

This is a true story about powerful Hurricane LENNY based on my report ISABEL and HURRICANE LENNY. My grandson, Daniel, was born in Spain around the same time and I wanted him to know how his grandmother ("Oma") fared all by herself during the hurricane.

Daniel's Hurricane

November 1999

by Isabel Belardo Cerni

1. Oma's Unexpected Guest

It was hurricane season 1999. That is, it was almost at the end of that season and it was very quiet. Daniel's grandfather (Opa) was away. He decided to travel to Germany on a business trip, then on to Spain to see the newborn Daniel. Like everyone else, he thought that the hurricane season was over.

Oma was a very busy lady and among other things she took care of her elderly father, at his house, in the early afternoon, did laundry and kept him company. Since she was all alone at her home she decided to go on a sort of Retreat; shut out the world and just have peace and quiet. She never put on the TV except maybe to see a religious program on EWTN. She was quite content with her life. She did not have to bother about cooking if she did not want to cook. Excellent!

She ate a meager meal, after all, she was on a Retreat. She did not make phone calls and discouraged receiving them. She never touched the computer. She was determined to have a retreat from the regular things she did every day and dedicate this time solely to God. Well, it seemed that God had other plans for Oma. Did He want to test her skills and courage ? Hm-m-m...

One fine day, that was November 13th, while she was taking care of her father and he was watching the evening news on TV she heard that there was a "disturbance" in the Western Caribbean. "What? A disturbance ? I'm not going to pay any attention to that!" she thought. "It is most likely going into the Gulf of Mexico, or take some other route." She thought about Honduras and Nicaragua, where Hurricane MITCH killed more than 10,000 people the year before. It was a catastrophic event!

The next day, Nov.14th, Oma decided to check her email, just in case. Somehow, that report the day before, left her a bit unsettled. She received one from an Amateur Radio Operator friend, Chuck Hewitt, who indicated that the disturbance had already developed into a Tropical Depression and was heading east.

"Oh, no! Not East !" She cried, "And here I am all alone!"

2. A Turn for the Worse

Oma could not resist. She turned on the TV to check the Weather Channel, that was her second favorite channel, and there it was! The Tropical Depression was already a hurricane with winds of 80 miles per hour! Hurricane LENNY ! It was expected to increase in intensity and it would pass very close to the south of St. Croix if it took that route. There were two other possible routes. Suspense was rapidly increasing with each update.

On Monday, Nov. 15th, little Daniel was born in Valencia, Spain, at the same time that LENNY was heading towards St. Croix and Oma. It was most worrisome for poor Opa. He was so far away. There was nothing he could do as he watched that huge

red/orange blob, but pray that Oma would be able to handle everything by herself. They talked on the telephone, until all communication was lost.

LENNY intensified to 100 miles per hour! It was not looking good for St. Croix. It was going to pass very close to the south.

"I'd better get moving," said Oma, "even a category one hurricane is a lot to deal with, so I will start by putting away all the loose items in the garden." She had to get a head start.

On Tuesday, Nov. 16th, Hurricane LENNY got even bigger. A category two ! "This is incredible! A hurricane coming from the West? That's the wrong side!" Everyone referred to it as "Wrong way LENNY." It was most unusual. St. Croix residents were told to prepare. It definitely was staying on that route with lots of room to get bigger! It was a most worrisome situation.

Oma was well ahead of everybody. In the morning she closed the shutters, picked up more objects from outside and rearranged the garage to make space for the car which she usually left outside. She rolled up the sun shades on the porch and secured them as best she could. Removing them completely was more than she could handle.

3. More Ordeals

"Well, that's the best I can do!" She looked around in the garden. All was quiet. The weather was beautiful. It was hard to believe that there was a powerful hurricane on the way. She started plucking at some wild vines as she still had time before she went to take care of her father. Weeding was tedious, but it afforded peace and time to think over certain matters.

"Ouch!!" She looked at her ring finger. "I got stung by a bee! That's all I needed, right?" The finger was swelling fast and the ring had tightened. After taking care of her father she raced into town to a friend's jewelry store, who helped to saw the ring off. It took forever, but it came off, just on time.

