Episode 150: Tara's only option was the attic

Have you ever been in a situation and had the thought, "I actually might die here today"?

We recently observed the anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and I learned about a woman named Linda Gronlund, from New York. She was an attorney, an accomplished sailor and scuba diver, a certified EMT, and she held a brown belt in karate.

On September 11, 2001, Linda was on United flight 93. The plane had been hijacked, and the passengers knew that two other planes had already been flown into the twin towers in New York. Before the plane went down, she called her younger sister, Elsa and left this message.

Linda
Elsa, it's Lin. I only have a minute. I'm on United 93 and it's been hijacked by terrorists who say they have a bomb. Apparently they have flown a couple of planes into the World Trade Center already and it looks like they're going to take this one down as well. Mostly, I just wanted to say I love you, and I'm going to miss you. Please give my love to mom. Mostly, I just love you and I just wanted to tell you that. I don't know if I'm going to be able to tell you that again or not. All my stuff is in the safe. The safe is in my closet in my bedroom. The combination is T for clear, and then 0913, and then it maybe pound, and then it should unlock. I love you and I hope I can talk to you soon. Bye.

Scott
Sadly, none of the people on that flight survived when it crashed into a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

The average person alive today has probably not been in a situation like that, where death could happen at any moment. But you're about to hear from someone who has.

Tara was at home with her wife, Catherine, and their 6 year old daughter, Hazel. They also had 5 dogs. They all survived, including the dogs, but as it was happening they didn't know what the outcome would be. What they feared was drowning. Because a category 5 hurricane was coming, and their home was on an island in the Bahamas.

Scott
You were born and raised in the Bahamas. Have you had experience with hurricanes before? I assume you must have.

Tara
I've had experience with hurricanes my entire life. My parents have had experience with hurricanes their entire lives. Grandparents. It's just the thing when you live in the Bahamas - you deal with hurricanes.

Scott
It's part of life.

Tara
Yeah. It's part of life.

Scott
But this time you kind of topped your previous experience.

Tara
Tenfold.

Scott
Can you describe your family at the time when this happened? Who was in your family?

Tara
It was myself, my wife, Catherine, and our 6-year-old daughter, Hazel, and we had 5 dogs.

Scott
Five dogs. I know my listeners' ears perk up just thinking, "Oh, hey, five dogs!" What kind of dogs were they?

Tara
We had four dachshunds - sausage dogs. Then, we had one medium-sized dog. In the Bahamas, we refer to mutts as potcakes. So we had a husky-potcake mix kind of dog.

Scott
All right. How was your house constructed at the time?

Tara
We had a concrete block home in the Bahamas. That's generally the way to go if you can afford to do so. You build a concrete block home with a wooden roof, metal shingle construction, elevated - because we were near the water - nice, solid hurricane-proof windows - the best ones on the market that are supposed to stand up to 150 miles an hour of wind. All built for hurricanes.

Scott
Really, you had everything in place. You did everything you could in advance preparation. Before this happened, were you ever nervous or apprehensive about hurricanes or it's just something that happens?

Tara
No, you're always nervous and apprehensive about hurricanes because you know that they can cause severe damage. It's always nervous. Whenever there's one coming, you prepare, you get ready, you do everything you can, you're guaranteed something's going to get wrecked and you're prepared to deal with the aftermath.

Scott
Well, I know hurricane season for the Atlantic starts June 1. What are your standard practices at that time to prepare specifically for the upcoming months?

Tara
June 1 is a normal summer in the Bahamas. We rarely see severe storms in June and July. We'll get a tropical storm. It blows through in a day. The kids are out of school. You clean up your yard and that's it. It's a non-event. It's not till August, September, and October that you really start to pay attention and start to worry about it.

Scott
When you know one is coming, do you go to the store and find that the shelves are empty from the water and stuff like that? I mean, that's what happens here in Florida.

Tara
Yes. If you wait until the last minute, if you try to go to a grocery store or hardware store 24 hours before we're expected to start having wind, you're out of everything and you're out of luck. So we always would prepare three days ahead at the very least so that we weren't stuck in lines or didn't have the things that we wanted to have.

Scott
How far in advance did you know that Hurricane Dorian was going to be a really big one?

Tara
I'd say about five or six days out. At that point, it was, “Oh, wow. This is strong. This is, like, a category 4 now.” Then, their forecast is saying it's going to be a 5. That's pretty bad. 5 is as high as it goes. At that point, it's still way out there. Like, 5 days out, those spaghetti models that you see all over the TV, they're all over the place. So you're just kind of watching and hoping that it's going to turn or move, or that spaghetti model that says it's going to stay out to sea, that's the right one.

Scott
Yeah, everyone hopes, right?

Tara
Everyone hopes.

Scott
Do some people actually evacuate the islands when they see something like that coming?

Tara
Yes. A lot of expats, foreigners, second homeowners, a lot of those folks will leave in the three days ahead. They'll get on a flight and get out.

Scott
You got word that Dorian was bound for your location and was still really big. What was your plan in, like, the few days in advance of that?

Tara
A few days in advance of that, we started with, “Okay, groceries. Let's stock up on the things that we need to have. Let's make sure we've got the water we need. Let's get the car filled up with gas. Let's get the jugs for the generator filled up with gas for after the storm. Let’s start thinking about where we're going to put our patio furniture and move our potted plants.”

Scott
As Dorian approached, were you more concerned about the wind or the possibility of water rising?

Tara
We were worried about the wind. The wind was always the fear. With hurricanes, in general, the wind is always the fear, unless you live on the beach. If you live on the beach, that's an entirely

different experience. Most Bahamians do not build their houses on the beach because of that reason.

Scott
Tell us about what happened when it started. You pretty much saw that your preparations were all just pointless, right?

Tara
Before it hit Grand Bahama Island and Freeport where we were, it hit the island of Abaco, which is about a hundred miles away. The storm was moving exceptionally slowly. It's barely moving forward at 2-3 miles per hour - max 4 miles per hour, which is a very bad thing. The longer it takes to go through, the more damage there is. So it kind of went through Abaco. There were Facebook videos and images and stories, and they didn't lose cellular signal, which has never happened before in a storm. When you have a storm, you lose cell signal and no one knows what's going on until after. This time, there were videos of people as the roof was pulled off the house in Abaco, there was a lot of water, the whole town was flooded, and people and cars floating by. So the images were terrifying at that point, but we were already at a point of, “Okay, we're hunkered down. We're ready for it. Can we make a big change now? Is that what are we going to do? We've got five dogs. Where are we going to go?”

Scott
So it hit Abaco first. And did you know, based on its speed, how much time did you have before it would get to you?

Tara
We knew we had a good 12 hours before it got bad - like, the wind would start before that. We had already started to have tropical storm force winds when it was over Abaco, but it was at the speed that was moving for us to have really bad wind. When I say really bad, I mean, like, 100 miles per hour. It was going to be a few hours before we got there. We're already hunkered down. It's late in the afternoon. There are no shelters on the island that would take us with 5 dogs. It would mean leaving our five dogs behind - not an option. Never was going to be an option. We were just kind of focused on the positive. We're okay. We're safe. We've had hurricanes in this house before. We had Hurricane Matthew 3 years before. We were fine. Okay. We're going to be fine. We're going to stay here.

