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Good Friday, March 27th, 1964

Quote: "Roads and buildings were being destroyed and an entire neighborhood slid into The Cook Inlet. It seemed like the world was coming to an end."

The ground was rolling like waves on the ocean and we were breathing in all that choking dust. The noise of the earthquake sounded like the hardest wind imaginable. It was deafening.

My older brother, Norman was fourteen and I was twelve were amongst some of the many survivors who had left that JC Penney's department store building alive. Miraculously out the side of the doors where the building collapsed. Perhaps you've seen that on a cover of "Life" magazine. This is how I remembered one of the most frightening days of my life on that, "Good Friday" March 27th, 1964. The day my family and I became survivors.

This is my story, I had just stepped off the escalator...

The time: 5:35 p.m. Mother Nature Had Other Plans

My home town was Anchorage where my family and I lived in a log house on 2nd Street. There was no school that day and we made plans to go ice skating with family and friends on our return. Norman and I walked downtown to 5th Avenue to the JC Penney's Department store to do some shopping. It was afternoon on Good Friday, March 27th, 1964. However, mother nature had other plans for us that day.

"Oh, there's Norman." I said to myself as I stepped off the escalator. I spotted him at the counter buying Easter cards. Not knowing how lucky I was when I walked over and stood next to him letting him know I was going to the ladies department to look for gloves.

And then...

The time: 5:36 p.m. and 14 seconds. Panic Swept Over Us

A big jolt. Crack, snap! Then, the building started shaking. Norman and I looked at each other and wondered what was going on. When suddenly, the female clerk jumped over the counter and sprinted away before the real hard shaking started. We heard someone yell, "Earthquake!"

Growing up in Alaska, we rode out earthquakes before. However, this earthquake started to sound and feel completely different from all the others.

Followed by a huge cracking sound. Worrisome, we both looked up at the ceiling, the lights were swaying back and forth. Perfume bottles, boxes and clothes were falling off the shelves and landing all around us. Norman and I were scared out of our wits. We clutched our hands together panic swept over us and we started running searching for an exit.

This was the absolute worst earthquake we had ever felt. All we had to do was look at each other to know how frightened we were. People were screaming and running and pushing. Ahead of us we saw an exit that would take us away from this danger. Forward, running forward to the exit then before I knew it I was laying on the floor. What happened to me and what had fallen on me? It was a heavy metal post card rack and it had me pinned down on the floor.

Completely stunned laying on the floor looking up and still watching all the chaos, peoples legs and boots as they ran past me.. I guess I was yelling for help because all of a sudden Norman picked up the metal rack or someone may have helped him. I don't remember and scrambled to my feet feeling shaken but not hurt. Both of us terrified with all the noise and the rolling floor from the earthquake we started again for the exit.

The time: 5:37 p.m. The Look of Terror In His Eyes

Finally, were at the Fifth Avenue exit. People were pushing and shoving as we tried to get our way out the first set of doors to the corridor then onto the sidewalk. Everything that has happened so far was just terrifying.

Now, in front of us was a very frightened man who was inside the corridor reaching his hand by the door desperately reaching for his wife and toddler who were standing next to us. His arm was stretched out just reaching, reaching to grab his family toward him. I don't know what happened to them and I always hoped they got together in the corridor.

Somehow, Norman and I pushed our way through the crushing crowd to get into the corridor. The floor was still shaking as we stood in the corridor with all the other frightened people. We had to get out the corridor and onto the sidewalk and run away from this building. A haunting image was when I turned and saw a man who was leaning against the glass wall with a beet red face and a look of terror in his eyes as he squatted down and covered his hands across his head.

After seeing that haunting image all I could think about was to get out of the corridor. Norman and I started pushing on the doors while surprising enough, maintaining our balance.

The time: 5:38 p.m. A Thunderous Crash

One of the most frightening experiences we ever encountered was about to happen. We managed to open the doors and Norman and I are now standing on the sidewalk looking through the dusty air while we stood there horrified watching people all around us scouring to stand up.

The ground was like waves rolling in the ocean and we were breathing all this choking dust. The noise of the earthquake was like the hardest wind ever imaginable. It was deafening.

Because of the outside of the building was falling apart the air was filled with a thick dust that we could smell and taste as it filled our mouths and made breathing hard. The JC Penney's building had no windows and was constructed with enormous wide and thick slabs of concrete which were attached to the outside walls. And each concrete slab was embedded with decorative tiny pebbles.

