Cultural Daily

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Hurricane Daze

Mish (Eileen) Murphy · Wednesday, September 13th, 2017

Cultural Weekly contributor Eileen Murphy reports from Florida. With her internet out, she sent this article and photos in spurts via Facebook Messenger.

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It's the day before Hurricane Irma's predicted to smash through Central Florida. The school where my husband and I work is closed. We fight long lines and informal rationing to buy water, batteries, and gasoline. The latest storm predictions put the hurricane smack on top of us here in Lakeland, thirty miles from Tampa. Everybody who lives on our dead-end street has a plan to cope with the hurricane.

My neighbor with the differently-abled child is concerned because his son needs to be kept in air conditioning and free from stress. Their house should have priority for power restoration because of his son. But that has never been tested.

I love dogs, and it's a good thing, too. In the next house, a crowd of big, jumping dogs surrounds me. My neighbors explain that the Coast Guard mobilized their son. They're taking care of his four "rescue" black Labs. We–the dogs and I–have a short but pleasant communication. They're upset about the hurricane. My dogs are too.

At the end of the street, my neighbor the registered nurse washes laundry and packs a suitcase. Her scheduled nightshift overlaps with the hurricane. The hospital makes staff stay and work if conditions aren't safe for them to drive home. *If it's more than 35-mile-an-hour winds,* she says, *the ambulances aren't allowed to go out. But the hospital itself stays open; it's not like a 7-11 or a school that can just close.*

Another neighbor woman has started a group chat on Messenger called "Friends Watching Friends During Irma." The group has helped by checking empty houses for people out of town, finding crates for people with pets, and looking up alternative routes for people stuck in traffic. After the storm, everyone must call in. If a person doesn't check in, someone is assigned to go to the house and look. *We have a list of who is responsible for whom.*

The day of the hurricane, my two friends arrive around noon. One will sleep in the guest room with his dog, cat, kittens, and big screen TV. The other will spend the night on the sofa. They are roommates renting a mobile home. That's a dangerous place to be in a hurricane.

My houseguest arrives with his cat and four kittens in a box.

The wind and rain begin to ramp up their intensity. Winds rip limbs off trees. Rains pound the soggy lawn. If a homeowner has skipped any repairs to the roof, any little leaks, he or she is sorry now.

The power first surges at 5:58 pm. We hold our breaths. The lights stay on.

8:40 pm. Amazingly, we still have power. I stomp through mud outside in a hooded windbreaker (forget an umbrella in this wind) to help the dogs do their duty. I'm so glad I impulse-bought a pair of rain boots. Our mini-dog Cookie is finally desperate enough to perform. She's wet and shivering as I carry her into the house.

My houseguests accompany me outside to walk the dogs; outside the carport is a wall of water.

Come midnight, the full force of the hurricane falls on us. The storm's as loud as a freight train. Imagine listening to this noise all night. Eventually it becomes soothing background music, the perfect white noise.

Since no one can sleep we decide to honor an ancient Florida tradition. We throw a hurricane party. We each pour the beverage of our choice into a paper cup and toast Hurricane Irma. But it doesn't seem like a real hurricane party while we still have power, lights, and music.

Then, at 12:52, the power surges, and the house goes dark. It stays dark. We grope for flashlights. And sangria. The hurricane party becomes livelier. At about 1:20 am, the eye of the storm passes over us. With flashlights we walk outside onto the porch to feel light breezes, no rain. Everything is so quiet.

At 1:33, the hurricane returns like the worst kind of ex. That's when about six branches snap off our oak tree and slam into the chain link fence. We watch, mouths open.

Tropical plants being tossed around by the wind.

I'm not exactly sure when Irma rips our mulberry tree up by the roots, but I do know she yanks it out of the earth with one mighty tug. In the morning, we find it lying on its side like Humpty Dumpty.

Whole mulberry tree is pulled up by the roots by the hurricane.

I wake up to the sound of machinery coming from across the street. The lucky people taking care of the four dogs own a generator.

All the residents of our street are outside, cleaning up the damage. Besides uprooting whole trees, Hurricane Irma has scattered a blanket of debris across people's lawns. Not a square inch of green remains without branches, leaves and Spanish moss draped across it like snowfall.

Everyone is busy breaking the debris down, raking it up, and hauling it to the street. Meanwhile,

the power remains off. And my phone can’t get a signal. Worst of all, I’m going to have to boil water in a pot over a charcoal hibachi to make coffee in my Chemex.

We’d been wanting to take a break from social media, go back to the simple things in life — or so my husband and I had said. Be careful what you wish for.

We have stocked up on water and fruit drinks. (Wine is a subset of fruit drink, right? Asking for a friend.)

Top image: At the height of Hurricane Irma, rain pours down like a sheet.

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