"My goodness!" She exclaimed outside, "just look at that ugly sky!" She drove home as quickly as possible. "I have to secure the porch furniture before it starts raining!" She kept an eye on the spooky, black sky. Soon after, it started to rain buckets with continuous lightning ("strobe lightning") and thunder.

"I can't believe this!" She exclaimed. "I've never seen the likes!" Even though it was already night, it seemed like daylight.

"This hand is really big and fat now!" she said, looking at her hand. The swelling was halfway up her forearm. "What bad timing! Thank God there is still electricity and I can see to move around faster!" She went downstairs to the little apartment, which doubled as a hurricane refuge, if the need arose. She was up and down the stairs, all around, getting all the necessities for the hurricane refuge.

Catty, the tuxedo cat, was huddled under one of the beds. Oma managed to get her out. It was not easy to do things with one hand, but she did the best she could to take care of everything as she listened to the radio.

One of Oma's favorite things to do was - laugh! So, she could not help bursting out with laughter when, as soon the radio announcer said, "We are so lucky to have electricity during such a lightning storm!" WHAM! There was a blackout!! Some people would not think that very funny, but for Oma, it was hilarious!

4. An Eerie Night

"I wish I could take pictures of this," she said, "lightning flashes all around, but then I would need another hand. If there ever was a bad time to get stung by a bee, it was this one. Bad bee! Bad bee.? Stupid me, for not wearing gardening gloves! Anyway, I probably would have gotten stung through the glove. Those are fierce little stingers. They get through anything." She closed the living room door behind her and turned the key in the lock. Did Oma think that LENNY would try turning the key to get in..? Huh?

The blackout lasted four and a half hours. The radio announcer said, "*Two lightning bolts hit the power station causing the massive blackout.*" Or, something to that effect. By this time Oma was so exhausted that she could not care less what caused the blackout. The small vigil candle flickered on the little altar in the bedroom downstairs. It cast a comforting glow in the room. Oma had had it for the day and fell asleep.

5. LENNY Arrives

On Wednesday, Nov. 17th, little Daniel was two days old in Spain, when Hurricane LENNY was expected to vent his fury on St. Croix and the surrounding islands. This is quite interesting, when we invite guests there is what is called "Crucian Time", in other words, don't arrive at the exact time of the invitation. Well, hurricanes are different, thank God, if the weather information says it's arriving at such and such a time, be ready, hurricanes don't know about local time.

Hurricane LENNY was expected to arrive at noon, so we were told that the electrical power would be cut at eleven-thirty. Oma called as many people as she could and she was called as well. Everyone was worried. LENNY was huge!

"I'd better pray some more and catch a little nap after, I'm too pooped to paddle!" Oma was really getting to the end of the road as far as exhaustion. She had been at this high stress level for days. She was proud of her two pets, Prinz and Catty, and so happy to have their company. She slept on one twin bed and they on the other. Prinz took advantage of an unusual situation and was lying on his back having the sleep of his life. He is otherwise not allowed on the beds. Catty "owned" the house so everything was hers anyway.

It rained torrentially! That means a whole lot of rain at one time! The wind and rain pounded on the house. Oma heard a loud, crashing sound outside. It was probably a metal sheet from another house. The wind was so strong that it drove the rain horizontally right through every little space it could find. The kitchenette and livingroom area in the hurricane refuge was flooding.

6. BIG LENNY

Oma was very worried about her father. Did her brother manage to get him to his house a short distance away? Or was he alone? What if his roof blew off! On the radio, the weather report said that LENNY was a category 4 hurricane. It was so powerful, so dangerous, that it had sustained winds of one-hundred-forty-five miles per hour with higher gusts of a catastrophic category 5 hurricane. As LENNY passed slowly, about 45 miles to the south, St. Croix was getting the brunt of the eye wall. It moved in closer, just 15 miles from the East End.

Oma noticed that Prinz was getting kind of nervous. Not Catty, as long as there was no thunder, she was fine. She went out to the hallway, and even ventured up the stairs and sat on the landing. Oma could not believe how calm Catty was under the circumstances. There she sat licking one of her paws as if it was just a regular day. It was most amazing! The howling wind did not scare her a bit.



