

You can see the devastation left by Irene on the YouTube videos—the scary rise of the water in Windham reaching from one side of the valley to the other, its violence and speed forcing the blue house up against the Church Street bridge. Cars submerged or taken, two school buses swept down Main Street. Class three rapids, no sign of land, each house an island. But although the photos tell so much, I still want to tell you more.

My nephew Austin got to our house—my mom’s and dad’s large old home—first, on Sunday night. It's bad, he kept saying over the phone as he walked through it, real bad. He spent Monday taking out rugs and furniture, squeegee-ing out inches of sticky, oily mud. After a long, circuitous route around closed roads, Eric and I arrived that evening. My neighbor had left a message, “Your house is still standing.” Though that gave me a clue, it didn’t prepare me: ten-foot ditches where the sidewalks had been, street lamps bent or gone, a macadam driveway on a neighbor's lawn, piles of furniture and garbage lining the street. There was no house not hit. At Church Street, the police and national guard had set up a barrier: no one allowed in but residents. Apparently our end of town, the lower end, was worse.

Our friend Michael had called and told us that the creek had diverted, aiming right toward our house (the water marks on the back wall were 47 inches high). So we knew the place had been hit from both front and back. Still, as we approached, I made the sounds people make when they’re stunned. There was no lawn left-- just what looked like a pond bordered by a vast stretch of mud and piles of silt. Someone's car trailer was smashed up against the birch tree, tangled with a large wooden beam and some unrecognizable metal. The large porch off the kitchen sagged, a post gone and most of the railing. I was thankful both Mom and Dad were dead.

My sister Carol and her husband Jimm had arrived about an hour earlier. Carol took me by the hand and led me around the back. It was a moonscape of mud—with only a single bit of green under the cedars, a patch of grass four or five feet square. The deck around the pool had been lifted and jammed against the maple, over a cap to someone's pick-up. Our neighbor's shed had landed nearby. With water on its one side and the shed on the other, the deck looked like a dilapidated dock during low-tide. The pool house was knocked over, remnants of fencing were scattered about and clogged with debris. The pasture was now layers of silt where a large swath of gravel led eerily toward the creek, visible for the first time ever from the house, the protective berm gone. Odd things from upstream were strewn about: an oxygen tank, a soccer goal, a lawn roller, some metal barrels, three or four ladders, an outdoor grill, golf balls, what might have been a watering trough. Upturned plants, broken limbs, fallen trees—the lilacs and northern spy apple we planted for my mother when she died. Lots of plastic. Outside the kitchen door by the large pine tree, was a dead chicken, its feet straight up. It took a while to go into the house.

Inside, the water had reached two feet. Everything below that was coated in red clay. Those who have been through a flood know what that means: every closet, every bureau, every kitchen drawer, every piece of furniture, every book on every shelf. It was getting

dark and wherever the squeegee hadn't reached, the mud was thick and slippery. We set up camp in the playroom, drinking beer and eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches in the candlelight. Austin told his story of getting there—the closed roads, the barriers, the sheriff stopping him: he was suspect, a long-haired stranger from Brooklyn in a beat-up truck with Texas plates. In the living room, Austin had found my parents' old wedding album on the coffee table. It was low-- well below the water line-- but the table must've floated because the photos were dry. Mom felt very near.

The next morning all of us started cleaning. We were excruciatingly inefficient-- not just because there was no water or electricity, we didn't know where or how to begin. We carried couches out to the curb, set photos on the porch to dry. After Mom's and Dad's funerals, we hadn't cleaned out or dispersed one item—the home we had grown up in remained a memorial to them. Now we needed a crowbar to wrest the swollen books from their shelves. We cut out the records with a sawzall. Carol and I kept yelling back and forth: “Oh look at this,” “This is when they took Hansen to Yellowstone,” “Here are Mom's records from the historical society,” “Her thank you notes,” “Dad's slides from Africa.”

We conferred with our friends Michael and Patti, two houses down and a half day ahead of us, about everything. They had a generator. Margo, our neighbor on the other side, told us to use a putty knife to scrape up the mud—it doesn't scratch the wood floors. Rick who we grew up with across the street gave us cases of disinfectant. Ned and Liz arrived, co-workers and friends, our first volunteers. They set up a system: scrape, then brush, then sweep, then wipe. Jon, Liz's husband, carried away the dead chicken. Gradually a few systems took hold, some organization.

No cars were allowed so only firemen or police drove by, and the national guard in their humvees. Some people walked or rode down on bikes. They all took photos. For the first time, I felt inside the news. Then the big trucks arrived with their crews: fixing the water line, the sewage line, filling the huge holes back in—it was very loud, but happily so.

In the evening we walked up to the community center, what we knew as the old Presbyterian church. The town had organized and the energy of every volunteer was marshaled. Command Central was formed; breakfast, lunch and dinner served, with a different restaurant or church group donating each meal. There were stacks of bottled water, juices, and coffee, tables of baked goods. Port-a-potties. Everyone served was in flood attire, covered in red dust, with their masks loose around their necks, rubber gloves in their pockets. I took a plate and as a woman served me some summer squash, I tried to say thank you but started to cry instead. She nodded and smiled. This was my favorite restaurant in the world.

When my sister Jeanne arrived, she brought food and that evening we stayed home. Before dinner we each grabbed a beer or glass of wine and walked down the street to see what was happening with our neighbors. A friend we'd grown up with came out with his kids and friends and we stood there on the yellow line talking about dehumidifiers and fans and mold and whether to try to restore an antique couch. And did we really have to

cut out the sheetrock and pull up the floors. Then this nondescript car came slowly toward us and stopped. The driver said, “Can I help you with anything?” paused, then added, “I’m the police.” One of us laughed and said, “Should we not be drinking in the street?” He smiled and said, “If my houses looked like that—I’d be drinking in the street, too. Or worse,” and he drove away. It was one of our perks.