We stood on the rolling sidewalk face to face holding hands figuring out our next move trying for all our worth to maintain our balance. Suddenly raining down from the sky were the tiny pebbles. They apparently had come loose from the intense shaking and were now pounding on our heads.

Then, before we took another step, a heavy concrete slab made a thunderous crash next to Norman and I. Thankfully after the heavy concrete slab fell on the ground it fell to the left of us toward the JC Penney building. Again, another heavy concrete slab made a thunderous crash next to us and that heavy concrete slab fell to the right of us toward the street. The dust was so thick by now and for our safety a sense of urgency came over us which was to get away from the collapsing building and run toward D Street.

The time: 5:39 p.m. We Were Frozen in Our Tracks

Fleeing from the collapsing building we had a new challenge to face as we stood there frozen in our tracks. Absolutely stunned by what we were witnessing. The parked vehicles on D Street were crashing into one another. On the very street we needed to cross.

We were watching a van filled with terrified people with their hands and faces pressed up against the windows as the van kept rolling back and forth banging its bumper into another car.

If we tried to run between the cars we would be crushed between the parked cars that were banging into one another. And just standing there on the sidewalk wasn't an option.

Norman and I looked at each other and by our expressions we were saying. "How are we going to get across the street without being crushed between the cars? "

The time: 5:40 p.m. The Earthquake Had Stopped

Thankfully we made it across the street away from the collapsing building and as we stood there on the sidewalk in a sea of dust. The earthquake had stopped. "Help me, help me!" A woman screamed. "Help, help me up! The woman was on all fours on the sidewalk. Norman went to help the woman up.

I stood there on the sidewalk hanging onto a parking meter. Yelling hysterically, "Norman, Norman don't leave me". Just the thought of being separated was too much for me to bare. He helped the woman up and then quickly came over to me.

We could see the cars on the street and people on the sidewalk through the choking dust and Norman and I wanted to run over to our dad's home. We just visited him before we left to go shopping at JC Penny's and we needed to let him know we were alright and wanted to make sure he was alright. Luckily, he lived only a few blocks away. He grabbed my hand and then we started running.

We Just Kept Running Toward Our Dad's House

Was the three room brick house that he built after I was born still standing? Was he alright? We just kept running toward our dad's house and noticed policemen and firemen were running toward the department store and their faces were filled with terror. Norman and I didn't even turn to look back at the building.

Thankfully, our dad lived across the street from the local police department and fire station and we all felt safe knowing that. As we got closer to the street where he lived, the faster we ran. Finally, we rounded the corner of the last building and looked down the street. And there he was, alive.

He was hanging onto his wooden fence and had a look of relief knowing we were alright. Big Sammy that was what we called our dad was alright and fortunately saw the house and it was still in tack. After a big hug Big Sammy and Norman wanted to look inside the house for any damage that was caused by the monstrous earthquake.

While they were inside and hanging onto the fence I prayed this over and over again. "Thank you God, thank you that he is alright". After they came out and told me that the inside was okay we noticed as we looked at the roof the brick chimney had fallen. Creating numerous holes on the roof and the heat from the hot bricks began to melt the snow which caused the water to start leaking into his house.

Big Sammy told us that he was alright and would take care of things. Knowing that the family would be worried about us he told us, "Go home, go home to Mama!" After another hug Norman and I left Big Sammy and started for home.

The Marque Sign Was Even With The Street

As we began our walk home with tears in our eyes Norman and I were looking with disbelief at all the destruction. The sky was gray and the snow was gray. Our boots made a sloshing sound in the snow. How bizarre to be on Fourth Avenue and to see, The Denali movie theater and all the other stores sunken down. The roofs were now even with the sidewalk and as we were crossing the street we saw Bagoy's Flowers, the building was folded like an accordion.

Norman and I just kept walking. People moaning and crying and were still hanging onto fences and some were still kneeling on the sidewalks. Now, sirens were being heard. Would our wonderful home be okay or will it have fallen over the bluff?

Finally, as we hurried down Fourth Avenue toward Cordova Street, knowing we could see our log house from the top of what we called, the big hill. And then we saw it, our log house was still standing. We hastily went down the big hill so we could get across Third Avenue and to get across to the field. We started running across the dirty, snowy field.

On Second Avenue running even faster up the snowy gravel street and finally right up to our front door of our log house. Norman and I opened the door into the kitchen and happily there was our step dad Bob, our older brother Sammy and our Cocker Spaniel dog, Goldie.

