



The way we were: Caroline Phillips with daughters Anya and Ella and husband Adrian at their immaculate house in Kensal Rise, which was due to be featured in *Homes & Property* before the tornado struck



The way we are: Caroline in the remains of her kitchen, wearing the only clothes she had after the tornado devastated her home and those of her neighbours

In seconds the tornado ripped my world apart

MY HOME has always been my sanctuary, a place of exquisite beauty and calm. I read or sit undisturbed on our leather sofa in our family room with its off-white walls, stainless steel and sage-green stone surfaces, and gaze through its wall of sliding glass doors onto our fragrant cream and lavender garden with its climbing roses, ancient apple and pear trees, camellias and jasmine.

All that changed in less than 10 seconds on Thursday when the tornado visited. The glass roof of the side-return exploded, tinkling down from the ceiling like sharp raindrops. Somebody's concrete windowsill crashed onto our worktop and now rests amid a quarry of shattered glass. A black roof tile speared the American walnut floating shelf, scattering our younger daughter Ella's birthday cards. 'Congratulations! Nine years old today!' The words have been lacerated by shards of glass.

Three bricks. Rainwater. Broken glass. A wooden bowl of Christmas clematines. These are vomited across our limestone floor.

If you dream of your home, it symbolises your psyche, what makes you you. It's your security. My soul was in that house. For three years, I'd indulged my passion for perfect decor. In January, it was to have been shot for *Homes & Property*. On Saturday, Ella is, no

A Standard writer tells of the terrifying moment when she saw the Kensal Rise tornado hurtling towards her

CAROLINE PHILLIPS

that's so, having three friends for a birthday sleeper. I am crying as I write this.

I was sitting in my first-floor office on Thursday morning, making a whirlwind of phone calls; speaking to Ella's classmates' parents, feeling explosive at hearing stories of bullying. There was a colossal thunderclap and gigantic explosion of lightning. I remember thinking it extraordinary; this physical manifestation of my psychic state. Suddenly I glanced out of the window. "Oh my God," I said, standing up. "Oh my God," I said into the phone.

There has been a terrorist bomb. I thought. A monstrous cloud of black smoke that spread the width of two three-storey houses and towered above them 200 feet away across our gardens was angrily blasting branches, missiles, bricks and branches into the air. With sudden terror, I realised that the "smoke" was moving towards me. The words "Wizard of Oz" went through my head as I crash dived under my desk. The second my head hit the floor and

I crossed my arms to protect my eyes and ears, there was an almighty explosion, then the sound of a 140-tonne aeroplane roaring through my office.

I lay on the floor screaming hysterically a primal sound. "Caroline, what's happened? Talk to me!" The voice of film producer Julia Barron came from the phone. I screamed and screamed. Once I witnessed an IRA bomb in Olympia where a second blast was expected. In my post-tornado confusion, I was waiting for another bomb to blow me up. I've never felt so alone. "Caroline! Are you hurt? Speak to me! Have you been hit by lightning?" I felt immensely relieved: lightning doesn't strike twice.

Pieces of glass fell from my (miraculously uncut) legs. I'd had sash windows overlooking the garden. Now there were panes punched out and glass thrown with violent abandon. Outside, the entire street's garden fences were scattered like a pack of cards.

A large uprooted tree from somebody else's garden had crash-landed on someone's roof... which was in my husband Adrian's lovingly tended garden. If I hadn't looked out of my window earlier and seen the tornado coming, I wouldn't

have been able to see this scene of devastation. I'd have been blinded. I called Adrian's mobile. He was at a job interview, having recently been cut from his work as a private banker. The mobile wouldn't connect.

HYSTERICAL, I phoned my brother Simon. He was watching his son George's Nativity play. "Our house has been hit by a tornado." He couldn't understand my screams. Watching our family boxer, Douschka, shaking and walking aimlessly in circles crunching glass, I rang 999.

Jamie, our musician neighbour and father of newborn Seth, was standing in our communal bomb-site. "Our roof has been lifted off," he said simply. "Look at our chimney dangling there." Incredibly his wife and son had been spared.

To the other side, builder Nathan Brown's and film-producer Juliet Levy's top-floor bedroom wall had been ripped off. And 90-year-old Beryl's loft kitchen had lost its walls and roof. You've seen these in the aerial photograph in the newspapers. We are among the worst hit.

In the street at the front it was a like a

film set, so surreal was the scene and so many the people. But instead of cameras, it was being videoed on phones. A group of refuse collectors stood rooted in shocked dismay. The side of a removal van was harpooned with roof tiles, a Toyota was halved by a concrete lintel. Thank God our daughters Anya and Ella were at school.

Juliet came out and we hugged and wept. She'd seen the tornado and had run away, thinking only of finding her daughter, two-year-old Jasmine. (She was unhurt.) Juliet had heard my cries through the thick Edwardian walls: "I thought they were the screams of a dying woman."

A dishevelled man in slippers walked past. "I've got to get into my house," he muttered anxiously. "I need my medicine. I'm a paranoid schizophrenic..."

Eyes wide with fear, geography teacher Vanessa Ross Russell ran towards me. "I don't know if Claudia (her two-year-old daughter) is in our house." We ran up the rest of the street together. Normally we just share school runs. Her front door was opened by her nanny, colour drained from her petrified face. Claudia stood by her side, like a statue.