Scott
Looking back on it now, can you evaluate how much of that was realistic thinking versus how much was optimistic thinking?

Tara
It was probably 50-50. 50 percent of it was, I'm just going to talk myself into the fact that we're going to be okay while I'm actually terrified. Then, 50 percent of it was actually logical. The logistics of Abaco, how high the Island is, the way that the island's positioned along the edge of the Atlantic Ocean versus the way that Grand Bahama sits on a bank, all of those things come into play with the way a hurricane would interact with the land and what we could expect as far as weather.

Scott
Take us from the time the storm surge came into your home. When did you first see that?

Tara

We started having hurricane-force winds at 10.30, August 31st, 2019. We went to bed listening to the storm. We got up a few times as the night wore on and checked that every three-hour update. What's it doing? Where's it going? Is it slowing down? Is it going to make that turn that we're desperately wanting so that we don't get the worst of it? We got up around 4 o'clock and looked outside and our entire backyard, our entire street was underwater. We had been up 3 hours before and everything was fine. At four o'clock in the morning, we were already surrounded by water.

Scott
That also means you're kind of cut off from any help too.

Tara
Yeah. At that point, we're already past help. There's no one that can help with that kind of wind and that kind of water without endangering themselves.

Scott
At that point, were there any agencies or people offering or being able to rescue anyone anyway?

Tara
No, there's nothing. You were stuck. You were on your own. Whatever decision you have made about where you're going to be at that point, that's it till it's done. When it first started to come into the house, for me, it was sort of, “Okay, we're going to have water in the house. We're going to have ankle-deep water. That's really annoying. We're going to have house repairs. Okay. Let's see what we can save. Let's get these photo albums up onto the highest shelf we can in the house and make sure they're safe. Let's try using some sandbags to kind of slow some of the water coming into the house.” At that point, we're not in peril danger yet. It's more, like, things are going to get broken. We're going to have to make repairs.

Scott
At what point did it cross over to the feeling that you were in danger?

Tara
Within an hour. Within an hour of the water first coming into the house, it had risen another three or four inches. It was rising really fast and then the whole house had water in it. Then, the sewage system started backing up. Then, the house was not pleasant to be in for smell or anything else. Then, it was, “Oh shit, we're in a lot of trouble now. What's going to happen if the water doesn't stop?”

Scott
You had mentioned - what you sent me - that fear of drowning outweighed logical thought. Can you elaborate on that?

Tara
At the time, I thought everything that I was thinking was logical. The ability to look back on it now, in hindsight, and realize that it was not logical has come from years of talk therapy. At the time, I thought every decision we were making was absolutely thought out clearly - the pros and cons, the consequences of our decision. We were pushing through and we were going to be okay, even though we were terrified. At the time, I thought it was completely logical - all the decisions that we were making.

Scott
And then, you made a decision that was not logical, looking back on it.

Tara
Looking back on it, it's not logical now. The water kept rising. We got to a point where we were sitting on top of our kitchen countertops, trying to stay dry. We had our 6-year-old and three of the dogs bundled in wet blankets on our kitchen island. Once the water reached the top of the countertops, it started to be, “Are we going to drown inside of our house? The water's not stopping. We're going to run out of breathing room. We have to get out of this house. We're going to drown.” And then it was, “If the water reaches a certain height so that all of our windows and doors are underwater, there's going to be a pressure difference between the inside and the outside. What if we can't get the windows open? What if we can't get the door open?” That's when the tunnel vision and the fear, fight or flight, not logical thought kicked in, “We have to get out of the house right now.”

Scott
So you're in your cement block house and you made the decision to leave the house. As I think about this, my dogs won't go out to pee when it's raining. Can you describe the process of how you get five dogs to leave the relative safety of the house when there's a hurricane outside?

Tara
The blessing was that four of them were really little, so all four of our dachshunds were 10-11 pounds, so you can manhandle that. Our mutt-potcake mix is 50 pounds and is not nearly as easy to manhandle.

Scott
So how did you do that?

Tara
We all went out through a bedroom window that we were able to open. We shoved floating things and everything we thought that we needed to be okay outside, including some things to stay together. We used extension cords to tie ourselves together so that we couldn't float away from each other. We had a floating mattress that we kind of pushed out of a window. Then, we kind of just - one-by-one procession - get one dog out, get the next dog out, and throw them on top of the mattress, which basically was a raft, not a very good raft because it was sitting two or three inches below the water, but it was floating. Getting our larger dog out was not easy.

I mean, I was on the outside. My wife, Catherine was on the inside. She's pushing, I'm pulling. The dog was fighting because the dog had a better idea of how stupid the idea was than we did. Finally, we were able to get her out of the window.

Scott
Did you all have life jackets?

Tara
No life jackets. We didn't own a boat. We didn't need life jackets. We were four feet elevated from ground level. The water was never going to get that high. The water has never gotten that high before.

Scott
So did you all fit on the floating things or were you in the water?

Tara
We were in the water. We had our daughter with a pool float around her waist as her life jacket and the five dogs were on the mattress. Catherine and I were treading water, floating, and holding onto patio furniture that was really not floating, but it was not sinking.

Scott
And how were the dogs handling this? Obviously, they must have been stressed out, but what were they doing?

Tara
Very stressed out. They were not holding still, obviously, crawling back and forth across the mattress, falling off, having to be retrieved, falling off again, and swimming in the wrong direction, and having to be retrieved. It was a constant battle of keeping everyone's head above water.

Scott
How long were you outside?

Tara
It felt like hours. It felt like hours of fighting the waves and the wind, keeping together, not losing the dogs, and our daughter screaming at the top of her lungs. We were outside for 30 minutes - the longest 30 minutes of my life.

Scott
Did Hazel, your daughter, object to going outside at all? Or she's just, “Hey, the grownups know what they're doing.”?

Tara
“The grownups know what they're doing” until we got outside.

Scott
Yeah, kids have to trust their parents, obviously. Did you see any other people while you were outside?

Tara
No. Our closest neighbor was 600 feet away. They had a second story to their house. We did not. We had a ranch single story. At one point, we considered swimming or trying to swim to the neighbor's house with their second story. We decided really quickly that either we would get separated or we would all drown if we tried to swim it. Even, I mean, our daughter was a really good swimmer at six years old. She could dive in a scuba diving pool down 12 feet at six years old. She was a really good swimmer. There was no way we were going to fight the wind and the waves to get to that house without drowning.

Scott
What made you decide to finally say, “Okay, we've got to go back in the house?”

Tara
I went under more than once. I couldn't keep my head up. I couldn't keep checking on the dogs. I couldn't make sure that Hazel was stable. I couldn't make sure that my wife was okay. I went under and inhaled salt water more than once. The second time that I came up, I just looked at

Catherine and said, “We have to go back in.” When we went back in, we had about 3-4 feet still of breathing space. The ceiling was 9 feet high. So water height would have been about 5-6 feet. You couldn't stand in there. You were still swimming inside the house. We had to dive back in. The window was underwater when we went back in. The window that we had decided to go out of was our master bedroom window and our master bed was floating. The bed was floating. The mattress and box springs were floating in the middle of the room. So when we got back in, it was, “Okay. That's where our daughter and the five dogs are going to go. That's their mattress. They're safer there for now until we figure it out.”

