

Tragedy at Love Creek

A PERSONAL ACCOUNT by CLARISSA L. BLOUNT

In January of this year the rains came to Santa Cruz, causing floods and mudslides that claimed ten lives. Clarissa Blount lived through the disaster, but found her life changed utterly. Following is her first person account of that harrowing ordeal.

The day began like other days with Ming—my little black poodle—deciding when to wake us up. She had a built-in time clock which said that a quarter to seven was getting-up time. I used to wish she would sleep upstairs with me, but she did not like the stairs so she slept very warmly and comfortably in her basket with blankets and a golden New Zealand sheepskin to nestle into, in the downstairs bathroom.

She would scratch a little on the door and then set up a little cry and so I had to get out of bed—sleepy or no. This morning

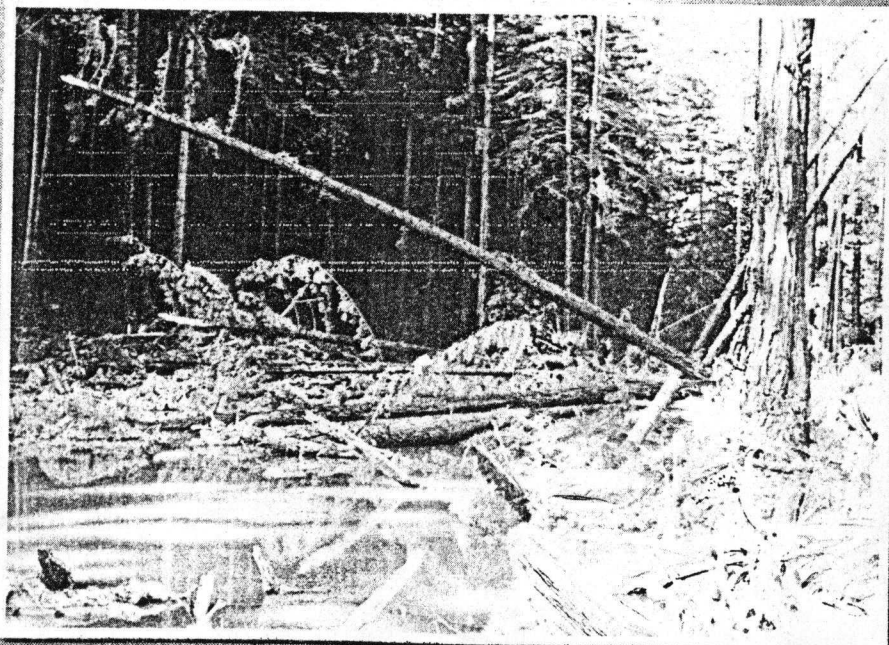


PHOTO BY GLENN KELLER

Most of the life of the

all the way down the stairs I was telling her, "Ming, it's pouring with rain—you won't like it," but she just rushed around me and when she ran out onto the soaking wet deck, I noticed the huge river of water pouring down Woodland Road.

Usually I did not call my daughter Vonna (and Gene Rumrill, who lived with her) until later, as young people like to sleep, but this looked very bad. So I called and Karen Wallingford, the student who stayed with them, answered. I told her about the river of water, but she was quite cheerful and said it was not hurting her car. I said I was worried about Gene's van which was down at the corner of Love Creek. I kept watching the relentless pouring of water and finally called again. Luckily Vonna was awake and realized it was worse than they had imagined.

Then Vonna, Gene and Karen went out and pushed Gene's van down Love Creek Road to safety . . . they thought.

Back they came to me, all dripping and smiling. They brought me pieces of wood for my Schaefer fireplace. "It's soaking wet," they said. But I had some paper and light wood and they stood laughing and dripping on the doorstep until my fire was going well.

Ming and I settled down together on a big chair, Ming to sleep and I to do some needlepoint—another unicorn. Julie, my other daughter, and Vonna and I all had this special thing about unicorns, and when I was in Scotland I thought I had discovered why—they were in our Scottish blood and were on all the royal signs and on Holyrood Castle.

*All this time
the creek roared
loudly and looked
ferocious. Vonna
came by and said
Love Creek Road
was gone.*

All this time the creek was roaring loudly and looked ferocious. Vonna came by again and said Love Creek Road was gone, but that Julie, who lived on the Saratoga side of the mountain, was cooking chicken and all kinds of goodies for us and was going to bring them as far as the road lasted. Vonna and Gene would go down and meet her.

Julie also wanted to take us all to her home, but at that time we were warm and safe. Nobody could have guessed.