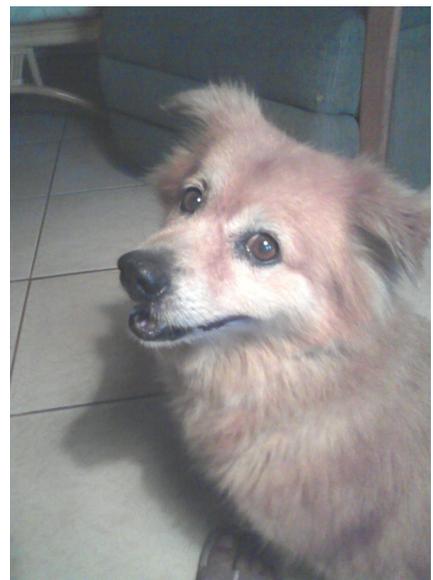
"Come on inside, you silly cat! Do you want to get blown away or something?" Oma was afraid she would climb higher on the stairs and the wind would take her far away.

The talk on the radio was disturbing, "*LENNY is beginning to make a turn to the north, this could bring it directly over St. Croix...*" Oma increased her prayers. She had supper on the bed, --crackers, cheese and peppermint tea. Her cousin told her that morning to prepare a big thermos of tea, it would help to soothe her nerves throughout the hurricane. It was a great idea! It sure helped.

8.Prinz takes on LENNY

Suddenly, a problem arose! "WHAT..?? You want to pee.?" Oma could not believe her eyes. Prinz was serious! He had to pee and he wanted to go out right now.

"You can't go outside now, there's a hurricane out there!" But all Prinz knew was



that he had to pee and right now.

"Do it right here in the hallway! It's all wet anyway!" Not Prinz, he kept going to the front door, actually, he *waded* to the front door, asking to be let out. What a dilemma for Oma! What was she to do! She threw up her hands,

"Well, when you have to go, you have to go, no matter what!" But it was not as easy as that. LENNY was raging out there. The sun shade directly above had loosened and was flapping wildly in the wind. Oma did not expect it to stay on. Prinz did not care about what was happening out there, he had some serious business to take care of and he had to get to it as quickly as possible.

Oma pried the door open and held on for dear life. She had to brace the door between her knees and hang on to the door knobs hoping she would not get sucked out. Prinz sped by like a bullet and disappeared around the corner.

"Prinz! Prinz!" Oma screamed with all her might, but she could scarcely hear herself above the noise. She kept on calling when suddenly Prinz sped by the door, or was being blown by the wind. "Prinz! ! Prinz ! Prinz ! Here! Come! Come!"

Prinz turned around keeping his eyes on the flapping shade above. He was more scared of that than the wind and the rain. Oma was so relieved when he turned around and raced into the doorway. She was very exhausted and did not know how much longer she could hold the door open.

"Well, I hope you peed!" said Oma, shutting the door against the wind. As for the shade, let it flap, she had enough. She was going to bed and hopefully get some much needed rest.

9. A Long Spooky Night

It was easier said than done for Oma. She thought that she could just go to bed and sleep! Really?

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed, when she went back to the bedroom.

"This just won't do! We can't have water all over this floor too!" She had to do something about it for the night.

Oma pulled the soggy, scattered rugs out to the hallway and draped them over a patio lounging chair which was propped on its side. It took a while to mop up three buckets of water, but she did it, and though it probably was not going to last too long, it was good enough for now. She gathered enough energy to throw herself on the bed. Now to sleep.....

"What was that..?" She sat up and listened attentively. She was sure there was a banging sound coming from inside the house. There it was again!

"I'd better..(yawn).. check...(yawn)... that..(yawn)..!" Oma slowly dragged herself out of the bed; except for the flickering vigil candle, it was completely dark. She reached for the big flashlight from the night table and carefully made her way to the stairway. There was no debris on the stairs that she could see with the flashlight. She wondered if the flapping shade would tear off. All around her was the tremendous turbulence that only a cyclone can create. Hours and hours of it. Never ending. Thank God that the hurricane was passing to the south, behind the house. She continued cautiously up the stairs.