Catherine and I had to wait around inside the bedroom while we started to figure it out. The only option was the attic. If we stayed inside the house, we were fearful that - it was still the same fear - we're going to run out of breathing room, the water's going to get higher than the ceiling, and then we're going to drown. So the attic was the only option.

Scott
You guys must be exhausted at this point.

Tara
Yeah, completely exhausted going on full-out adrenaline for six hours at that point with no break, just adrenaline-fueled. I had, like, three bites of a dry piece of bread that I managed to not really swallow at one point that morning while the water was rising. No food, no water.

Scott
What's the access to the attic? How do you get there?

Tara
We had an attic ladder built into our master bedroom closet as part of the construction for if we're going to use that area as extra storage or if someone needs to fix something, they can get up there easily.

Scott
So this is just one of those things that's in the ceiling. You pull on a chain and a ladder comes down.

Tara
Yes. And we had that open actually. Whether it's an old wife's tail or an actual thing, we always grew up with, “If you have an attic, you need to open the attic so that the air can pass through and not create pressure in the attic and blow your roof off.” I have absolutely no idea if that's a reasonable engineering thing or a Bahamas thing, but we always open our attic when there's a storm. So the ladder was open, the ladder was down, ready for us. It would have been impossible if we hadn't opened that ahead of time to get in there.

Scott
What would have made it impossible? I mean, I know you'd be opening it down into the water.

Tara
Yeah. We would have had to wait until the water was high enough so that we were much closer to the ceiling to be able to reach to get it pulled down. Then, we would have had to fight with it without the ability to have our feet on solid ground to get it down and open for all of us to get in. We had packed what they call a bug-out bag with some food, clothes, and important documents in case you have to be evacuated, except there's no evacuation coming at this point. The bag

with the clothes was completely saturated and the documents inside the bag were completely saturated. It wasn't a waterproof bag. The food bag and cooler bags are waterproof - that had food in them - but all of those things were packed as the water was coming into the house. We never packed a bug-out bag ahead of time. We'd never needed one before. We'd never contemplated the idea of having to be evacuated.

Scott
Do you recall, as you were floating in your bedroom and thinking about what to do, what was the smell?

Tara
It was raw sewage - the smell in the house. Once the septic system had backed up from the flood, the inside of the house was pure sulfur. It was horrendous. It cuts your breath. If you took a deep breath, you'd cough because it was so strong.

Scott
And can you describe the noise level? I know the wind makes a lot of noise when there are such high winds just outside the window. Was it noisy inside the house?

Tara
The contrast between the outside and inside was a big difference. Outside it was really loud. We had to shout to each other to hear each other over the wind and the waves. When we came back in, suddenly it was quiet. I mean, yeah, you could still hear the wind and you could still hear the roof creaking and the waves knocking into the house, but we weren't shouting at each other to speak to each other inside of the house. Once we got the dogs and Hazel situated on the bed and we felt reasonably stable, we decided that Catherine was going to go retrieve these bags because we were going to have to go to the attic. That was our food. We wanted to make sure we had our important stuff. So she swam back to the kitchen to get those and bring them back to the master.

Scott
I know at some point during this, you asked Hazel how she was doing. What was her state of mind?

Tara
She was still crying, very upset, very distraught about having been outside. And now we're back inside and what are we going to do? It's dangerous. She's terrified and she asked me for her glasses, and I hadn't even realized she'd lost them.

Scott
Does she always wear glasses?

Tara
They were reasonably new. She had just gotten them that summer before and she was very proud of these glasses. She loved her glasses and they weren't on her face. We had to assume that she had lost them at some point either while we were outside or when we were trying to dive back into the house. They weren't floating, as far as I could tell in the debris in the bedroom. The lost glasses were just her 6-year-old way of expressing terror. She lost her mind because we couldn't find her glasses.

The dining room chairs made their way from our dining room on one side of the house to our master bedroom on the other side of the house with the water. So we were able to grab a couple of those and push them low enough in the water to stand on and our weight, if evenly distributed, kept the legs of the chair on the ground. So we were able to stop treading water and stand for a few minutes. It was that tiny bit that made my heart rate go down just a little so that I could try to start thinking clearly.

There's so much mixed in the water. Everything that had been on shelves had all floated off. Anything that had been inside of a drawer was floating because a piece of furniture had been upended because of the water. Once we got those chairs underneath us, I looked down and there was a red can of Coke floating next to me. I grabbed it and it was intact. I thought about it for half a second, “Well, should I drink this? It's been floating in sewage. Yeah. I don't think it matters at this point.” It's hot. It didn't come out of the refrigerator. It came out of a cupboard somewhere. I don't think I've ever tasted anything that good in my life. We all shared it around. Everybody had some of it. Hazel had more of it than Catherine and I did. It was the first sugar our body had seen in 4 hours at that point, or food of any kind.

Scott
So at this point, it looks like the attic was going to be the only option, but you were particularly terrified of that. What was your thinking?

Tara
I was still on the, “We're going to drown inside the house without any air. We're going to get our heads against the ceiling and we're going to run out of air.” For me, we can't get out of the attic. There's no door or windows. There's no exterior access. There's no tool to cut a hole in the metal sheet covered roof. If we go up there and the water keeps rising because it is still rising very quickly, we can't get out, but we didn't have any other option at that point. That was the last option to keep our heads above water, even if it was only buying us hours.

Scott
Now, I found it interesting that, at this point, you're considering that's your only option, but you also remember when you went outside that you thought that was a logical option and you proceeded, but it turned out to be a bad decision. You made a phone call.

Tara
Yeah. Like I said, we maintained cellular signal through the middle of a category 5 hurricane - never happened before. We had been keeping the cell phones inside plastic bags instead of Ziploc bags, so they were dry and they were working. So we took it out, turned it on, pressed the button, and FaceTime worked like normal. We phoned Catherine's sister, Charlotte, and her wife, who were our closest relatives. They were living in Connecticut. So we connected FaceTime from the Bahamas in our flooded house a thousand miles away to Connecticut.

Scott
I mean, they're sitting in their dry house. I mean, they knew about the hurricane. They probably were wondering how you guys were doing, right?

Tara
We had been in contact with them off and on as the water was rising, so they did know that we were in a bad situation.

Pattie

We had been FaceTiming with Catherine, Tara, and Hazel prior to the hurricane about preparations that were being done.

Scott
Catherine's sister-in-law, Pattie.

Patty
But then we got a call from Catherine saying that water was coming in through Hazel's bedroom walls. Yes, we were all alarmed and concerned. Then, next, we got another phone call that the water had reached their car and Hazel was sitting on the kitchen island with the dogs floating around on cushions.

Scott
They still must have been surprised to get that phone call, especially, not just a phone call, but a FaceTime call where they could see that you guys are floating in your bedroom with the water being that high already.

Tara
They told us after the fact that they'll never forget the look of terror on our faces.

