

Tragedy in Papua New Guinea

By GRETCHEN GRAF

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WE ARE leaving for Lae after Gerry and Sheila take an early mark from work, but I've forgotten to get to the bank before it closed at 3. I walk into Gerry's office at DASF (Department of Agriculture, Stock and Fisheries) to see him, feet up on desk, staring out the window, so contemplative he hasn't heard or seen me enter. Within four hours he'll be dead. Does he have some sort of premonition?

I startle him with a "Hey Gerry," and he pulls his feet to the floor.

These are the days before credit cards – I need to borrow some cash for the weekend. As soon as I mention it, my big brother pulls out a wad of notes from his pocket: the guy who notoriously always writes cheques – even at the supermarket – and asks how much I want. Embarrassed, I say twenty bucks will do. He tosses me a fifty like it's nothing. Then he announces he's had enough, suggests we get the others and hit the road.

We jump in the fluorescent green VW and drive the five minutes home, to the other side of the airstrip. Sheila's also absconded early, and is busy getting the kids' clothes packed for our weekend away. Jacques arrives in his Toyota with big Steve, both friends of Gerry and Sheila, so Maryanne, Stevie and I pile in with him, while Sheila, Chris, Paul, baby Nicky and housegirl Anna cram into the VW. Maryanne is my friend and fellow traveller; we are on our Uni holidays, adventuring



in PNG. The two oldest boys Stevie and Chris, are six and five, Paul is three. Gerry is anxious for us to get on the road, because he wants to show me his favourite place, the majestic Markham Valley, by sunset.

Travelling in convoy can be disconcerting on unsealed roads. To ease the effect of the billowing dust from this road, the Highlands Highway from Goroka to Lae, Jacques travels well behind Gerry. Nevertheless he has trouble keeping up with my rev-head brother in his souped-up VW.

I tell him not to worry, I'd rather get there late but safe. The light fades rapidly after sunset in the tropics, but as we pull into the Markham Valley lookout, beside the hot green beast, we get to catch and admire the view of the long, wavy swathes of grass and the tropical jungle before complete darkness. In the fading light, we take pictures of each other

with Gerry's camera, tourist-style, against the darkening green valley and pale pink sky.

Setting off in convoy once again, both cars soon get stuck behind a large truck, taking the winding, dusty mountain road in low gear. We figure we'll be able to take him when the road hits the valley floor. But the truck accelerates as soon as it's on the flat, and as Gerry tries to pass, it moves to the centre, blocking his passage. This happens repeatedly, as we watch from a safe distance back. The only chance will be an inside curve. Eventually there is one, on a slight rise, so as the truck slows slightly, both cars safely take it and accelerate to get well ahead.

After another ten minutes or so, Gerry pulls over, and so do we, just in front. The windscreens are filthy, making night vision dodgy, to say the least. We must clean them quickly, before the truck passes us.



Roads in New Guinea have massive wide storm drains called barats, running either side, to cope with tropical downpours. They are about a metre wide, and even deeper. They often exist where a road shoulder would otherwise be in a non-tropical environment. Because of the barats, we cannot pull right off the road, but are as far to the left as possible. Sheila and the sleeping kids stay in the VW as the rest of us jump out for a breather. We clean the wind-screens as best we can, but looking up we are stunned by the myriad stars of the Milky Way, till we notice the lights of the truck looming.

No time to get back in the cars, we have to let him pass, so I grab Stevie's hand to stand between the two cars. I see my brother, paralysed with fear, silhouetted by the headlights. In a split second, I realize the truck is going to hit us. It's doing at least 100 kph and not slowing down. Adrenaline makes me jump further than I ever have in my life, dragging Stevie, over the barat to hit the ground face down. As I do, I hear the two loudest bangs imaginable, as the truck takes out both cars. I find out later, that it throws Gerry's car 100 feet (30 metres) into the scrub, and Jacques' 90 feet (28 metres), and

keeps going. Seven and a half tons of truck with a massive bullbar just keeps going, without turning back.

