

Helene

The first sign of things gone awry was the tornado warning, out of nowhere. When my roommate showed me footage of the tornado in Blowing Rock, I couldn't believe my eyes. In hindsight, our reaction to the tornado was eerily similar to what it would be to the approaching hurricane, Helene. I didn't know about Hurricane Helene until two days before it hit. The same sentiment was echoed by other students, who had nothing much more to offer than an "Oh really?" at news of the coming storm. Reminiscent of the tornado warning, we didn't know it was on the way until it was knocking at the door. The impact was under-prepared for, and no one anticipated the extent of the havoc.

On Thursday night, the wind was howling through my window screen like an animal. I couldn't see much but a few streetlights in the driving rain. By the time I woke up, I saw that Hungry Howie's was swimming and that the bar parking lot was fighting a losing battle against a creeping tide of muddy water. That was a surprise. The next time I peered out my window, I was stunned by a group of people attempting to push a car onto the shrinking lot of asphalt, yelling indecipherable words at each other. Another group was across the road, now a rushing river, gripping a stop sign for balance. Brown water past the knees. They held onto each other to get across, their hands strung like safety ropes. It was startling to me that the road I had crossed in a few seconds the previous morning had become a river. Torrents of water rushed across the road like a morbid kind of traffic.

It didn't take long to lose power and internet. Communication severed from our families felt like ties severed from home. The darkness of the apartment overwhelmed every battery-powered light I managed to find. I hated it.

When it stopped raining, my roommate and I ventured outside. A tree had fallen into a powerline, blocking the road behind our apartment. We watched car after car turn back around to return home when they realized they couldn't get past. Others were outside too, staring, taking photos, some playing in puddles of displaced water. I tried to send pictures to my family and reply to their concerns, but nothing would go through. People I hadn't spoken to in years messaged me asking if I was okay. But those texts felt like bridges.

It was the silence that stood out to me the most when I went outside after the hurricane. Silence. I was not used to the silence. I live above a bar by a busy street. On some nights bargoers were so loud that I was desperate for quiet. This was different; it disturbed me. Only able to stare with a dropped jaw at the silent film of aftermath. The silence was broken by an 18-wheeler rumbling past me, plastered with the words "DISASTER RELIEF."

When the power returned, I was euphoric. It put into perspective for me how much I had by having electricity. You don't think about having electricity until you don't have it anymore. My gratitude told me that I had taken it for granted all this time.

After a few days, all that was left of the water were large swaths of caked mud and dirt. As cars passed by, the dirt and sand stirred up into the air so that you had to cover your eyes if you wanted to be on the sidewalk. And it felt silly to me, that it made me want to cry.

Boone received a boil water advisory, which left my light blue pot with a thick brown ring. Classes were canceled, students were packing up to go home, and parents were rushing to load up their cars. A curfew was set in place, and my boyfriend and I got a ride home from the hospital in the back of a police car.

It was all at once that the hurricane swept away each routine and comfort that we took in normalcy. I felt guilty about this because comparatively, I had it easy, and yet I was unable to get

out of bed. As other people ran to help those who were worse off, I spent the first few days in apathy. At a moment when I was doing particularly bad emotionally, a Wendy's employee purposefully upsized everything I ordered. A tiny act of kindness that made a world of difference to me. I noticed that everyone I talked to was kind. This helped me get up.

A friend of mine who volunteered to clean out flooded homes told me it was heart-wrenching to cart off items, once owned and loved, to be thrown into heaps of trash. Surreal to see piles of things that she had back at home too, unsalvageable.

While I believe that disaster tends to bring out the best and worst of humanity. In Boone, I saw the best. The kindness of this town stood out tall and strong like a lighthouse amid a battered community. Smiles were kinder. Hearts were selfless. A family friend dropped by our apartment out of the blue to bring us bottled water. I came home to my roommate taking large clippers outside to cut branches from fallen trees. All around me, I watched people jump in to piece lives back together. I heard a group say that they were able to complete "60 service projects in 2 weeks." I heard donation centers were so full they had to turn away donors. I saw more supplies stacked in the First Baptist parking lot than I could grasp and a line of cars bringing more. It was overwhelmingly beautiful to me.

I got to join in with people from Antioch Boone, Acts of Mercy, and Samaritan's Purse to strip off and clean floorboards from a flooded store. Beside me was a contractor with over thirty years of experience and a 9-year-old child, rebuilding.