The emergency services came, along with my shell-shocked husband. I had only the clothes I was shaking in, and my mobile. I couldn't find a glass-free spot for Douschka. A fireman carried her to safety in the fire-engine. Adrian went

into our house. "Please don't go back in," urged a fireman as he came out. "That chimney stack is about to fall." We'd lost part of our roof and all our back windows.

A neighbour, Chris Martin, an advertising producer, arrived. He survived the Hatfield rail disaster. On Thursday he had moved back home after three months of decorating. Luckily he was out when it struck. "You're in serious shock," he said.

Emergency services treated people for shock, kicked down doors, vacated properties. They acted with kindness, spirit and awesome efficiency. Faced with a messy child's bedroom, one fireman seized the moment: "Looks like a tornado hit your room, love!" We spent 10 tremulous minutes waiting to hear whether our damage would be covered by Lark Insurance Services or disallowed as an act of God. "Well, are you?" asked a policewoman, her eyes bursting with compassion. We are.

I spoke to endless media. A need to be recognised when I'd almost been no longer. Then came acquaintances', friends' and family's touching offers of help, beds, cash and clothes. Deep-frozen, I'd already borrowed four jumpers from neighbours: I wore them all for three days. Amid the scene of devastation, a man tried to bring order to his world by washing his car.

As rain poured into our kitchen, I

dreaded an electrical fire stealing the remains of our home. I feared looting.

Then we heard that a fiftysomething man had suffered serious head injuries. With rising foreboding, we went from official to official, from Methodist church hall to the British Legion centre, to find out if it was our friend Chris Barker. It wasn't.

News changed by the minute. We were told that our house (though not visibly terrible) was the most dangerous in the street. There was a rumour of its being demolished. When the cordon banning residents access to affected CREDITON Road houses came down, apartheid prevailed for three houses. Ours was one.

Since then I've been in an emotional cyclone. I already had a brilliant trauma specialist therapist. I went to see him on Thursday evening. I've felt a desperate need not to be alone, to keep in touch. (We've stayed with friends rather than a hotel because I want to be with people I love.)

I haven't slept much. I've shivered brutally. For three nights, I saw the tornado coming towards me whenever I shut my eyes. I've jumped at loud noises, panicked hearing sirens, cried endlessly. Sat in my car and screamed and screamed hysterically at such unfairness. Fought the desire for cigarettes and alcohol after 18 years' abstinence. Despaired of my loss of earnings. Felt like never living in my house again.

'I haven't slept much. For three nights I saw the tornado coming towards me whenever I closed my eyes'

Now we've been allowed home to survey our private war-zone. We don't yet know the extent of the structural damage, but it may take six months to repair. Neighbours Sunil Vijayakar and Geraldine Larkin have been told to throw away *all* their possessions, filled as they are with shards of glass. Simon Willsmer, our loss adjuster, hasn't yet broken that news to us. The insurance

companies have taken a recent slating. But he was sensitive and reasonable. He said we could stay in a hotel.

Adrian explained that there is only one hotel in London: Claridge's. Simon did not demur. And he loved what's left of our specialist-polished plaster walls.

We're acknowledging our children's trauma, talking to them and giving them lots of treats. Staff at Francis Holland, Anya's school, have been magnificent in their sensitive handling of

her feelings. We took Anya, 11, "home" on Friday. Her room was virtually untouched, being at the front of the house. But she feels displaced and traumatised.

On Sunday we took Ella. She was devastated that her cat, Happy, was missing, possibly killed. She surveyed the destruction wreaked on her spotty Cath Kidston carpet, rosebud blinds and soft toys. "You always say my room looks like a bomb site," she said, smiling bravely. "Now it really does."

Two roof tiles and 50 pieces of fist-sized glass lay on her bed. Just days before, unwell, she'd have been there at 11.02am. Tears filling her eyes, she picked up a pink rabbit, her favourite toy. A sprinkling of glass fell off his fur.

I attended Friday's crisis meeting in the British Legion. A room full of frightened people who'd scarcely slept in this makeshift refuge; many of whom had lost their homes and were too distressingly poor to afford insurance cover. I was offered a hard hat, possible council tax rebate but, so far, no counselling.

Nearby were the "Scientology Volunteers" in emblazoned fluorescent jackets: people praying (or should that be praying?) on the vulnerable.

"Almost worse than losing my house is being accosted by Scientologists," I told the waiting cameramen outside. There was a tornado in Kensal Rise in the Fifties. Now I know about the Scientol-

ogists, I can't risk living there any more. On Friday evening, stupidly, we met friends for dinner in that awful eye of the social tornado, Cipriani. I wore Tornado Chic — the grey pants and multiple jumpers that were still my only clothes. I screamed with grief in the loo.

I fought the urge to shout: "Less than five miles from here, there are old people like Beryl who didn't even have enough money to paint her door, who have lost their roofs..."

The Apocalypse was not all bad. There was something comforting about watching the Salvation Army dispensing tea and sandwiches. Uplifting seeing people in crisis helping one another. And meeting kindly new souls in the street.

As for the house, it's just bricks and mortar. We're not in a tent in Pakistan or even Brent council's temporary accommodation. In fact, we staying with close friends. Thankfully Christmas isn't such a disaster — we already had plans to go away. Everybody is safe. Happy Ella's cat, returned this morning.

Last night I didn't see the tornado when I went to sleep. I feel euphoric that I'm alive. I've got used to friends calling me Dorothy; a reference to the Wizard of Oz. My family surmises that I'll do anything to get out of cooking Christmas lunch. Oh, and now we might just get that communal garden we've always wanted.