

I knew that the day before the storm would be the last time Hope Town would be so incredibly beautiful for a long while. Flowers were everywhere. The foliage was luxurious because we had not had a major storm the year before. I knew that would change. I decided to walk every lane in the settlement and record this beauty with my eyes. I am so glad that I did because my peaceful home would not be the same for a long time.

As always when expecting a rage, there was tension in the air but, Abaconians have seen many a storm and know how to prepare. I saw the police officer, newly assigned to our island, loading his truck with suitcases and his dog, accompanied by his wife. I asked him where he was going and he told me there was an evacuation order and they were headed to Marsh Harbour. Later in the day, I saw him unloading everything and taking it back to his apartment. I asked him why he had returned and, with a bit of disgust in his voice, he said there were too many people staying and he had been instructed to stay on the island.

September 1, 2019 will be etched into the memories of many people. We will never be the same. My daughter, who lives in Nassau, begged me to leave and I stubbornly refused. After all, I had seen many hurricanes in my life. This one, however, was a monster. Dorian arrived in Abaco, coming ashore at 185 mph. sustained, with gusts to 220 mph and riddled with tornadoes.

When the winds started to pick up, I took my flashlights, water etc. and went upstairs in my wooden cottage. I decided to lay down and weather it from up top. After listening for a while, the sounds became so frightening that I went downstairs and sat in the shower. After what seemed like hours and probably wasn't, the house started moving up and down. The sound was horrible. The shutters were trying to stay shut and I could see light and leaves blowing in from the sides. That was the one saving grace- the fact that it happened in the day. If this storm had been in the middle of the night, there would have been many more deaths than there were. Anyway, I started to pray and finally realized God, despite hearing prayers in all languages, would never understand this language I was speaking. It was like a mad auctioneer's rant. I then concentrated on slowing the prayers down so they would be understandable. That helped me keep a focus. I was terrified.

I still bear the scars of fear. I have vitiligo, an auto-immune disorder exacerbated by stress. That day made my adrenaline kick in and my arms now have large melanin-absent splotches. The melanin never returns so I look like a spotted leopard. It is a constant reminder of that day.

During the eye, a young man named Noah Albury came to get me and take me to a neighbor's house where there were 15 other people huddled. When Noah said he would have to lead me to my neighbor's house, I didn't quite understand until I looked around and saw the devastation. Then I started to shake. I had no idea how powerful a storm this was until I saw houses gone and debris of all description everywhere. I had a mini-meltdown. When I got to Monica Cook's house, there were people of all ages there- young teenagers to people older than me. One family staying on the back road had been trapped by the high waters. The force of the water against the door had prevented getting out easily. They were able to wade to Monica's. Again, had this been a night storm, they probably would not have made it. There were all kinds of things floating- golf carts, telephone poles, appliances,

boats, walls and roofs of houses. The surging water level coming into the harbour was about 20 feet. It undermined even homes on the ridge above the harbour.

One of the things I had never seen was the eye of the storm so defined. It looked like we were all sitting at the bottom of a bowl. The eye gave us a chance to get ready for the back of this monster. We didn't know how long it was going to last, so we hurried to find shelter for the second half of Dorian. Later, I talked to several families that had to stay outside with their children because their houses were gone in the first half. We tried to keep light hearted as a group so as to comfort each other, but we were all terrified inside.

The second half of the storm came in and, suddenly, we heard a terrible crack. We ran to the other side of the house, not knowing what had happened and what was next. Part of Monica's roof had gone and water poured in. The saddest sight in that room was 3 people in their 80's beneath a mattress trying to stay out of the deluge raining on their heads. They stayed calmer than the rest of us and I attribute that to having lived through many hurdles in a long life. We formed a brigade of brooms and anything else that would get the water out. This, of course, was basically impossible, as the water was coming in so fast we couldn't get it out fast enough. It kept us busy and kept our minds focused on the task at hand. After what seemed an eternity, the horrible noises and the winds laid down. When we felt safe, we left only to see our lovely little settlement completely destroyed. There were whole blocks of houses gone. There was not a leaf on a tree. All the utility poles were on the ground. There was a mattress high up on the stick that had once been a coconut tree. It cannot be properly described. Our beautiful settlement looked like the photographs you see on the news of Beirut or Aleppo. I never quite sympathized with those people and would cluck "how sad" while I sat in the comfort of my home. Now, I understand. Now, I get it.

The next day was truly out of a Fellini film. We gathered together around what had been the Post Office. The liquor store across the street was gone, leaving hundreds of bottles sitting as though they had been shelved on the sand floor. The road was gone and everything was covered in sand and whatever the sea had brought in. There were two women who waddled by with their bags full of bottles. One man had a recovered fishing rod, large and super expensive and he was trying to figure out how to use it. There were people walking by looking as though they were in an apocalyptic film, eyes glazed over with tears rolling down their faces. One man had already found his fill of the liquor bottles on the ground and was shouting and unruly. There were no leaves or trees to offer shade. There is no breeze after the wind has sucked it out of the atmosphere so it was oppressively hot.

The leaders in the community gathered us together as they spoke from atop what had been someone's roof. They told us we had to organize and work. With no food, water, electricity or anything else, we needed to carry our weight or try to leave. There were few resources. We then started volunteering to be of some use. There were roads to clear, tools to gather, what remained of food to be organized etc. I signed up to help the Nurse. (thank God she stayed as there were a lot of injuries) They told us we needed to cut a path through to the ballpark where helicopters could land and carry out the sick and injured and bring us supplies. Everyone started immediately. As a group, Bahamians, Americans, Haitians, Canadians- whoever was there- we were able to clear the road. One large house had completely covered the road and had to be cut through. There was not a single standing utility pole so we were without power.(for 9-10 months) Many people had no home to return

to. We didn't have any communication at that point. We found out one man had a satellite phone and he was just sending messages from each person to a family member saying "I am alive." That was at least a comfort to people who thought we all might be dead.

The next few months were educational. There were wonderful groups such as Samaritan's Purse and World Central Kitchen who were there for us. Many smaller groups helped out as well. I don't know what would have happened if the international community had not stepped in. There was also what I call the Newsletter crowd, who showed up for a picture in front of the Command Centre/ Clinic to show how they were helping the Bahamas and left immediately on their helicopter, never to be seen again. I am sure they got a lot of donations that way. Notice: Do your homework when you decide to donate after a disaster. Oh, and no, we did not need nail polish.(not kidding-found several in a box of donated articles) There were some wonderful selfless people who pitched in. Of course, there were also people who took advantage of the situation, but, fortunately, they were outnumbered by the good people.

I don't think anyone who was not in Abaco the day after that storm could ever understand the devastation. It was horrendous. The number of dead will never be known because many were illegal residents uncounted in the official numbers. All of us that were there suffer from a form of PTSD and the knowledge that it is common after a disaster, has helped us through the sleepless nights. I hate the sound of wind and always will. I am not sure any country can be prepared for such an event as Dorian, but with climate change, this could happen again. The economic toll is great. The human toll is worse. Every bit of knowledge should be applied to prevent the fallout that Dorian left. There are leaders of the community in Hope Town who should be consulted. They lived through the worst nightmare and have led us out with hope and a determination to rebuild. Believe it or not, even covid has not dampened their spirits. One nail at a time, one shingle at a time, the island of Elbow Cay will someday be as beautiful as the day I walked the lanes before the storm. Oh, and by the way...remember the policeman. I think being in Hope Town and not in Marsh Harbour may have saved his life. Marsh Harbour had many deaths. Fortunately, we did not.