Where is everyone? It's pitch dark except for the glimmer from the stars. I listen to Stevie panting, not cognisant. I hear an unearthly scream, followed by "The kids, the kids!!" I don't recognise the voice. More adrenaline kicks me into action, but not enough to jump the barat a second time. I help Stevie down into it, climb down myself, then pull him up after me onto the roadside. We must find the others. But I can't see anyone. I can't even see the cars. They're gone. I remember I have a voice and start yelling everyone's names, randomly.

I wander up and down the road, in the blackness, screaming names. Jacques answers and we stumble towards each other. Steve is wandering around like a zombie, and I realize it must have been him screaming. I hear muffled sobbing from Maryanne, and walk towards the sound, to find her sitting on the edge of the barat, nursing a heavily bleeding arm. But where is everyone else? I continue stumbling along the road till I see Gerry, lying face up in the middle of road. Not moving, not

breathing, no pulse. My high school CPR memories kick in and I know I must try something. I tilt his head back, and notice the unseeing eyes open, and covered in grit. I know he's dead. He has suffered the full impact of a seven-ton truck travelling at 100 kph. But I put my mouth on his slack lips anyway and blow air into his mouth. Blood and foam froth out of every orifice, and I know there is no point in continuing. I'm running on adrenaline, definitely in shock, but I remember thinking he must have died instantly, and thank God for that.

Leaving Stevie with Jacques, Steve and Maryanne, I stand up and yell Sheila's name as loudly as I can, over and over, then wait. An almost indecipherable reply comes. I scream at her to keep calling, so that I can fight my way through the head high grass and scrub, to find the car on the other side of the barat. When I get to the car, I open the driver's door to see Sheila, still strapped into the passenger seat, quietly asking what has happened. How to answer? Words escape me. The quiet from the back seat is more disturbing. Anna is sobbing softly, Chris is crying, but the two young ones are silent. I feel for them in the darkness,



and find Paul wedged under the driver's seat unconscious, his chest compressed, and Nicky, also unconscious, in Anna's arms, her head swelling rapidly. The engine has been forced into the back seat by the impact. Somehow I get them all out, and Anna carries Nicky, while I carry Paul, and walk them and Sheila and Chris through the grass, across the barats, to the road. Anna and I lay the babies down on their backs, and I do some sort of assessment to decide who needs CPR first.

Chris has put his teeth through his lip, and is still bleeding, but seems otherwise ok. Paul smells strongly of vomit, and does not appear to be breathing. Nicky also seems to not be breathing. So, without clearing airways or using the recovery position, I tell Anna to watch as I pinch Paul's nose closed and start blowing into his mouth. His rising chest makes me feel hopeful, so I pass the responsibility to her while I try the same with Nicky. Being 18 months old, I don't know whether to try and cover both her nose and mouth with my mouth, but I quickly decide to hold her nose and blow. Her chest rises, and I am hopeful for her too.

How much time has passed is unknowable, but I hear a car approaching. Jacques does his best to flag it down, but it veers around us. Appalled, I swear and curse. The same thing happens with a second car. I scream in desperation, and am determined this will not happen again. Everyone else is in much more shock than me. They are like zombies. We are all on the road, in darkness, Anna and I doing CPR on the two littlies, and Sheila muttering over and over "He's dead? Are you sure?"

The next vehicle is a flatbed truck, and Jacques stands in the middle of the road, refusing to move aside. The truck pulls up. It's a native driver and his offsider, and we tell them firmly we are putting everyone in the tray, and driving as fast as safely possible to Lae Hospital. They help us lift Gerry's body up onto the tray, and then everyone else. The two oldest boys are crying and sobbing. I urge Anna to keep blowing air into Paul's unconscious body, while I continue doing the same with Nicky. Sheila asks me to drape the sleeping bag that's on the tray over Gerry's body, and I reply thoughtlessly that there's no point, he's dead.

