weeks. As far as Water Island is concerned, best guesses are that we will have power in time for Christmas and phones in about five months. There has been a hot business for cellular phones but it has been almost impossible to get through during daylight hours.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Marilyn, our emotions have been up and down. We are very fortunate and very grateful to be alive, have our boats afloat, our cats safe and our valuables safe. (Yes, the breakable Christmas gifts were safe in the guest bedroom closet.) When the mosquitos arrived in hordes two days after the storm and we were still missing walls and had very little insect repellent, I was in severe distress. My body was covered with welts and sleeping was very difficult. Thanks to FEMA two days later, I had a precious can of Off.

I washed two and three batches clothing, sheets, pillowcases, fabric, etc. by hand every day for the first two weeks. It had to be done or it would all mold. Everything that had blown all over was stained, and I couldn't get all of the stains out. (Mom, how I would have loved to have had your wooden scrub board.) Oliver helped with wringing some of the large items; my hands and arms began to wear out after awhile.

The Wahoo which had been on tires (no boat trailer was available for it to sit on) way up behind the dock building had been moved off of the tires and under the stern of a larger trailered boat. After much struggling using plywood and 2x4s as leverage, Oliver finally got it onto a trailer and in the water again last Tuesday only to find that the engine had severe water intrusion and needed repair. (We had just spent \$350 on engine repair two days before Hurricane Marilyn.) Fortunately, there is a ferry launch between Water Island and Crown Bay. At \$3 each way, that begins to get costly too, but a monthly pass can be purchased for \$80. We just may decide to sell the Wahoo and use the ferry instead. We're beginning to get tired of maintaining vehicles of transportation.

On the upside, we haven't had any large amounts of rain, and the owner of the house arrived on island midweek following Marilyn. He hired a carpenter and they have begun putting the house back together. Five days ago I came home from work to find that our floor was almost completely enclosed again, either by wood or plastic. This was a landmark day.

FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Assistance) has also been a great blessing. (Jodie, please thank the President from us.) It may be difficult for some of you to comprehend, but when a disaster like this occurs on an island you have nowhere to get money, food, fuel, etc. for several days after. We did not have time to go to the bank before Marilyn, and we found ourselves extremely short of cash. The banks opened five or six days after the storm on a very limited basis and at one or two locations. (Our bank, Scotiabank, has loaned its downtown facility to Citibank whose building was severely damaged. They do have one Scotiabank teller in with the Citibank group but you can only make deposits there, no checks can be cashed. Yesterday Oliver tried to get cash by first going there, with no success of course, and then walking to the main branch a mile away to find a line stretching way out in the parking lot. It was so hot waiting in the sun, he just gave up and will try again today.) You could withdraw a maximum of \$250 from your account and there was no credit card business anywhere. Gasoline was not easy to get. The marina began selling it a few days after the storm but only for a few hours each day and always with waiting lines. Some people waited up to five hours in line to buy fuel. Grocery stores were not open for many days and they still have limited supplies. For instance, we made our first attempt at shopping last Saturday. We weren't able to get to the store until afternoon and we were greeted by the usual line waiting outside just to get in the doors. To keep order, there were two Rangers at the head of the line. Since it was blistering hot in the sun and there were at least 30 people ahead of us, we decided we would come back Sunday morning. Again, there was a line outside, but we only had to wait about five minutes. There was no air conditioning in the building and the shelves were getting bare. The only produce available were bananas, oranges, potatoes, apples and garlic. No fresh or frozen meats or dairy products. Canned tuna was the big buy of the day.

Midweek following Marilyn, FEMA gave us a box of 12 MRE (Meals Ready to Eat) and four gallons of drinkable water. We enjoyed everything about the MREs--each meal was an adventure. The chemical heating system was interesting, the food was palatable and you never knew what you were going to get when you opened the package. The main dish was marked on the outside of the package, e.g. Chicken Stew, and inside would be several smaller packages in addition to the stew which might contain crackers, cheese, jelly, peanut butter, freeze dried fruit or applesauce, M&Ms, or pound cake, and each MRE always had one package with instant coffee, powdered creamer, hot chocolate mix, Tabasco sauce, toilet paper, wet wipe, spoon and chewing gum.

Oliver is attempting to get what remains of the washing machine to work. When I say remains, it means just the inside tub and motor, and the control panel he retrieved from the bushes down the road. The case of the machine is completely gone, there is no lid, no knobs on the control panel, and the control panel will have to be attached to a stud above the tub somehow. But he has hopes because he also found the back panel of the washer with the schematics down the road.

This is being typed thanks to the little generator downstairs operated by a one cylinder Briggs & Stratton gasoline engine. Sounds just like a lawn mower but twice as noisy. We run it twice a day for a total of 7 hours. Oliver starts a loaf of bread in our bread machine each day and it needs 4 hours of generator time to complete. He has been giving these loaves out to our neighbors who are thrilled to have bread. Our Mac Classic and printer were being used by Oliver at his job in one of the buildings on Waterfront, and were submerged under five feet of salt water. So, we are sending the floppy of this letter to Marisa who will print it and send it out.

For those of you who had planned to visit us this summer and we had to send replies saying we would be delighted to see you after November 15, we hope that this letter will help you understand our concerns about company during hurricane season since living in St. Thomas means that evacuation is not really a possibility--the only way you can leave is to fly out. Here when a hurricane hits, you just hunker down and tough it out! Faye has been frightened enough that she will not spend another hurricane season here and hopes that this is the end of them for this year. Company is still very welcome after November 15, but there may not be all of the comforts of home for several months yet.

Our return to America will take place August 31, 1996 on the 8:40 am Delta flight to Atlanta.

Peace, Goodness and Love,
Oliver and Faye - (and Henry, Millie and Little Joe who now run and hide every time they hear a loud plane fly overhead)