

# The Crimson White

Providing Disaster Updates

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## Saved by a mattress

by [Letter to the editor](#)

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by Meridith Shook

I was in the bathroom of my house in the Forest Lake neighborhood when the tornado came through on Wednesday.

Early that morning, I had woken up to rain beating down on my bedroom window and flashes of lightning filling the room every few seconds like a strobe light. I remember wondering how strong the windows of my house were and feeling disgruntled that it would be another rainy day, when the weather was supposed to be sunny and more like spring.

After the storm finally stopped that morning, I went to my art history class and stayed on campus for a while to work on an essay for my French class. I had seen that the forecast for late afternoon and evening that day included strong winds and the possibility of a tornado. I asked my dad if he thought my house would be safe enough if a tornado came through, and he said yes. My boyfriend, Drew, wanted me to come to campus to hide in a basement with him, and I planned on doing that closer to the time the bad weather was predicted. I still thought he was being overly cautious. When I returned to my little blue house on Forest Lake Drive that afternoon, I stayed there, watching James Spann on my laptop and cleaning my room because my parents were coming to help me move out of my house the following week.

When I grew restless, I baked white chocolate-raisin-pretzel oatmeal cookies and then chocolate chip cookies. I placed the oatmeal cookies in a plastic container and laid the chocolate chip cookies on the oven to cool. I heard the tornado sirens go off but didn't really think anything of it, because they had gone off a week before and nothing happened.

James Spann announced that a tornado and severe weather were headed for Tuscaloosa County but it seemed like it would stay away from Tuscaloosa, so I wasn't worried. I looked out the window at my neighbors tall, spindly trees swaying in the wind, which seemed to grow increasingly strong, and thought how easily they could fall on my neighbor's house. At 4:47 pm, I texted Drew: "I'm scared. I don't like my house. The trees are scary."

Drew told me to get in the bathtub, so I went and sat on the floor of my bathroom with my Renaissance art textbook and laptop. I would walk back and forth between the bathroom and bedroom, looking out my window for a green sky or any sign of a thunderstorm.

I decided to get in my bathtub, just in case. I laid down some towels and brought in a couple of pillows, and sat down with my laptop at my feet, still playing the broadcast of James Spann. It seemed like the weather report was saying that a tornado was coming to Tuscaloosa after all, but I couldn't understand where exactly. I texted my dad, "I am in my bathtub. I am safe." My dad responded, "There's a tornado?" and I answered, "Yes, it's a big deal." A couple minutes later, Drew texted me: "Are you covering your head with all your pillows? If you can get your mattress into your room, do it immediately. There is a half a mile wide tornado confirmed," and then, "Seriously. Can you get your mattress into your bathroom?" I went back into my bedroom and tried picking up my mattress, which was far too heavy for my small frame. I texted him back: "No. Where would I even put that?" Drew replied: "Over your head. This tornado is coming straight for Midtown." I almost decided to forget about the mattress, because it was cumbersome and I thought it was a dumb idea since it hurt my head. For some reason, though, I dragged it into the tiny bathroom with me.

I climbed back into the bathtub and pulled the mattress as close to me as I could, like a tent against the wall. I closed my laptop and waited. That's when I heard it – a sound like a freight train when you are standing very, very close to the tracks – and that's when I knew something was wrong. I called my dad because I was really scared and didn't want to feel so alone. I was sobbing and I kept telling him that I loved him because I realized that it might be the last time I ever talked to him.

As I was on the phone with him, I watched the roof fly off, the water pipes burst, and the floor split apart. Everything was moving, I was wet, and bits of debris were flying in my eyes and mouth- it was like being on a really horrible amusement park ride gone wrong. I think

I must have climbed out of the bathtub to get further underneath the mattress. Parts of the wall had fallen into the bathtub. I kept asking my dad if he thought it was over, as I looked at the dark and menacing open sky above. I looked around saw some of my shorts and shirts lying on the floor beside me, but I knew I wasn't in my bedroom where those should have been. They had flown underneath the walls when the floor had split. I still didn't know the full extent of what had happened. My dad told me to call 911, and I had to dial twice before I finally reached an operator. He told me they would send someone, and not realizing that so many other homes had been damaged, I thought that the voices I heard a few minutes later were those of the emergency crew.

I kept calling out, "Hello?" and I heard a male voice respond and ask me where I was. I told him I was in the bathroom behind the door. All four walls, although crooked and tilting, were still standing. He kept asking, "Can you see my hand?" and I kept responding, "No." The bathroom wall across from the bathtub had a mirror and I could look out at the open sky above. It still hadn't clicked with me that the rest of my house was gone.

There was a crack where the wall with the door and the wall with the mirror met, and the group of guys who were trying to help me finally managed to push this far enough open so that I could squeeze out. I didn't have shoes on. One of the guys, who had dark hair and eyes, had the presence of mind to tell me to put on white tennis shoes that we found. They weren't my shoes but I picked them up anyway. I looked around and realized that nearly every other part of my house – all the walls, all the rooms, everything – had disappeared. Parts of a wall had fallen on my car and smashed it beyond repair.

The dark-haired guy, who was around my age, told me his name was Eric and he took me to The Downs, an apartment complex down the street from Forest Lake Drive. The people inside were clearly shaken up, frantically calling their loved ones and clearing out one of the closets in the main hall in case another tornado was on its way. I asked everyone for water, but no one could seem to find any.

A few minutes later, I saw a familiar face – my boyfriend ran into the building and hugged me. My dad had told him where I had been taken. I can only imagine what would have happened if he had gone to my house first and found just the piles of debris. We left The Downs and started to walk to my house to see if we could recover my computer, but people on the street kept screaming that another tornado was coming in ten minutes and we all needed to take cover. This scared me more than anything because there was nowhere to go.

I called my dad every few minutes to ask if another storm was coming. I spent the rest of the night following Drew around as he took pictures of the devastation.

Drew and I stayed with friends that night at their apartment, which miraculously still had water and electricity. The next day, along with my friends and parents, who had driven from my home in Auburn, we went back to my neighborhood. The trees had all been snapped like matchsticks or completely uprooted from the ground. Cars were smashed. In some cases, a basement was all that was left behind from the house. The Forest Lake area and my house were completely unrecognizable. We managed to salvage a few things, like my wallet, some books, and a couple of pairs of jeans, but most of the house and my belongings had vanished. Strangely enough, we found the still intact Tupperware container with oatmeal cookies that I had baked right before the tornado.

Tornadoes are so strange – we found my kitchen mixer, still in its package, but there were pieces of the roof and insulation in the sealed box. I don't understand why one pair of jeans made it and another didn't when they were all in the same place. We found my spices still in one of the kitchen cabinets.

My sadness over not having my things or little car, "Finny," is nothing in comparison to how overwhelmingly happy I am to be alive. So many of my neighbors were not so fortunate. I don't understand how or why I survived a direct hit from a tornado of that magnitude, except for that the mattress must have saved me from being sucked up into the 200 mph winds.

I think when you escape from a situation in which you think you're going to die, you realize many things about your life and the way you have been living very quickly. Talk to and love as many people as you can. Be kind to others because you don't know what they're going through. Little things don't matter as much as you think they do. Most of all, life is too short to be unhappy.

*Meridith Shook is a junior majoring in art history and Spanish.*

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