"This is absolutely incredible!" Oma exclaimed. She stood there staring at the livingroom door, half of the double door was standing wide open. "Didn't I lock this door behind me? What is it doing open! I can just imagine the mess inside!!" Much to her surprise everything was in order! She forgot for a moment that there was a hurricane in progress, because according to the scene in front of her, it could have been an ordinary day. She peered around with the light.

"Everything is in place! Who will believe me?"

The banging was not from the door. No, there it was again! It was one of the kitchen shutters banging back and forth. She did not latch it properly was all she could think about. Oma stretched and stretched to grab the shutter, which always managed to be out of reach. With that taken care of, she went back to bed and actually slept.

10. The Day After

On Nov. 18th, the fury of Hurricane Lenny began to lessen. It lasted twelve hours, but it took another five hours to pass St. Croix completely.

"It doesn't look too good out there," said Oma, when finally there was enough daylight to see what she could see. "Did I land somewhere else.?" The damage to trees and plants was quite visible. "Not a leaf, not a flower." A sad sight indeed.

It was still very windy with strong gusts at intervals, as well as squalls. LENNY was moving away, but it was so big that it would be felt for days. As the day wore on Oma ventured out. She took pictures of what was left of the once beautiful garden. The young trees were all lying flat. Thirteen Hibiscus plants would need straightening.

"Rather the garden than the house." She had to smile at Lenny's masterpiece. The indoor walls on the stairwell and porch were plastered with every leaf from her garden and who knows from where else. Wall-papering with fresh leaves!

At 6:30 p.m. that evening, while trying to straighten up the Hibiscus plants near the patio, she felt something move quickly across her left foot. It was a long, brown centipede! She shuddered. At that moment she heard her niece next door call out the welcome news.

"We have electricity!" Not bad, only 16+ hours without it. "That's great!" She called back, "There's a lot of cleaning up to do!" It would be a long time before Oma could sit and put her feet up, "Ah, to relax some day....."

It seemed like an impossible dream. Sooner or later, though, she knew that all would be back to normal and with Opa's help when he returned, they would get the place back to its former beauty and comfort. In the meanwhile, and in between time, Opa was battling a snowstorm in Zurich, Switzerland on the way back from Spain.

Conclusion

"Hurricane LENNY, I hope you don't turn around and come back! Oh, please, don't!" cried Oma, she'd heard on the radio that "*it is quite possible that Hurricane Lenny could turn back from east to west....*" Oma turned off the radio. "Oh, be quiet!"



The population was warned to be on alert and keep shutters closed for a few more days until LENNY was out of the region, for good. Oma spent long hours trying to save as many trees and plants as she could. If it was not done as soon as possible, there was the risk of losing them. She needed the extra energy to straighten up the Flamboyant Tree, which is now in the "Columbus Circle" of the little park in the lower garden (see photo). It is a very big tree today with great, strong branches to climb, and with beautiful flowers to enjoy for three months of the year.

Thirteen years later, Oma breathes a sigh of relief when another hurricane season passes safely by. But to be extra sure that she knows well in advance of an on-coming storm and would like to notify Crucians and relatives and friends near and far, she joined the Caribbean Hurricane Network as a Special Hurricane Correspondent and sends in updates, from June to November, on weather-related conditions on St. Croix; these updates from all the islands can be read on www.stormcarib.com

Before, during, and after Hurricane LENNY, many concerned relatives and friends from all over the world, logged on to find out how St. Croix fared. That's where Oma's job of informing them would be

very important. She would write about the conditions as far as she could see and of what was reported on the local news, government updates, and try to help the worried folks as much as is possible.

Since Nature has it's own mind, it is very important to be informed at all times, especially when a tropical storm or a hurricane is in the region.

It is good to always, "Keep an eye to the weather!"

-----End

(Revised in November 2012)

In the meanwhile, Daniel (13 yrs.old) has grown to almost 6 ft. and is active in a competitive swim team with hopes of going to the Olympics in Brazil.

Catty and Prinz have gone ahead to Rainbow Bridge "where pets run and play" and wait for their beloved families to arrive.