Pattie
In the next phone call we got from them, Charlotte told them that they needed to go into their attic. Tara, who is usually calm and collected, was just beyond fear. The look in her eyes is something that I'll never forget. The fear of death was right there. She was realizing how dangerous things were at this point. They said they were going to shut off their phones and would call when they could.

Scott
The reason you were calling them was to just get other adult opinions. Like, is this really the best thing we should do?

Tara
Yeah, that's exactly what it was. We had been talking to them about what we were going to do, what was the plan, what should we do, and how are we going to be okay. After having made the decision to go outside and realize that it was such a bad decision, we needed someone else to tell us what to do, and they were in agreement. We were out of options. No one was going to be able to come for us. We didn't know how long it was going to be before it got better. If it got better, were we still going to drown? Was this the last time we were ever going to speak to them?

So with the decision made, we were going to go to the attic. We had to get to the attic. Now we have to get the three of us, five dogs, and the two bags into the attic with water too high to stand in and rising fast. Catherine went into the attic first, taking one bag. I followed her and took the other. We left Hazel and the five dogs on the bed, got everything up there and sort of figured out where we were. It's very dark. What are we going to sit on? There's cross bracing every two or three feet. It's not like an attic in New England where it's wide open in the middle and you just store stuff in it. It's an attic because it's the roof. The structure of the roof is holding it up. There's no floor. It's just beams of wood and then insulation and sheetrock holding it. So if you step between the two beams, you're going to go through.

Scott

And what was the height? I mean, you couldn't stand up obviously fully, right?

Tara
We could. Our roof and our attic were very tall, very big. It was a design feature that the architects that built the house decided was necessary for making sure that it was hurricane-proof and the design that we wanted it to look like from the outside and all those things. So it was very tall in the middle, but then it tapered off to all four sides. So if you were a few feet from the outside of the house, you would hit your head but, if you were standing in the middle, you had a lot of space. Catherine went up, I went up, and we got the bags up. I went back down and got two of the little dogs, and left Hazel with the other three.

And we're calling back and forth to each other as we're doing this, and she can see us. We're in the master closet, she's in the master bedroom. The only time she loses sight of us is when I go in the attic and we're calling down to her. “It's okay. We're coming.” This is what we're doing. Like word by word, minute by minute, helping her see us, even though we weren't there. I went up the ladder with a dog under each arm wiggling - not easy - gave them to Catherine, and went back down.

Scott
After going outside, your dogs may have some trust issues here, right?

Tara
They may have a little bit of trust issues. We wouldn't have managed any of it if we had five large dogs. It was having the smaller dogs that made it manageable. Once I got three of the little dogs upstairs, I got Hazel. I got Hazel off the bed, got her up the ladder, up to Catherine. We had two dogs left in the bedroom whining for us because there was no person there with them now. I couldn't get him the last little dog. I didn't know if he was asleep or he just was being stubborn or he was frightened, and I couldn't see him because the bed's floating above my head. So I was calling the dogs, not responding. I called the large dog. She comes to me. Great. So we swam to the ladder. Now I had to get the 50-pound dog to climb a ladder because I can't carry her up there. So a lot of pushing and Catherine pulling from the top. “Climb the ladder! Learn to climb the ladder right now!” And she did.

At that point, we had 24 inches, two feet of breathing space. The doorway between the master bedroom and master closet was rapidly disappearing, and I made the last trip to get the last dog. I had to go under the doorway, like hold my breath and go under the water to get back into the other room. Finally, I got him off the bed. He had to dive with me to go under the doorway and we all made it into the attic. It was really loud in the attic. Like, it was outside loud with every tree branch that hit the roof, every drop of rain that hit the roof, the wind pushing, and all of the wood creaking as it pushed.

Scott
It feels like at this time you may have gotten to a place where you're safe for the moment. You can relax a little bit. You have to stay on these cross beams. You can't just relax. How did you manage not going through the ceiling?

Tara
We had a couple of Rubbermaid containers. They were empty. They were just stored up there because we didn't have anywhere else to put them. We turned one of those upside down and kind of braced one side of each end on one of these beams to create a kind of like a bench. We had a cardboard box that used to have an oscillating fan and we spread that out between the

two beams. Once the cardboard's wet, it's not nearly stable anymore and we're soaking wet. We mashed down the air conditioner ducting. It's a big, square, silver ducting that you see in your attic from an air conditioner. We kind of sat on that and flattened that out.

Scott
There's probably less worry of Hazel stepping in between the beams and going through than the two of you as adults, right?

Tara
We were worried about the dogs, especially the big one. We can understand that we have to only walk on wood and we can explain that to our 6-year-old, but we're not going to explain it to the large dog who is not holding still and she's running back and forth exploring because, now, she feels safe. Thankfully, her weight wasn't enough to go through.

Packing the food bag was my job. Packing the clothes and the documents was Catherine's job. We did not consult each other on this process because we were running around in knee-deep water when we were doing it. When I opened our pantry to pack that bag, I was packing believing I was going somewhere that was safe and I was going to need food for the next couple of days. I wasn't packing for the situation. My brain wasn't functioning the way it should. When we opened the bag, we found we had uncooked rice. We had cans of food, but no can opener. We had a granola bar, a container of peanut butter, and a package of Ritz crackers.

Scott
Did Catherine have anything to say about your packing decisions?

Tara
It was a very brief “What are we going to do with this? I don't know. I wasn't thinking.”

Scott
So you had a little bit to eat, anyway.

Tara
We had a little bit to eat, so we shared one of the granola bars. We had some peanut butter and crackers, but we knew that food had to last. We didn't know how long that food had to last.

Scott
I think that would be part of the stress - not knowing when this is going to end or how it's going to end. It seems like that would always be on your mind, like, “When is this going to be over?”

Tara
Yeah. There's no timeframe to it. When we went into the attic, we lost all cellular signals. We had no access to information and couldn't talk to anybody. We were cut off. The last update we had about what the storm was doing said that it was crawling at barely a 1 mile per hour along the island, and it was possible that it might stop moving altogether. It was possible that it was going to make a sharp turn and head out to sea.

Scott
But at this point, you completely have no idea what it's doing because you have no idea, no information.

Tara

No, we had what it might do at 11.30 AM that morning, and that was it. Once we settled and started to have something to eat, we realized that we had no drinking water. Of course, the water in our house is saltwater mixed with sewage that's not drinkable. We realized that, in the rush to move things from the kitchen to the attic, the bags, we didn't bring water. I remembered where I put the water. I had put the water in a high cabinet in the kitchen because the water was at countertop height and it was going to float away. I put it in a cabinet in the kitchen. I thought briefly about going back for it - go back down the attic ladder and swim across the living room. 12 inches of breathing space gives me heart palpitations as I think about it.

Scott
I have no doubt that people are listening to this and getting those same feelings of stress, like, “No, don't do that.”

Tara
More decisions. Should I make this decision? No, this seems like a bad decision. I somehow concocted this idea that if I walked across the attic to the other side of the house where I knew the kitchen was, I could figure out where the cabinet was and then I could punch a hole in that sheetrock. You just punch a hole in it. If I stand on it, it's going to fall through. If I punch a hole, I can reach in and I can grab the water. That's what I'm going to do.

