

45 seconds that changed our lives

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ABSTRACT

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FULL TEXT

One morning last month, 11-year-old Adam Currie slid out of bed early, crept downstairs and into the kitchen of his home in Christchurch, New Zealand. He was on urgent secret business.

First, though, a distraction. Madatac (Cat Adam backwards) had given up chasing the bellbirds around the jasmine and was demanding to have his tummy tickled. Undeterred, Adam put the kettle on to make tea and, after picking a flower from the garden, tip-toed back upstairs to wake his mother, Alayne McLaren, with a birthday kiss.

"We opened my presents in bed," says Alayne. "Through the window we could see the ocean on a beautiful day. It was a loving, happy morning. Adam and his father had bought me a portable phone, and there were gifts from my family and friends in England that he brought up."

The two got dressed and were soon ready for the 10-minute drive to Adam's school. "We practised his French on the way. It's something we always do. Then I waved him off and said I'd see him in the afternoon for swimming."

Today, however, there was to be no swimming, and mother and son would be reunited only after the most brutal and terrifying events of their lives.

"I wasn't working and had planned coffee and a walk on the beach with Jenny, a friend," recalls Alayne, 55, a British freelance line producer for film and television, who made her home in New Zealand 28 years ago. After dropping Adam off, she drove back to their Colonial-style house in the seaside suburb of Mount Pleasant, south-east of the city, her home for the past 13 years. "Jenny and I hadn't yet been for our walk and were just chatting in the sitting room, about to make lunch. And then it came."

In the seconds that followed, the two women realised with sickening familiarity the roar of what was now beginning to nudge ornaments out of place and send windowpanes into spasm. Just five months before, the "Garden City" had endured a 7.1 magnitude earthquake, wreaking havoc but, by some miracle, claiming no lives. The tremors were recognisable all right, but now there was an added fury to them.

"It felt like a truck had hit the house," says Alayne. "We just had time to shelter beneath a door frame. They are one of the safest places as they brace the ceiling and roof. But it was all coming apart.

One side of the house just blew out. "The shaking was the worst. I shake now just to think about it. It lasted about 45 seconds. It's not like a car crash - it goes on and on. Jenny and I were clinging to each and decided we had to get outside."

Up and down the shuddering length of Rangatira Terrace, stunned figures began to emerge from shattered homes and gather in the local park. "Some women were screaming. There was a need everyone felt to hold on to each other. We stood there hugging and hanging on. The relief of seeing some people you knew reunited with their families was immense." For others, there was lingering uncertainty.

"Soon there were sirens wailing and helicopters overhead. 'Stay where you are' was the message. Some homes were quiet. No sign of life. A few of the older folk wanted to go back inside to rescue pets, but were persuaded to stay back. In one house, a woman of 80 who had been trapped in the shower managed to pull herself clear."

A glimpse towards the city's Central Business District put their ordeal into perspective as the ferocity of the 6.3 quake became apparent. "We all knew exactly what the skyline looked like... what it should have looked like. Then the plumes of black smoke came. Someone said, 'God, look at the city.' We knew buildings had gone down in an area where most people would be at midday."

The agonising uncertainty of what might have happened to Adam grew increasingly unbearable. "I had no idea how he was. Where he was. Someone turned on a car radio. In the city, we heard that facades of building were falling on buses and killing people. There was a fire. It was bad..." "At first I held myself together. I told everyone our children would be safe. They were with their teachers and knew the earthquake drill."

Shortly before the cellphone towers went dead, Alayne's estranged husband, Duncan, an international lawyer, contacted her. "He asked if I was all right and said he was going for Adam. Somehow the road was still open. Dunc set off on a 10-minute trip that took an hour and a half. Eventually, as the car drew up, I saw Adam's little face and knew he was all right. I don't ever like to fear the worst, but until you see them whole and undamaged..." Her voice falters at the memory.

As night approached, with the temperature dropping, Alayne tried to get to the house to retrieve warm clothing, but both times she was repelled by tremors as she neared the porch. "I realised I wasn't going back in there," she says. "I was never going back."

Before taking shelter with friends, where she and Adam shared a bed, she found her phone was working again. "I called London, where it was about 2am, and spoke to my sister-in-law, a travel agent. I said, 'Please get me and Adam out of here...'"

Today, sipping tea in the garden of her mother's home in Bruton, Somerset, while Adam goes shopping for them, Alayne reflects on leaving New Zealand after nearly 30 years for a new life in Britain. "This is my haven," she says. "When you're beaten, you run for home. Here I have my mother, my brother and sisters, my friends, my god-daughter. There is great support from them.

"How much have I lost? My home. Adam's home. Our pleasant life, our security." Alayne has learnt that householders must wait at least four months while damage to homes is assessed before the Earthquake Commission makes any compensatory pay-out. Insurance complications must be faced. At present, the house "is worthless. It is not safe to live in. The structure is twisted and broken." In time, it may come to be repaired, but who now would want to buy in a city that must live with the ever-present threat of another catastrophe?

From her shattered home, Alayne was finally able to retrieve passports and a change of clothes. "And a little metal heart that my girlfriends had given me for my birthday." In all, their possessions filled two bin liners as they took off

for England. "Yes, my resources are threadbare," she says. "I'm living in charity shop clothes, but I don't care about that. The sole ambition of my life has shrunk to one thing: to be safe; to have my family and the people I care about safe and nearby. The other stuff doesn't matter."

Now, her priority is to find a home - "I have to fall on the mercy of Somerset county council. So far, they've been very receptive" - and a school for Adam. "We are having lessons at home for now but there's a church school here I'd love him to go to. They let you know in 10 days.

"I'd so like a little place of our own. Our own space. Maybe I can get film work again. I do have some great contacts still in Bristol.

"I cling to the belief that we have a good future. I will make one for my son and myself because we have a loving family here."

For now, it seems, the stark horrors of Tuesday, February 22 remain all too vivid a memory, but you can guess that somehow the spirit and fortitude of "Head Sister" - a nickname earned in childhood - will prevail.

You can help those affected by the New Zealand earthquake or the Japanese earthquake and tsunamis via several recognised charities: www.redcross.org.uk/nzeearthquake www.redcross.org.uk/japantsunami www.savethechildren.org.uk www.unicef.org.uk/donate

'In all, their possessions filled two bin liners as they took off for England'

Credit: Ben Travers

Illustration

Caption: Terra firma: Alayne McLaren and her son Adam begin life anew in Bruton, Somerset. Above right, the carnage of Christchurch; CHRISTOPHER JONES

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