By labor day weekend we had (partial) electricity, water that needed to be boiled (but no toilets) and hordes of volunteers. They’d arrive with their own masks and gloves and boots and offer to do hard horrible work. Mostly people we’d never met. Two self-described disaster junkies, teenagers tattooed and pierced, a lesbian couple, evangelical Christians. And what seemed most surprising, whole families, one all the way from Syracuse, the teenaged boy saying, “This is what we do. We went to Katrina, too.” Zoe, an eleven-year-old from Manhattan, carried five gallon pails of mud against her chest up the from the cellar all day long—her father and brother and sister and mother helping, too. One young, thin man slogged bucket after bucket till his pants got so heavy with mud, we had to find rope to hold them up. Jeanne set up a system in the driveway to wash the clay-covered dishes and pans. Two lines of women working, laughing, talking with an effortless intimacy, among them Sheila who drove from Bronxville, a friend I’d grown up with in Windham but hadn’t seen for maybe twenty years.

So many volunteers came we had to organize our lists—offering various levels of dirty and hard—from packing china to cutting sheet rock and pulling nails to slogging mud. Some cleaned cabinets and floors and baseboards. Or holed up in closets to remove plaster from lath. Or scraped mud from the stud bays. Or joined the endless bucket brigade from the basement.

Which felt more and more medieval. After the buckets of rot-ridden mud came the cement blocks—a wall had fallen in. And after the blocks, came all the stuff—skis and Christmas decorations and bags of Depends and paint cans and old tools— covered with a chocolate-icing consistency but with that foul, sewagey smell. And after the stuff came the dismantled closet, and after the closet, came, piece by piece, the old, regulation-sized pool table. Then the power-washing began.

Everybody at one time or another talked about the smell. One evening, the water had gone a bit brown but I didn’t believe it entirely when it came time to take a shower. I was so filthy and I thought maybe the new hot water heater was working. It wasn’t but I had gotten pretty used to cold showers. In the middle of the night I woke up, and wondered why I could smell a manure pile—had I gone home to where my horses were?—and then I thought no, Windham’s sewage lines must be broken again—till finally I realized the smell was coming not from the window but from my own skin. That damn shower.

Each evening we said the same thing, “Today was huge.” And the bunch of us: Eric, Carol, Jimm, Jeanne, Whit, Austin, Sara, Frosty, Pam and I ate too much and most of us drank too much too. We called our sister Kath stuck in Houston and our brother Bob in Connecticut incessantly, reporting on each problem and accomplishment. In the morning we’d start again. Occasionally I’d tear up at what I saw—old wall paper from my

childhood being carried to the curb, my mother's recipe drawer in the garage, more strangers arriving to help. This world felt both very full and close to the bone and I was falling deeply in love with it.

And we felt so lucky. I've known from past floods in my own home and town that the closer you are to the nadir point of a disaster the luckier you feel. It's exponential: one person loses a car but feels lucky her home is safe, the next loses a home but lives are spared... So while I was scraping mud I kept thinking about the people in Prattsville losing so much, their cars and homes, so much of their town. When Lee brought in the second batch of rain and our "pond" filled up again and the creek behind us overflowed into the field, five trucks towing inflatable boats lined up across the street at the firehouse. Headed for Prattsville, but luckily—there's that word again--the rain backed off. But even those thoughts feel abstract compared to the ones circling around Lorraine Osborne, Timmy's mother. A generous, outspoken, joyful woman. The water was rising fast and her husband got the truck from the garage just as the house started to move...with Lorraine waiting inside in a wheelchair. He couldn't get to her. It's a thought you can't think for long.

And then there's the reality underlying all the love and luck and that is the rain itself. The sheer amount. 18 inches fell in Maplecrest and about 13 in the rest of Windham's watershed—in *one* day. No system could have handled it. 51 years ago was our last flood—not half as strong but worrisome enough for the town to build two flood dams, which did hold. But where there's hurt, there's often anger, and that means blame. The City is always a target, and for us on our end of town, the school has certainly not helped, taking away a wet land and replacing it with a soccer field and some ineffective catch basins. But this outward-facing blame deflects us from the real problem: our collective inability to both listen and think when it means pointing the finger at ourselves and our own way of life. Will we continue to add huge amounts of carbon to the atmosphere each day? What is eerie is the accuracy of the climatologists' predictions—everything is happening just the way they said it would. More carbon particles means the air holds more moisture (I read the percentage once but my brain translated it immediately into a more meaningful word: LOTS) until the water-laden air becomes too heavy and falls. We get more rain with fewer storms. Can we remain so willfully blind?

And so this heart's a complicated place: a swirl of gratefulness, indebtedness, and wonder at people's capacity to give even when they're not personally invested in the relationships, giving with no expected gain besides the reward inherent in the act itself. And full also with familial love—our parents' souls embedded into every fiber of that old house...and the bonds between us five siblings thickening and tightening—as well as extending toward each other's spouses and children and their friends... An extended family broadening into a community.

But ah, there's the rub. *Community* The word is so overused and often so narrowly provincial in its scope. But what has happened to the word *society*? Is it too large for our collective and political imagination? We need to grow into that word. We need our imaginations as citizens to expand outward, and we need it to extend not just into our past

but also into our future. Not only will our kids and grandkids be there, but people we do not know. Perhaps we can help them too.