It didn't go as planned. Two of the dogs insisted on coming with me. I had Catherine and Hazel stay where they were because I felt that moving Hazel at that point wasn't the best decision and I wasn't convinced that one of us wasn't going to get knocked unconscious walking through the attic, hitting our head on a piece of wood somewhere. So I went to do this errand myself and two of the dogs decided they were going to join me. I misjudged where I needed to punch the hole. I misjudged how much force I needed to punch the hole with. I fell in. I fell through the ceiling. I was in the kitchen. I had the kitchen location and I had the location of where the cupboard that had the water was, but I misjudged how much force I needed to accomplish all of this. When I reached, I overreached and I fell head first. So, then, I found myself in the exact position I had been trying to avoid all along with water at the ceiling and 12 inches of breathing space.

I didn't stop. Okay, I got to get out of here. Let's get the water, put the water in the attic. Let's get this thing that's floating here. Yep. I need that. Let me throw that. Oh, look, there's a dog bowl to put water in for the dogs. I want that too. I threw that back through the hole. Then, I tried to pull myself back up into the attic and I couldn't. I didn't have the upper body strength to pull my weight and I fell and I got hurt again. I tried a few more times. I tried standing on the kitchen countertops and using the extra height to hoist myself. I tried pushing a piece of floating furniture, a chair onto the countertop, but that wouldn't go deep enough.

When the adrenaline and the fight-or-flight hit me, after how many hours still, my body was still producing adrenaline, I forced my arms up into the attic at a different angle, bruised my ribs, scraped my back, did whatever I had to do to get out of the kitchen and I was able to get back in the attic.

Scott
And the two dogs that were with you?

Tara

One had fallen in with me. Thankfully, it was the small one. I was able to push her back into the attic. The larger dog slipped, but didn't fall in. So everybody was back in the attic and we had the water that we needed.

Scott
Are all of you just soaking wet still at this point?

Tara
Yep. Everyone's still wet and shivering now because suddenly it's cold. The inside of the attic was so cold. We were, again, lucky. Lots of miracles in this story. We were lucky enough that there was a Rubbermaid container floating in our closet, full of winter clothes. Now, yes, we live in the Bahamas and we have actual winter clothes because we take vacation to go to the snow. When you live on the beach, you go to the snow for vacation.

Scott
It's like people that live in the snow go to the beach, right?

Tara
Exactly. It works both ways. We had a bin of dry winter clothes. When I was in the kitchen, I found a dry Ziploc bag that had one of Hazel's school uniforms in it. We all got dry clothes.

Scott
That's got to be an emotional lift just to be dry.

Tara
Yeah. Once we're dry and the shivering stopped - because of shock, not just temperature - once our bodies kind of came down from that really long adrenaline high, we were more comfortable.

Scott
Does your attic have any light coming into it or were you just in the dark up there?

Tara
The only light we had would have been every so many feet along the eaves which would have been like a vent for airflow. The water hadn't covered that over yet, so we had a little bit of light coming in there. It's still really dark, even in the middle of the day. Hurricanes got terrible cloud cover. Most of our windows are underwater below, so the amount of light coming from the attic ladder area is limited. We're just going to sit here and wait because there's nothing we can do.

Checking in on Hazel. She's got her little stuffed animal that she's been hanging onto for the entire time, saturated. She's sitting and she's rubbing the dogs, and the dogs are comforting everyone. We kind of shuffled around a couple of times because the sitting and sleeping arrangements weren't comfortable. They weren't very stable. Eventually, we managed to figure out how we were going to go about maybe getting some sleep.

We started to think about having our dinner which is, again, a couple of Ritz crackers and some peanut butter all before what would have been normally sunset. Because once the sun went, the tiny bit of light we had was gone. We couldn't move around. You couldn't see your hand an inch from your face.

Scott
Did you have a flashlight?

Tara
Thankfully we did. One of the things that were floating around in the bedroom that we happened to grab was a flashlight. But we were really concerned about the fact that it had been floating in saltwater. Saltwater corrodes instantly. So the fact that it was turning on was miraculous. We didn't expect it to last very long. So we would turn it on, have a quick look at whatever we need to see, “Where do I need to put my feet?”, and turn it off again trying to conserve the battery. The Rubbermaid bin that we had turned upside down to sit on, we turned right side up and Hazel crawled inside of it with a wet pillow. That's where she stayed for 12 hours.

I laid sort of haphazardly on the flattened ducting, which basically felt like if I moved too quickly, I was going to fall off it. Catherine was able to sit and kind of lay on the exterior concrete block wall of the house, which was visible in the attic. Concrete blocks, 8 inches - that was stable. That wasn't going anywhere. It's cement. So she sat on that with a couple of pillows, a kind of narrow space to sit. That's where we stayed. She was on that half of the house and I was quite a few feet away and then Hazel was perched another few feet away just because of the way the bracing was and where we could set up that was reasonably stable.

Scott
The other issue is bathroom use. Can you talk about how you figured that out?

Tara
We didn't have a random bucket. Would have been a lot easier if we had, for some reason, a bucket in our attic. Two of the dogs were moving around. They weren't holding still. They weren't settling. We were concerned that if we just picked a corner to use as a bathroom, the dogs were going to go over there and do what dogs do. Then, they were going to come back and want to crawl into our lap. We were reasonably clean and dry at that point. We were basically just hanging over the access to the attic that was full of water, our closet, and using that as a bathroom.

Scott
You never expect yourself to be in that position.

Tara
No, you really don't plan for that one.

Scott
And how high was the water at that point?

Tara
The water… we watched it inch up the ladder after we got into the attic. We'd check it every now and again and that was kind of what we were marking - the height of the attic ladder. “Okay, we lost another step. Okay, we lost another step. It stopped six inches from the attic access. The house was full of water. It was really dark and really loud. All you kept hearing was the roof creaking and you were waiting any second for the roof to pull off. I was waiting for a tornado or water spout to come through the middle of the hurricane and pull the entire roof off and take us with it. I just sat in the darkness, not able to reach out to Catherine because of the stability of where we were sitting. We'd talk to each other every now and again but it was, “Are you okay? Is Hazel okay? Is the dog okay?” We were still in survival. There's no conversation about, “Oh, I wonder what it looks like down there,” or “I wonder what we're going to do after.” It was just, “Please don't let the roof fall off.”

Scott
And that was kind of your mantra throughout the night, right? How did you use that mentally?

Tara
Mentally, it was the only thing I could focus on. There wasn't anything else. It was the blackness and “Please let the roof hold. Hold my breath. Listen to the wind. Please let the roof hold. Feel the wood that I'm leaning against cracking and moving with the wind. Please let the roof hold.” for the entire night.

Scott
Would you call that a prayer of sorts?

Tara
It wasn't spoken to anyone. It wasn't spoken to a Christian God or anyone else's preferred religious deity. It was just the same words over and over again. It wasn't praying to anyone specific. That was what my brain was focusing on - that hope.

Scott
So did you sleep at all?