As the day progressed, Vonna and Gene and sometimes Karen would come down to see me and give me news. They told Julie not to come until the next day as there was no road now. The power and water were out, and the phone was next to go. But my darling Vonna and Gene kept coming down to see me.

*While it
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my beautiful grand—
and sang.*

While it was still light I played the piano—my beautiful grand—and sang. There was my book of recitatives and solos from the *Messiah* which I had sung often when I was young.

So I started off, "There were shepherds abiding in the field keeping watch over their sheep by night"—right on through "Rejoice and Come Unto Him." Then suddenly it was too dark and I collected all the candles and oil lamps and set them on the dining table. I saw lights in Vonna's house too.

My neighbors across the driveway seemed to have bright lights and I heard later that they had a generator and perhaps that's why Pat Nelson and her son Mark were there. Then I saw some lamp light up at Lorraine Leatham's home, opposite mine on the other side of the road. So I felt fine with Lorraine's and Vonna's and my lamps and candles. Vonna and Gene kept appearing at odd hours all evening, but with flashlights now.

All my beautiful colored lights from around the deck and my lovely green Christmas tree from Crest Ranch out on the middle of the deck with blue balls and twinkly lights were all dark now. I had a beautiful indoor Christmas tree too, with all my Christmas presents unwrapped all around it waiting for Twelfth Night.

I had been so happy with my new deck that I had decided to have an outdoor tree right out in the middle of it this Christmas so that all the neighbors could enjoy it and all the people who went up and down Woodland Road. A little boy, Kelly, used to stop and talk to me. He told me he really liked my outdoor tree and lights but then

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his big blue eyes opened wide and he said very seriously, "But I haven't seen your indoor tree."

"Would you like to come now and look?"

"Yes," he said eagerly, and ran across the drive. We took hands and went inside to see it. "Oh," he breathed, "it's beautiful and you have all the lights on in the daytime!"

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I sent him home with the promise that all the lights would stay on until Twelfth Night.

"I can't resist it," I said. We loved it together and I sent him home with the promise that all the lights would stay on until Twelfth Night. He was a cute little boy and always talked to me, so now I know he walks with God and will always have beautiful lights around him.

Vonna's last visit to me was between 9:30 and 10 p.m. and we kissed each other goodnight—her face was all wet and shiny and her eyes smiled at me as she said, "Mother, we are all safe now—the water is lessening and we can see Gene's van down on Love Creek. Karen's car is safe and so is yours, so we can all go to sleep. And remember we'll be watching just across the way."

My darling Vonna. "Be careful, Darling, walking up to the house," I said.

"Yes, Mom. Good night."

"God bless," I said.

I took a candle upstairs to my bedside table and blew out all the others and went to bed quite happily about 11 p.m. After my light was out, Vonna put hers out, and I snuggled down under the covers and went straight to sleep.

That was the end of life as we knew it—of families who lived near each other in the most beautiful valley with wonderful redwood trees (some of mine tremendous), with huge old oaks, with madrones and bay trees, firs and laurels, hazelnuts and manzanitas and so many more. All had been there forever it seemed and would be there forevermore.

It may have been midnight when I woke to a tremendous crash and I knew it was one of the big redwoods behind my home about thirty feet higher up, near the

road and between Vonna and me. I was thrown out of bed and when I came to I was on a little ledge of roofing high up on a big redwood tree and down near the roaring creek. There was utter darkness and the rain was falling on me. My legs were pinned together under a piece of wood. I could not move at all.

I am always complaining about my silly little nails that break and are so helpless, but that night they did the right thing. As I hung onto a piece of cloth that was caught in the tree with my left hand, my right fingers pulled little slivers of wood off the board that had me pinned, until my left toes were free. Then I set to work on the wood around my right knee. I have no idea how long it took but finally my legs were free and I was very proud of God and me managing together.

Then I turned over and to my horror discovered I was on a small ledge of roofing. My knees were nearly up to my chin and part of my back was on a piece of board, I think, but I could not lie down. My left side was protected by a branch of the tree and I could hang on there with my left hand, but my right side was being rained on and it was very cold. Worse still, when I put my right hand down on my sore thigh I found that there was nothing beneath it.

Two beautiful stars came out and I was so happy because I knew that when the stars got low in the sky it would soon be morning.

Luckily the rain stopped. Two beautiful stars came out and I was so happy because I knew that when the stars got low in the sky it would soon be morning.

