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The eeriest experience of my life

by [Letter to the editor](#)

by Abby Connally

I don't know if words can accurately describe everything I've thought, felt, and seen over the past two days. On April 27, 2011, my college town was ripped apart by a tornado. My apartment was destroyed. The roof was ripped off and the ceiling caved in at some places. All the windows were busted out; everything I own is covered in glass and insulation. But it could have been much worse.

I am okay. My roommate is okay. My friends and family are okay. And I use the word okay because there really isn't one I can think of that describes what I'm feeling. I'm in a daze, shell shocked from the whole experience.

I had been monitoring the weather all day, and knew that it was getting serious. About the time James Spann said that people in Tuscaloosa needed to be in their place of safety my downstairs neighbor, Julia, knocked on my door and asked if I wanted to go down to her apartment because it was safer. I grabbed my phone and my shoes and went. I was down in her apartment for about 10 minutes and then it hit. We were watching the tornado on TV, heading to where we were, and the power went out.

We both jumped up and ran into her bathroom. As soon as I sat down glass was shattering. There was a loud roar, and a high pitched whistling noise (probably wind going through something?). We could hear things crashing outside, loud booms, and the sound of metal twisting. I've never been more terrified in my entire life. In my head I just kept repeating "Please God get me through this" and "Its going to be over soon." My ears kept popping. It felt like there was something sitting on my chest. I felt dizzy, like I was going to pass out.

And then it stopped. Things were quiet. We both then slowly made our way out into her apartment. There was broken glass everywhere and it was very, very dark. I helped my neighbor find her phone and then immediately called my mom. I knew that she needed to know that I was okay. I got in touch with her, and I don't remember what I said over the phone.

While I was talking to her, I realized just how bad it was. There were trees all over the ground lying in every direction. Our dumpster had been moved from one end of the parking lot to the other. I found my car under multiple trees. It was totaled.

Then I turned and looked at the actual building. All of the windows were busted out. The wall on the other side was gone. The roof had been torn off. The place where I had lived the past two years, where I had spent my junior and senior years of college, had been destroyed in less than a minute. I was dumbfounded. There are no words to describe how this feels.

As I made my way up the stairs to my apartment (so that I could check it out), I heard something that made my heart stop for a second. In the apartment next to mine a child was screaming. I saw their front door jerking like someone was trying to open it and ran over to try and help. The ceiling had caved around the door and was blocking it from opening for more than just a little crack. We (the people living in the apartment and I) were able to open it wide enough for two little girls (who looked like they were somewhere around the ages of 10 and 4) to get out easily, and then the mother had to hand me her two year old son so she could wedge herself out. The two guys that live under her had heard what was going on and rushed to help, getting her and the kids out and down the stairs into Julia's apartment, which, besides the broken glass, had held up the best of all the units in our building.

I began to look around at all the other apartment buildings and townhouses near ours. They all seemed to be much worse. I began to wonder what other parts of Tuscaloosa were like, but couldn't get any more calls out and none of my neighbors had heard anything. For the time, the only thing in the world that existed was the absolute devastation all around me. I began to really worry. My roommate was on campus, what did that look like? My brother lived across town, had that been hit? Was where I lived the worst of it? Or the best?

Around that time I was able to contact a friend who doesn't live in Tuscaloosa. She told me that she had talked to my mother and that my brother was fine and on his way to get me. For the tiniest second I could breathe again. About that time I saw my brother running up.

Because of all the down power lines and trees he had to park far away and walk to me. He told me that campus was fine and relief washed over me. He then told me that 15th street had been hit very hard. My cousin lives over that way and my brother had been unable to get in touch with him. We then trekked back to his car and made our way over to what looked like a war zone.

We couldn't get far in the car, so we ended up parking it by Mike and Ed's BBQ, which looked really bad. Walking down 15th street was the eeriest experience of my life. I was walking past buildings that I had driven past almost every day and couldn't tell you what they were. It was just one pile of rubble after another. There were many people around us, and all seemed to be doing the same thing, heading to friends houses to see if they were okay.

Everyone seemed to have the same looked of worry and disbelief on their faces. Very few people were talking, except to point something out to a friend or try to call someone on a phone.

When we reached the street to get to my cousin's house it was blocked by downed trees and power lines. I waited while my brother made his way around to get to my cousin. While I waited two girls walked up to a severely damaged house I was standing by and asked if I had seen the two guys that lived there. I hadn't, so they went inside looking for them, calling out their names.

As I watched this I thought that this kind of thing only happens in the movies. It doesn't happen to real people. But it was. My brother then came back with good news. My cousin had been on campus and was okay. His roommate had been home, but he was okay as well. Their house fared worse than my apartment, though.

I've spent the three days since then going back and forth between my parent's house in Birmingham and Tuscaloosa. I've been extremely blessed or extremely lucky, depending on how you want to view it. I lived, and most of my belongings were salvageable. I really want to commend and thank all of the volunteers that have been helping around Tuscaloosa. Everyone has been so kind and helpful.

Almost every five minutes while we were taking things out of my apartment someone would come by offering water or help. Today as we were getting the last of my things a group from Mississippi came by and gave my roommate, our families, and me lunch without us even having to ask for it. Those acts of kindness that really make this hard time much easier and give me hope for the future of Tuscaloosa.

Abby Connally is a senior majoring in telecommunications and film.

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