

Everyone I love lives in these mountains. When I started trying to find someplace to go after Boone, NC started flooding as a result of Hurricane Helene, I quickly realized that every place that would welcome me with open arms was in western North Carolina. I am from a small community in Madison County, NC and I am a graduate student at Appalachian State University in Boone. My entire family, apart from some great-aunts and great-uncles, lives in the Blue Ridge Mountains of western NC and eastern TN.

I have been horrified, devastated and petrified by the past three days. I went to class at App State Wednesday and immediately after class was caught in my car during a tornado warning. I made it five miles toward home in my two-hour commute before I encountered flooding and landslides. I spent the next two days in a friend's apartment in Boone, then at the Red Cross center on App State's campus, then in Winston-Salem with my great-aunt and uncle. I'm writing this from the piedmont, now safe, with cell service and with the knowledge that my immediate family living twenty minutes outside of Asheville is safe, at least for now. I still have countless people who I am waiting to hear from.

Western North Carolina is where I have always felt safe. When I travelled out West and saw the flat horizon, I worried for fear that some storm or tornado would rush through, without the blue horizon of mountainous protectors to stop it. When I am hurting, anxious, feeling lost, I always flee to my home in the Blue Ridge. She always takes me in, bandages my hurting heart, soothes my every worry.

I work as a whitewater raft guide on the French Broad River. The French Broad is a massive river, wide and powerful and flowing through the middle of WNC. Every day in the summer, I take groups of tourists down Class II and III rapids in Marshall, NC. Every day, I tell them about the Great Flood of 1916, in which the town of Marshall was swept away, in which dams broke and the railroad was twisted off its tracks and pushed into the river like the helix of a DNA strand. When sixty people died.

Today, I have seen pictures of Marshall, covered by the French Broad. It still sits below several feet of water, the river still swollen far past capacity and lapping up at the steps of the post office. The river crested at 29 feet, five feet above the level reached during the flood of 1916. There are at least five buildings which are no longer in the town, including the old railroad depot which has been converted into a community stage and was the first place I ever sang for a crowd. The town where I work, Hot Springs, is currently cut off from North Carolina. The 500 people who live there are all accounted for, due to the incredible community organizing which took place to ensure everyone's safety. When we do not have a town, we have our people. Buildings are destroyed and will not be rebuilt because insurance now considers my hometown to be a flood plain.

This morning I heard from my dad via phone call. I had known since yesterday that my immediate family had survived the initial flooding. My uncle was aiding in rescue efforts in Buncombe County and managed to reach my grandparents' house, where he found all of our family who was in NC. My uncle found cell service somewhere in Asheville around 2am and called my aunt, who was at their home in Erwin, TN. Interstate 26 between Erwin and Asheville had washed away in the flooding, leaving my aunt unable to see anyone in her family. My aunt communicated to me that my family was safe and today, my dad contacted me and said that power had been restored to our home and that our family was well, only lacking in resources. Many are not so lucky.

The flooding and damage that is facing western North Carolina literally has washed away towns. People have died, and thousands of people have not been confirmed to be safe. Cell

service and power for the region was almost entirely down yesterday and has slowly been coming back online today. However, many people in the hardest hit areas are still without cell service, leaving them unable to contact emergency services, much less their friends and families. Resources are running thin, and access to resources is even more difficult. People are desperate, and things are going to get worse.

I work on the French Broad River. It is my home, the place where I have learned so much strength and belonging. To see it sweep away my town, hurt and take away the people I know, ravage the people I love is something I was never prepared for. My coworkers are aiding in swiftwater safety operations through my county and other counties. When water level predictions were issued, I was painfully aware of their meaning. I remembered all I had been told about the flood of 1916. I remembered, and I shook. I do not think, no matter what happens, that I will ever be a raft guide again. For the first time in my life, I am terrified to go home, terrified of what awaits me.

The longer I stayed in Boone, the more I realized that my home would never be the same, and I would never know her the same. I didn't sleep for four nights. I told myself over and over again that my family was safe, that water levels would go down, that there was help on the way. Every road between my location and my home has washed away or is covered by a landslide. We will never be the same. None of us will ever be the same.

But let me tell you this. There is a not a stronger, more capable, more determined and loving group of people than the folks that make up my home. I have full and complete confidence in that. I can look at the way my friends in Hot Springs have kept each other alive in a situation that was near impossible. I can look at the rescue efforts being waged nonstop into communities that are completely isolated. I can look to the way that when cell service was restored to Marshall, I had four texts pop up from people in my home, asking if I was alright, even though they were the ones who had almost died. I can tell you that there are hundreds of casseroles at the fire department in my home, cooked by folks who have power for their neighbors who don't. I can tell you that I saw pictures of people kayaking down streets to check on their neighbors. We have suffered great loss and will suffer great grief, but we I can tell you that I have already seen great miracles. I can tell you I have seen the hearts of my people, and they are good. They are strong. They are resilient.

Know this. If there is a group that will make it through a disaster that's being called "biblical" and "catastrophic": it is the people of southern Appalachia. But they'll need some help. They'll need folks who have resources to give, skills to give, equipment to give. They'll need boots on the ground, now, and they will need boots on the ground, many weeks from now. When we rebuild (because we will), we will need you to remember why you love this place and come visit us again. But until then, we will need prayer, and we will need this story to be told. If you can give nothing else, you can give us those gifts. We refuse to be forgotten.

I have always said that my life was just a love letter to my home. So here I am writing another love letter to the place that has always held me, to the people that have always loved me, to the mountains that have always given me strength. I will love you again. I will love you always.