Tara
I closed my eyes for 30 seconds at a time. As soon as my body would decide it was going to shut down, “I can't do it anymore. You have to sleep”, then something would hit the roof or the wind would pick up and it would howl, and the wooden bracing would creak and I could feel it moving against my back, and then I'd be awake again. Hazel slept for eight hours. She woke up at one point in the middle of the night, kind of screamed and called out, dreaming of what was actually happening, I'm sure. She settled pretty quickly. Catherine was able to reach out to her and kind of stroke her leg and, “It's okay, you can go back to sleep.” Catherine didn't sleep.

Scott
I'm thinking of being in your position. It almost seems like you could be a little bit envious of Hazel with her mindset. Hey, my moms are in charge. I'm not going to worry about anything. I can go to sleep. But you didn't have that option.

Tara
No, I didn't have that option. I need to be awake in case the roof comes off. I don't know what I'm going to do if that happens, but I need to be awake for that.

Scott
Yeah. Cause if the roof goes, what do you even do then?

Tara
My mind never solved that problem. I never came up with a plan for what I was going to do if that happened. There wasn't one. Just before the sun came up, Hazel woke up. She's rested and she's ready to go. The rest of us, not so much. We were able to shine the flashlight again at this point. You kind of had to smack it a couple of times when you're trying to make the batteries work to get it to turn on. We were able to shine the light and we looked down into the water below and realized that it had gone down a couple of inches. So that's the aha moment. That means it's going to be over. That means the hurricane is leaving. We made it through the night. It's almost sunrise. The hurricane is leaving. We're alive. We're going to be okay. Then, the sun

came up and we got some more light. We didn't need the flashlight anymore. We were able to just sit and stare at the attic hole and watch the water very slowly go down. It was an inch and then it was two inches and, look, we can see the ladder that we haven't been able to see before. Okay, there are two steps. Okay, now there's three. Hours of just sitting and watching the water move very slowly down.

By noon on September 3rd, it was the day after almost a full 24 hours in the attic, the water receded enough that we could get down into the house. We still had about ankle-high water when we came out of the attic. We set the dogs and Hazel up on the same bed that was no longer floating. Because there were broken glasses everywhere, we were terrified someone was going to get cut or slip and break a leg. We kind of stepped out into our living room and it looked like a washing machine had gone on in the house for 24 hours because that's exactly what had happened. Everything was broken. Everything was smashed. Everything was covered in seaweed and ocean, mud, and sewage. Nothing looked salvageable.

Scott
We'll have pictures of these in the– who took those pictures anyway? I mean, you guys are thinking about taking pictures during this?

Tara
Catherine took pictures the entire time from the beginning. We have the entire process documented. Catherine's an artist. She sees the world visually and the photographs started with, “Oh, we're going to document this for insurance purposes. Look, there's water in the house. There's a picture of that.” It helps when you file insurance claims. Then, it turned into, “We're going to take pictures so that we can show everyone what happened to us after.” Then, it became, “This might be the only thing someone finds of us.”

Scott
How did anyone know to come and rescue you?

Tara
We had been making phone calls to friends and family. We had told Charlotte and Pattie back in Connecticut that we obviously needed help, but there wasn't anybody who could come. So we were on that “these people need help” list, which had been forming throughout the storm. We had posted a Facebook post with SOS help the day before. When we had been out of the attic for only about 20 minutes, we turned and heard a noise and there was somebody in full wetsuit gear, fins, and mask on our back porch magically appeared out of nowhere. “How did you swim here?” It turns out that it was a friend of ours who was part of the volunteer folks on the island, the actual staged sort of governmental rescues hadn't begun.

It was still blowing 90 miles an hour. These guys were risking their lives to be out in the storm. We were the first ones they came to because of knowing that we were stranded with a young child and no one had heard from us for 24 hours. He showed up in a boat. He had two guys in the boat. He swam from the canal area. Our house was actually on a saltwater canal. The island of Grand Bahamas is full of saltwater canals. Of course, the water was surrounding the entire neighborhood. Like, you couldn't see where there was a canal. It was all ocean. You could just see the houses and tiptops of trees.

This friend of ours had been to our property before, and he knew where there were obstructions and where there was a wall. And no, the boat can't come past this point because it will get wrecked. So that was helpful. He said, “Do you guys want to go?”

“Well, what about the dogs? Can the dogs come? We're not leaving the dogs. We're not leaving if we can't carry the dogs.”

“Of course, the dogs can come.”

“Okay, great. Let's go.”

Scott
And the boat was big enough for all of you and the dogs?

Tara
It was big enough for all of us. It was still a small boat that shouldn't have been out in that kind of weather - a 23-foot open center console kind of boat with outboard engines. So he swam a couple of the dogs out from the house to the boat and came back for us. There were issues with the boat. The boat's bilge pump that's supposed to pump the water out of the boat was failing in 90-mile-an-hour winds while they were trying to rescue us. So it was very touch and go. We were taken a few miles away to the Grand Bahamas Sailing Club, which is exactly what it sounds like. It's a sailing school, but it was in a part of the island that did not have the flooding that our part had, and was still safe and intact. It wasn't a shelter, but it was their staging area. We were indoors. The club manager fed us, gave us dry clothes, and made sure we were okay. “Here's my cell phone. It is working. Call whoever you need to call.” The service was terrible. You would call someone and get every fifth word. We call Charlotte and Patty first. We're okay. We've been rescued. We're safe. We're alive. No one's hurt. Somehow we managed to do all of that and come away with bruises and a skin rash.

Scott
Any infections from floating in sewage water?

Tara
After we were evacuated, we saw a doctor who checked all of us out. We had bruises and a skin rash. That was it. We were at the sailing club for a couple of hours. From there, we piled into the front cab of a truck. That was another experience. How do you put 4 adults, a child, and 5 dogs in a single cab truck? They gave us a lift to an acquaintance's house who was house-sitting for an expat - a really big house. It was empty, except for him and his wife, their kids - another family. “You guys can come here. Bring the dogs. It's fine.” So that's where we went.

Scott
That sounds like the perfect destination at that point.

Tara
It was the best possible scenario. As I've said, shelters on the island wouldn't have allowed dogs. We couldn't go to a shelter. Some of the shelters were underwater. At that point, driving around was still dangerous. There was still lots of water standing. So yeah, it was the best possible place we could be. We were at the house with those acquaintances for two days.

Scott
And I'm sure, sometime during that two-day period, you're thinking, “Okay, what are we going to do? Where are we going to live?”

Tara

Yeah, all of that. We managed to go back to the house the day after our rescue. The storm was gone. Winds were done. Most of the water had actually disappeared and gone back to the ocean. So we were able to go back to the house and try to salvage something.

Scott
When you first got to your house, just before you went in, did it look like it was destroyed? What did it look like from the outside?

Tara
The exterior of the house looked like the exterior of the house. There was a seaweed line where the water had stopped up near the roof. All of the windows were intact. The roof was intact. The walls were intact. If you looked at the house, all you saw was some organic debris and a whole lot of mud. It looked fine from the outside. The inside, not so much. Everything was covered in mud. After 24 hours of tropical post-hurricane air mixed with wet, everything was growing mold already. The inside sheetrock walls were torn apart. You could see through this to the studs. We can see from one room to another where there should have been a wall. Furniture was moved from one side of the house to the other. Everything's piled on top of each other. Things were broken. It just looks like a bomb went off on the inside. Structurally, we had a feeling that it wasn't fixable. The reason is that, during the storm, we actually saw bubbles bubbling up through our foundation, which means the foundation's cracked. In the end, weeks, months later, structural engineers inspected the house and said it was not salvageable and couldn't be lived in ever again.