So now I had to think about living until help came, so I began to sing. For one thing I had to stay awake so that I would not fall off the tree, and for another, I love to sing—it comforts me. The words and music were already in my mind—"There were shepherds abiding in the fields keeping watch over their sheep by night." So I sang all the recitatives and started "Rejoice" but that was too much for me. By now I was shaky

with cold and a shaky "Rejoice Greatly" sounds very funny—it made me giggle. After that I didn't bother with real songs, but just made them up about the stars and when they got low in the sky it would soon be morning and someone would find me. I didn't know then about Karen, but she could hear my voice some of the time, she told me later.

*Morning
took forever to come
and my voice was
getting very wobbly,
but slowly the stars
seemed to be getting
lower.*

Morning took forever to come and my voice was getting very wobbly, but slowly, slowly the stars seemed to be getting lower. It was very cold and I had no space to move and I would rub my right thigh with my right hand and then hold onto the piece of cloth with that hand and rub my left side with my left hand. It sounds a little complicated, but it gave me something to do—and it was very, very cold up there. I just kept telling myself—singing it, in fact—"Morning is coming and will soon be here!"

And there it was at last, the day was coming. It was 7 a.m.—my watch was still going. I forgot all the discomfort and the cold and the charley horses in my legs and sang out loud, "Morning, beautiful morning!" I sang for help, but all was still and very quiet except for the little junkos. I watched the minutes go by still calling now and again, but now I knew—I knew there was nobody. By 8:30 I knew that somehow I had to get off that tree and find Vonna. She and Gene must be trapped. The branches of the tree hid everything to the left of me. Straight down to the right, about thirty feet down there were broken trees and sharp palings. The roaring creek was just ahead of me.

For the first time I was frightened because I had to get down to find Vonna. By now I knew there was no hope of help, and there was an eerie silence. There was a tiny space in front of my bent legs and I could see some ground and a piece of wood and a torn square of insulation. Should I jump? All my life, since I was a little girl, I loved to climb but I hated to come down. I was afraid to. So now I had

to jump. Now I knew Vonna and Gene were trapped or they would have found me. Perhaps one of the three redwoods that fell on me fell on them too. Oh no, not my beautiful Vonna!—no God, not Vonna and Gene and Karen.

Then just as I was preparing to fall off the tree somehow, there beside my right hand was a piece of wood—I hadn't even seen it before, but now God showed it to me. It was a plank maybe six inches wide. Inch by inch I moved it over the edge of the tree. It had to go straight down or it would be lost, so I was very careful. Gently and patiently, I let it down. It's hard to believe, but it was just long enough to get to the ground and rest on the end of the tree.

Now I knew I could do it. My soaking wet unicorn cushion was at the ledge by my foot and I eased it up and set it on the branch. Then I pulled my legs out and hoped the branch would hold me. I moved slowly on to the cushion and then slid down the plank. Oh what a wonderment! But then I lost all my courage because my leg was smashed. I couldn't stand up, let alone walk. I was not singing now, I was crying. I had to get to Vonna.

Well, I could crawl. So I crawled on my hands and knees over broken trees and boards. Then I saw the revolving clothes line which I knew was near the bottom of Vonna's land. I began clutching at pieces of branches and sticks and I kept crying, "Vonna! Vonna! God, not my Vonna!"

Sometimes the broken trees were big and I couldn't crawl over them, but I'd throw my body over and go again. At last I was there at Vonna's patio near the stone barbecue. Then I knew why there was no sound, no help. There was no mountain-side. There were no trees. No houses. . . no houses at all. . . no Vonna's house. I dragged myself onto the redwood chair and started calling their names: "Vonna! Gene! Karen!"

*Unbelieving
I looked and could
not understand. No
thing in all my life
had prepared me
for this.*

Unbelieving, I looked and could not understand. Nothing in all my life had prepared me for this. No mountainside where gnarled madrones had forked their

way through tall straight oaks and firs. And oh, my beloved redwoods towering to the sky. All gone. All broken. Utter incredible silence.

I called your name, Vonna my darling and Gene. Vonna. Gene. I called.

Then a small sound, a voice that answered me beneath the rubble. And there stood a young woman dressed in blue. Was she real? "I came to see the creek," she said. And then she ran for help.

It was cold—so cold. And then Bill Dekking, a friend of Vonna and Gene's, came crashing through the broken trees. He wrapped his jacket round me and hugged me and I told him there was a sound.

He started calling for Vonna, Gene, and Karen, but nothing now. "Are you sure you heard a sound?"

"Yes, I did—I heard something."

"Point to where you heard the sound," he said.

*"It's Karen
and she's alive and
we'll get her out!"*

I pointed and he clambered over the mess and debris and trees and boards and shouted out to me, "It's Karen and she's alive and we'll get her out." He hugged me again and said "We'll find Vonna and Gene, too."