Half an hour later, we pull into the hospital and I jump from the truck screaming "Emergency, emergency!" at the top of my voice. It's close to midnight, apparently, and the skeleton staff spring into action as best they can. A surgeon is called in and asks me what has happened as he scrubs up to operate on Paul and Nicky. I tell him what I know, and say "The little boy had his chest crushed, and you can see the baby's head swelling..."

Police arrive and question me, Sheila, Maryanne, Steve and Jacques. Steve has recognised the truck as one from his company, Morobe Constructions – crucial information at this time. Maryanne's shrapnel wound has been stitched up and bandaged, but she continues to sob quietly, while the other two are still zombies. I am firing on all cylinders, full of adrenaline. For me, shock will not fully set in for two days yet. I scream at the police that the truck driver did not slow down, he did it deliberately, you have to find him...

After hours giving details to the police, I realize I have no idea where the two boys are. I go looking. Chris is in a ward, sleeping. Stevie is nowhere in the hospital, so I walk out



the entrance to emergency. There, outside, still on a stretcher, Gerry's body lies under the stars. And walking around the stretcher, around and around, is an uncomprehending six-year old Stevie.

A day later, Paul dies because his lungs have basically been dissolved by his own vomit. An insensitive nurse comments to me that she wished she'd been at the scene of the accident – she would have known to get the vomit out of his lungs first, before resuscitating him. I take Sheila, belatedly, to the ward to say goodbye to him. He never recovered consciousness. He is white, and his lips blue. He has been dead for some time.

Two days later, Sheila, nursing her whiplash injury, Maryanne her deeply gashed arm, and I huddle together around Sheila's bed and sob and cry and grieve together, all day. We can't stop crying. Sheila keeps saying that she can't believe Gerry won't suddenly waltz through the door. If only.

On the third day, the supervising surgeon asks me to prepare Sheila for the death of her 18 month-old, comatose infant daughter Nicky. I remember the words I spoke:

Doctor, if that baby dies, Sheila will die. She will not have the will to live. She has lost her husband and her son. You have to save her baby.

Two weeks on, Sheila, her parents, Maryanne, Stevie, Chris, a supervising pediatrician, a comatose baby Nicky and I board a plane for Canberra, along with my second brother Rick, who had flown to PNG as soon as he could to sort out the bureaucratic and medical issues to enable our return. He has worked tirelessly to get us all to the point where this is possible. I am keenly aware that Gerry's and Paul's bodies lie below us in the cargo bay.

We will touch down in Canberra to meet my distraught Mum and Dad on the tarmac. I will collapse in-consolably into their arms.

POSTSCRIPT:

GERRY and Sheila's three surviving children still live in Canberra.

Nicky slowly woke from her traumatic brain injury after three months, and remained in hospital for another three months after that. She had to learn to eat, drink, walk and talk all over again, and she did. She has spasticity on one side and multiple impairments, but has a successful public service career, like her father, and has raised four beautiful children.

Stevie has five children of his own, and Chris has four, all now adults. They each run their own successful small businesses.

A few months after the tragedy, Sheila met the second love of her life, Willem Van Opstal. Just twenty, like me at the time, seven years younger than Sheila, he took on this wounded family heart and soul, fathering the three surviving children to adulthood. Sheila had two more children with Willem, Luke and Mieke, who are also now adults.

The driver of the truck that killed Gerry was found just days later, hiding at his sister's place in Lae. The fluorescent green paint on the bullbar of the truck was a dead giveaway. He spent months in jail awaiting a trial. He was charged with dangerous driving causing death, said he had fallen asleep at the wheel, and was given a modest fine.

On July 16 2020, Sheila lost her second husband Willem in another tragic accident, when he fell from the cliff he was attempting to climb at Seal Rocks, his favourite place. He was buried next to Gerry and Paul in Canberra Lawn Cemetery, on July 30, 2020.