Scott
I assume you had home insurance to cover this.

Tara
We had full hurricane insurance on our home. We were some of the lucky ones. A lot of people lost everything and had no insurance.

Scott
So what's your long-term plan at that point?

Tara
At that point, we evacuated to Florida two days after the storm and thought that we would settle there for 6 months, which was how long tourists were allowed to stay in the United States. We're Bahamian. We have to travel on a visa. We're not allowed to live in the United States, but we're allowed to visit for 6 months of vacation.

Scott
And your passports and visa were dry enough that they could recognize it?

Tara
We laid all of it out underneath a ceiling fan the next day. All of it dried out. All of our birth certificates, marriage certificates, passports, all of it.

Scott
So you were in Florida for six months and then what?

Tara

We weren't in Florida for six months. A few days after Dorian, there was a little blip in the news media of the United States that there was fear that all Bahamians affected by Hurricane Dorian were now going to immigrate to the United States illegally. Suddenly, the United States didn't want to let us in. Some not-nice stuff was said by people high up in the government of the United States about Bahamians as a stereotype. We were told, “Okay, you guys have two months. You need to be out of this country in two months. Don't care where you go, but you need to be out in two months.” Okay, now what? We didn't have a house to live in. Grand Bahamas is a disaster zone. There's no electricity. Fresh water is an issue. It's horribly traumatic to think about going back there and looking at all of that every day after having lived it. We can't stay in the United States for more than two months. What are we going to do? Okay, let's move to another country because that's the best thing to do when you're suffering from PTSD after trauma.

Scott
And that's where you are now, right?

Tara
That's where we are now. We live in New Brunswick, Canada. We left Florida six weeks after Hurricane Dorian and drove to Canada. That was almost four years ago now.

Scott
How do you like Canada? I'm just thinking of one extreme to the other - the tropical Bahamas to the snowy cold North.

Tara
It's a very different life. We've traded hurricanes for snow storms, which really is the motivating factor. We're not doing hurricanes ever again. I'm never going to be in the path of a hurricane again, if I can help it. Snow storms blow through and you hunker down for six hours and then you go outside and you shovel snow and it's good and it's over.

Scott
And you're really there. It's almost easier to prepare for a snowstorm because what's going to happen even if it's a big one?

Tara
It's much, much more predictable than hurricanes.

Scott
But where you are, you're still close to the ocean, right? What was your logic behind that?

Tara
So we all threw a dart at a map. We said Canada because it's an open-minded place that's welcoming to LGBTQ families and people. There's an immigration pathway for us. We can immigrate here legally. We needed to be near the ocean, even though the ocean tried to kill us. We needed to be near the ocean. It's a part of our souls, a part of who we are. We couldn't live in Toronto or Alberta, so we said East coast. We wanted to be near our family in Connecticut. We wanted to be within driving distance - eight hours drive from our door to theirs. So we just said, “Okay, that's where we're going to go. That's what we'll try and see if it works.”

Scott

Fortunately, you were in a position where you had the money from the insurance that you could get into another house and not have to worry about putting food on the table immediately.

Tara
Yep. Yeah. We were very blessed that we had the ability to restart. A lot of people might have chosen to leave but didn't have the ability to restart.

Scott
How has Hazel adapted to this new environment?

Tara
We joked all the time that she's now Canadian.

Scott
She was born in the US, right?

Tara
She was born in the US, grew up in the Bahamas, and she's now Canadian because she's adapted so well to all of it. We've all had therapy. Hazel had play therapy and kids therapy where you use games and drawings to help them sort out their feelings surrounding trauma that could scar her for the rest of her life. She has lots of friends. She loves to play in the snow and we're good here.

Scott
Obviously, this was very clearly a near-death experience because, if you'd stayed in the bedroom, you wouldn't have survived. Can you talk about your mental health following this ordeal? How have you handled that?

Tara
The three of us have all had mental health issues. Hazel has rebounded fastest. We do talk a lot about the storm. We talk about the Bahamas. We still call the Bahamas home. So that's been really good for her. It's been really good for us because it's forcing us to address it. I've done more therapy and more therapy options than I can count at this point over the last four years. PTSD has been an issue. Depression has been an issue. Some people with PTSD have ADD symptoms. That's been an issue.

Scott
You're four years past now. Do you feel like you've overcome it or you're still in the process?

Tara
I feel like I've overcome it. I feel like there are scars. I've gotten over the worst of it. I've processed it. I used writing therapy to process it. My therapist said, “Oh, you write poetry. Okay. I want you to write about what happened to you, and we'll use that for therapy.” So what started out as “I'm going to write down and tell the therapist what happened in words” turned into chapters. Those chapters turned into an entire book. That was what I used to process the trauma.

Scott
And you didn't even know that would be the end result when you started writing it.

Tara

No, that wasn't the intention. It's one of those dreams in the back of your mind that you never actually get around to doing, “Oh, I'm going to write a book one day. I'm going to be published one day”, but then you never do it because you don't believe that you can do it well enough or something else comes up. You have a kid. You don't have the time. So it started, like I said, as pages that turned into chapters that turned into an entire book with two and a half years of writing.

Scott
And part of that– what you've written is about how climate change has had a direct effect on you, right? Is that the majority of what that is?

Tara
But most of the book is the story. Most of the book is about who we are, why we were living, where we were living, what happened to us, all of the details of the story I've just given you, but in more detail, but also how we came about to have to make this decision to leave the place of our ancestors and about how, for us, it's not livable anymore because of climate change. I've lived 40 years and I've been through how many hurricanes and my parents only went through this many and their parents only went through one in their entire lifetime. So the Bahamas is going to continue to get less livable as climate change gets worse.

Scott
When we last spoke previously about this, you were shopping your book among publishers. Any news on that?

Tara
No, nothing yet. The process of getting a book published, if you want to have it published in one of the big publishing houses - let's say I want to have it sitting on a shelf in Barnes and Noble - it's a very specific process. Some of that has to do with being lucky enough to find a literary agent who's interested in the story, who feels like they're connected to the story, and who wants to represent you to shop it around to big publishers. I'm aiming big, it's a big dream, but I'm confident that I'll get there. It just takes time.

Scott
I think it has the potential for that. You sent me one chapter and, just by reading that, it makes me want to read the whole book because it's very well written. I mean, you've mentioned that luck is part of this. Hopefully, you haven't used up all your luck during that time in the attic.

Tara
Let's hope I have 9 lives.

Scott
Well, once it does get published, obviously we will know about that. We'll put that on the website. We'll add that to the episode notes for this podcast. How can people find out more about you?

Tara
I am on Instagram and LinkedIn, Tara Pyfrom - very easy to find. My website is tarapyfrom.com.

Scott
And we'll have those links. Tara, I'm glad you survived. Thanks for sharing your story.

Tara
Thank you for having me.