And the young woman in blue came back with lots of men with ropes and with chain saws, and Bill showed them where Karen was. She thought she had lost an arm because she couldn't feel it, but it was crushed and the nerves were injured. And there were the firemen with a stretcher, but they carried her out of the ruins on a door and then carefully transferred her to the stretcher and tied her on and placed pads under her head where she hurt. I spoke to her but I don't think she knew I was there. Her head and neck hurt and those firemen were so good and so careful with her. Another man wrapped his jacket around me, too, as I was very cold in my wet and bloody nightgown. And the young woman in blue took off her little jacket and wrapped it around my feet... so kind everyone.

Bill said good-bye and promised to be back for me as soon as they had Karen out of the danger area. The firemen were waiting for another stretcher for me, but I wanted to wait for Vonna and Gene. They told me they had found them, but couldn't

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get them out yet. I felt they were saying that so I would go, because they were not using the chain saws. I feared the worst, but tried to believe—after all, Karen was alive and I was alive.

There were six firemen carrying me and they were so wonderful. They had to lift me over huge fallen trees and sometimes underneath others that were so low that they had to get down on their knees.

Whenever they set me down to have a little rest, one of them would massage my bare, cold feet, and they were so funny. "Don't massage the skin off her feet," they would say, trying to make me laugh. They wouldn't let me close my eyes. "You must not go to sleep," they told me, "so we will tell you jokes. They may not be very funny, but you have to laugh." So I tried to laugh and after we had all got safely over the bridge we were very happy and had a good rest on the other side.

Then we had a very difficult trip down Vineland, because there were mud slides and waterfalls and no one had extra breath to tell jokes. They were all magnificent young men and I'm old enough to say that I love them all.

The ambulance was waiting and soon I had oxygen attachments. They asked where I wanted to go. I said my doctor Colin Mackenzie went to Dominican, and they took me there.

As I lay on the hospital bed in the emergency room all I wanted was my daughter Julie—she would love me and comfort me and she would find Vonna and Gene. Sister Mary Margaret came almost at once and I told her how to get Julie. She tried and tried and so did Sister Anne (I think). Still they could not get through to her—she lived on the Saratoga side of the mountain and phones were all mixed up and not working at all in some places.

The nurses cleaned me up a little and the doctor stitched my legs in a couple of places and I had x-rays and still no Julie. Then I began to be afraid for her—not both my darlings—we were very close and loved each other so much. Ever since my husband died we had tried to grow up together and somehow it had worked. Apart from loving each other we had really liked and respected each other.

So I fretted, and when the nurses (so kind and sweet) asked me if I needed anything, I said "My comb please" because my hair was full of redwood burrs and pieces.

They looked at each other and said, "Of course, we'll get you one."

It was then I realized that I had nothing—I suppose for the first time in my

life. But it didn't seem to matter. All I wanted was Vonna, Gene, Julie, and her friend Casey.

At last Sister Mary Margaret came back with good news. They had contacted a ham radio man and he connected with another one in San Jose and they managed to get through to Julie. They told her I was at Dominican Hospital, but she knew nothing else of course. She thought I had walked out on the wet deck to get wood and had sprained an ankle or something. She collected all the food she had been cooking for all of us and came over as fast as she could.

But now I had to tell Julie that they had not found Vonna and Gene and we were desolate together as she had not even imagined that an unbelievable tragedy had occurred. I had seen it, but still could not believe it.

While Julie was filling out forms for the hospital personnel, Casey phoned and heard the worst from me—that so far they hadn't found Vonna and Gene. He was devastated and said he'd be right over to help look.

My darling Julie was up there right up to the last day, when the heavy equipment had to be taken out because geologists said the earth was still moving. Julie was sure she knew where they were because she knew every room in the house. And they found them—Gene had his arms around Vonna, and they must have gone together immediately. The mountainside must have fallen on top of them, because there was no mud and Vonna's dog, Snuggles, was dead lying beside them.

Some bodies were never found including that of my little friend Kelly and his brother Trevor, but I'm sure our Lord will take great care of them—He always loved children.

Julie and I know we have to live with memories and we try to be brave with each other because we know Vonna and Gene are already looking for woodlands and wildlands and all the wonderful creatures and flora of the wild and they will be very happy together and will be sending us loving messages all the while. We just have to listen and try to do the right things here. Karen and all their students must listen too and learn the best way to keep our world together here.

I know that all those who loved Vonna and Gene are already listening and thinking and planning, and all of us will begin to love in a new and beautiful way, because of their great love.