



# NIGHTMARE

Paula Slier reports back from one of 2004's greatest tragedies. by Paula Slier

this huge build-up growing just beyond the heads. I suddenly saw this enormous wave and I just remember screaming: 'Start running!'

The family made it into the foyer of a nearby hotel before Chene's grandfather tripped on the ground. His wife, Myrtle, remembers seeing him trying to get to their son.

"My son was standing on a counter and he called his dad and said: 'Dad, dad, come here.' I also wanted to get on that counter but I couldn't, it was too high. My husband slipped and my son dived in to save his dad. And they both disappeared. The wave took me and I was under the water. I saw bubbles and things were falling on my head. I could hear people screaming.

"Eventually I just cried, 'Oh Lord!' and started praying. All of a sudden I was lifted up. I could hear my daughter Lesley screaming: 'Mom, lse, lse, mom,' and I managed to get away from the roof that I was stuck under and swim across to her

because by then we'd been lifted up to the roof of the hotel."

Lesley survived by hanging onto one of the hotel pillars. "Although it seemed like a lifetime it was only a matter of minutes before the water started subsiding and a Thai man appeared, carrying Chene.

"She was exceptionally limp," remembers Lesley. "We lay her on the floor and I tried to administer whatever CPR I could remember, but I was in a state of shock. We managed to revive her but she was wheezing terribly and it sounded as though she had swallowed a lot of mud."

Myrtle wipes away the tears. "Thank God they found her then; otherwise there wouldn't have been any hope. I think she's going to be fine, she's fully aware but very quiet."

Chene's little body is supported by a drip on the plane home. When we arrive, Dr Pearl carries her into a waiting ambulance. He's expecting his first child in two weeks time, and wipes the tears back from his eyes.

## lessons I've learned

### PAINFUL MEMORIES

Following her out of the aeroplane is a badly bruised Christiaan Abt. The 28-year-old South African lawyer is wheeled into the airport a few minutes later. He almost didn't make it back on the rescue flight as he'd been in a back room in Machura hospital and was missed by the South African team when they came.

"I'd spoken with my folks on the phone and they told me about this flight. I knew it was scheduled to arrive early in the morning, and when after a few hours no one had come to fetch me I asked someone in the hospital to phone the embassy. To be honest with you, there was a part of me that was happy I hadn't been fetched as I wasn't sure I wanted to come back home."

Christiaan and his girlfriend, 28-year-old Lisa Lung, were enjoying a romantic holiday together when disaster struck. "We were in a cabin and had just woken up. Lisa went to the



Christiaan lay there, alone, for about five hours, until a Thai man found him and carried him to a waiting boat.

"The whole thing seems so surreal now. I still think there was more chance of me winning the lottery than experiencing a tsunami. It was Lisa's dream holiday and she'd been planning it for over a year. We'd been there for a week and were due to leave the next morning...

"You see the best and the worst of people in such situations. I'll never forget the face of that Thai guy who helped me – he wasn't a big guy and when he carried me down, he kept saying: 'Sorry, never tsunami, never Thailand'."

### WHY DID IT HAPPEN?

It's certainly not something most people ever imagine having to experience. A few days ago I could hardly spell the word 'tsunami,' let alone know what impact it would have on my life. I've covered four earthquakes as a journalist and while each has its own unique stories of suffering, there was something particularly heartbreaking about the Phuket mission.

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bathroom to wash up for the day when I suddenly saw about ten to 15 people running. I thought a fight had broken out but when I looked to my left I could see palm trees and bungalows getting uprooted. There was water everywhere.

"I shouted to Lisa to get out, but as I turned to go to the bathroom, the bungalow lifted up and crashed down. It was happening too fast. She obviously couldn't see anything as there was no window in the bathroom. Our bed was against the wall and the water was coming in from that direction.

"The whole one side of the bungalow was lifted up, I saw the bed being thrown up, and I think it crashed into me. The furniture, the wood, it was all falling onto me and I felt like I was getting buried. It was like being in a tumbler. I was completely aware of what was going on and I remember thinking: 'This is a horrible way to die.'"

But Christiaan didn't die. Instead he was carried to a dry patch of land a few miles up the beach, on top of a roof. "People were saying they wanted to get to the hill because they were afraid of another wave, but I couldn't stand up."

Some French, Canadian and Swedish people found him there, and gathered some cylindrical water barrels that were lying around to place around him as protection against the sun.



Perhaps it was because some of the survivors were South African, or maybe it was because the pictures were so dramatic, but listening to their stories – and only guessing at their pain – I am filled with a deep sense of sadness and despair.

I'm not sure I can make sense of it all, but then I know that's not my role as a journalist. All I can do is tell the stories, and this one ends with a plane load of broken South Africans who came back home without their loved ones and their dreams shattered beyond repair.