Scott
You can see pictures of the flooded house, and you can also get a full transcript of this episode, at WhatWasThatLike.com/150.

I heard someone mention a term recently, and I thought, wow – this definitely applies to podcasting. This term that caught my attention was “active listening”. And I really love that! I think a lot of people have this idea when they’re having a conversation with someone, that the person who’s talking at the time is “active” and the person who’s listening is “passive”. That might be true sometimes, but I think that can also result in a kind of boring conversation.

I mean, think about some of the podcasts you listen to. The host talks for a while, then the guest talks, and you can kind of tell that the host isn’t really super engaged – they’re just waiting for the guest to stop so they can talk again. Some hosts even have a list of questions, and the guest might have an amazing answer to one of them, and the listeners are yelling “hey, ask a follow up question about that!” but the host just continues down the list of questions, because they gotta complete that list.

That’s boring to me. I love this idea of “active listening” because it means the person who is NOT talking is still completely engaged and just trying to soak in and comprehend what the other person is saying. And in order to be a host who’s an active listener, it helps if you have a guest who is really interesting. That’s easy for me, because all of my guests are interesting - if a guest has a boring story they’re not coming on this podcast anyway. But I think it’s a good goal, and something that we can all definitely improve on – being an active listener.

And Raw Audio 35 is now live! If you’re not on What Was That Like Plus, you’re missing out on these bonus exclusive episodes – these are actual 911 calls and the stories that go with them. And you get all the regular episodes of What Was That Like without any ads. You can try it out for free – in the Apple Podcasts app, just find the podcast and click on Try Free, or on Android just go to WhatWasThatLike.com/plus.

In this Raw Audio episode, an 8 year old girl calls 911, and the dispatcher is rather impatient –

8-year-old girl
My mom is in the basement, and I need emergency, and I need– hello?

911 Operator
Where at?

Scott
A woman calls after she is given a drugged cupcake as part of a kidnapping attempt –

Woman 1
I'm super spacey. Like, it's hard to talk, and my hands and my feet and my arms are super numb.

Scott
And officers are called to a school because one of the students has a gun –

Woman 2
Yes sir. It's Cummings Middle school. We have a student with a gun. Can you help us out please? Well, call the police also. You're closest to us.

Scott
So now you have 35 Raw Audio episodes to binge as soon as you sign up at WhatWasThatLike.com/plus on Android, or on your iphone just find the podcast and click on Try Free at the top.

And speaking of Apple Podcasts, here's a review that came in recently from user twenty/ten: "Captivating, inspiring, and a good variety of unique, real-life experiences. Scott does a great job plus he has a pleasant voice. My favorite podcast! 5 stars"

Thank you so much twenty/ten! And if you haven't yet left a rating and review, I invite you to do just that. This is part of an experiment. Really all you need to do is leave a 5 star rating, not necessarily a review. But if you do leave a review, you might hear it here on a future episode.

Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz. Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

And the moment you've been waiting for – it's this week's Listener Story. We do this every single episode! If you have a story, like 5-10 minutes, about something unusual or funny or sad, record it on your phone and send it to me at Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com.

This one is from my friend Corey. If you're on TikTok, you should definitely follow her, and her TikTok name is SugarBombCorey, all one word, and she's also in the Facebook group. Super fun person. And her listener story definitely falls into the True Crime category so I think you'll enjoy hearing this.

Stay safe, and I'll see you back here in two weeks.

(Listener story)
I was harassed by a murderer. Basically, it starts out as my husband's story. When my husband was 5 years old, his dad was a police officer. What had happened was there were 2 men - a father and a son. I'm going to call them the old man and the young man for this story.

An old man and a young man had gotten into a fight with their neighbor over an old bicycle of all things. There had been some sort of an altercation with the neighbor. The police came and arrested the old man. On his way into jail, he said that he had chest pains and they took him to the hospital. While he was in the hospital, he managed to escape with the help of his son. So the old man and the young man gather up a bunch of guns and basically barricade themselves inside their house. The police there called upon my husband's dad to come help because he had plenty of run-ins with these guys. They thought maybe that he could talk some sense into them, bring them in, and have them arrested, and no further problems, but that is not what happened.

Unfortunately, while my husband's dad and his fellow police officer were trying to approach the house, they opened fire on them. There was a shootout. Both the police officers were shot and my husband's father was killed. It was a tragic, senseless murder. Very sad. Like I said, my

husband was only 5 years old. He hardly has any memories of his father. But both the father and son, the old man and the young man were sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. The old man died when my husband was in high school.

After I got married to my husband, of course, I learned this story, I was curious, and I did some research about this case and read old news articles and court transcripts, et cetera, et cetera. In looking for this information, I ran across a YouTube channel and this YouTube channel was hosted by a man who would take phone calls from prisoners who felt that they were unjustly convicted and would basically record these phone conversations and then broadcast them on the YouTube channel. At the time, it was quite a popular YouTube channel with lots of subscribers and lots of comments. The younger man had made many Videos with this gentleman, proclaiming that he was innocent, that he had the right to defend his home and property by shooting the police officers, and was saying very inflammatory things about my husband's family. They were from a very small town where everybody knew everyone, saying some really terrible things about my husband's father and his family that were just untrue.

People have the right to their opinions, but they don't have the right to say things that are just patently false, so I made the mistake of commenting on this YouTube video. Little did I know that I was opening a huge Pandora's box. This is probably not the last time that my big mouth is going to get me in trouble - it certainly isn't the first either. I basically just said something about, “This is absolutely false. Anybody can look up the court transcripts, and their public record. These things that he's saying are not true.” That caused a firestorm.

He continued to make more YouTube videos, really started kind of pointing his ire towards me directly, and then started making some threats against my husband, against his mother, against his family, and called upon the YouTube channel page to find out everything that they could about me, and I ended up being doxxed. What being doxxed means is that people find all your personal information - where you work, where you live, your phone number, et cetera. I ended up getting hundreds of phone calls. I got death threats at my job. It was really scary.

I called the prison that he was at and said, “Certainly, there's something that you can do.” It turns out that they're allowed to make phone calls. They can call whoever they want, and they're not in charge of this man who runs the Youtube channel, so they really couldn't do much. But, obviously, he's not allowed to make threats against his victims and their families. So he was put in the shoe or solitary confinement several times.

Finally, I did end up filing a restraining order personally. Once I filed that restraining order, I could no longer make any sort of comments on the YouTube channels. I couldn't try to talk to him directly at all, which of course I didn't. It did simmer things down a little bit when he had gone to the shoe several times. When I made that restraining order, it certainly didn't stop him. He did continue to call into that show quite often and make some really thinly veiled threats against our family, but it did finally stop.

The reason why - I've got some mixed feelings about it - was he ended up getting tongue cancer. He kept calling in, but he became more and more unintelligible as time went on. The comments really stopped on the videos because people couldn't tell what he was saying. He kept calling in for about a year and finally just stopped because nobody could understand a word that he was saying. Like I said, I've got some complicated feelings about that. But all in all, I guess I would say karma's kind of a you-know-what. So I don't know. That's my weird story, Scott. Please keep it up on TikTok, man. You're so fun there. You are the king of dad jokes, and keep it up with the podcast. I think you're great.