The Refrigerator Had Danced Out Away From The Wall

Oh my goodness, I can't even begin to fathom what I saw in our kitchen.

The kitchen was a mess. The floor was covered in food, the mustard, jelly, ketchup, juice, milk and coffee. The worst was the green pea soup that my mother, Feodoria had made was now all over the floor and running down the stove. The kitchen floor was sticky, smelly and messy. The refrigerator had danced away from the wall. All the cupboard doors were opened and all the spices along with everything else that spilled made a giant mess.

I sat down on the bench in the breakfast nook. The pea soup that had spilled off the table and which I was sitting in now is all over my navy blue coat. Yuck, I stood up and walked over to the sink. Norman was telling Bob and Sammy what the Fourth Avenue street looked like and where we were and that we saw Big Sammy. Then, I just put my head in my hands and leaned over the sink and moaned. "I don't feel well, I just don't feel well."

We Saw Them Running Home Across The Field

Our log home was three stories high and the kitchen, living room, bedroom and bathroom where we spent most of our time was on the second floor. All the bedrooms were on the third floor. And the basement was where the furnace and laundry room were. Anticipating and anxious Norman and I stayed in the kitchen looking out the breakfast nook window to see who we were going to see first crossing the field.

Bob and Sammy kept themselves busy in the other rooms of the house and cleaned up our dog who was covered with the sticky, soupy mess from the floor. Norman and I not knowing to sit or stand noticed that our heads and clothes were all covered in dust and tiny pebbles. And what we just experienced seemed unbelievable that we were here in our kitchen.

I stood there looking out the breakfast nook window and so worried about Mama. Waiting and praying for my family and hoping they would come home safely before it got dark. Then, at last, one by one my family started to come home. We saw them running home across the field. My older brothers, Bobby and Jimmy then my older sister Betty. An answer to prayer, they were all safe and we all stayed in the kitchen talking and finding out where everybody was during the earthquake.

Peggy's Airport Cafe was across town where Mama worked and waiting for her to come home seemed like an eternity. Was she alright and how would she get home because she didn't drive? We were wondering if someone should start walking to the cafe to make sure she was okay. There wasn't any power or any telephone service either. Then, at last the waiting was over.

Looking out the window we recognized Mama as she was walking away from a car. Cheers of happiness rang out in the kitchen. We were so happy and relieved as we watched our mother cross the field for home.

All of us clamoring over each other and standing on the slippery floor just waiting for her to open the door and hug her. We were all alive, at home and all together.

We talked about that each one in the family stopped at Big Sammy's house to make sure he was alright. And Mama was so thankful a co-worker drove her home. So after that, the field where I watched my wonderful, beautiful family come running home on after the earthquake, that day of destruction. The place where we played kickball, rode our bikes, flown our kites were filled with those happy times and the field was never looked on the same by me again.

He Answered, I Believe It Was Angels

What does my family do? What we always do. We pull ourselves up by the boot straps and start cleaning. Once we got most of the mess cleaned up it was time to settle down into the living room. All of us were too frightened to sleep upstairs. We didn't not want to be away from one another after the most terrifying day that we all had just gone through.

We listened to the radio that night and each night. Slowly our home and our town came back together. Stronger, wiser and blessed that more people were not lost in, which is now known as , "The 1964 Great Alaskan Earthquake". Measured on, the Richter Scale as a 9.2 and lasted for 4 minutes and 38 seconds.

In 1989 on the 25th Anniversary of, "The Great Alaskan Earthquake" a local newspaper wrote a story which included my family. After dinner we were all standing in the living room at my mother's and step father's house on Oxford Street. It was quite a write up and we were all talking about the pictures and the stories.

And Norman and I not knowing that each other one had said, "I don't know how we got across the street, away from the building. I believe it was Angels."

Interesting thing was, I only found out about that comment when Norman and I told our earthquake story separately and we each had said the same thing in that article. So, I asked Norman. "Did you know how we got across the street?" He answered, "I believe it was Angels." And I said, "So do I. I thought it was Angels."

That was the only time we had ever discussed the most terrifying time of our lives. My family and I did not know what was going to befall us on that "Good Friday" back in 1964. We seldom talk about that day because we can see the fear and tears welling up in our eyes for some of our loved ones have now passed on.

I must add how grateful I am that they survived that day.

And that I was a survivor.

The End

Acknowledgments

To my wonderful family and to my loving husband who was also a survivor.