

When the phone rang on the morning of April 16, I was writing an e-mail to a friend who is working in Afghanistan. There had been a suicide bombing a few miles from where he is stationed and he had written to say that he was okay. I was planning to say that perhaps he ought to come home earlier than September. Like, tomorrow. I didn't know, as I wrote, that a tragedy was happening 20 miles away. I learned of it in a phone call from my cousin in Las Vegas. "Headline News" was on in his hotel. In my little office on the mountainside, the TV was off.

"I just heard about the shooting at Virginia Tech," he said. "Twenty-two people dead (then). Do you know anybody there?"

Well, yeah. Dozens of people. It's just down the road.

My husband and I have degrees from Tech, and I once worked in the building in front of Norris. My children are students at Roanoke College with half their high school classmates enrolled at Tech. I know professors and staff members, but my closest connection nowadays is the young NASCAR driver who helped with my new novel. He is in graduate school at Virginia Tech and my first thought that morning was whether he was safe.

"He's fine," I thought. "What are the odds?"

I called him anyway. Got his voice mail. "I know you're fine," I said, feeling stupid. "Please let me know for sure, though."

And he was fine. But it was devastating. So close to home. The waiting to see if any of the victims were friends of my family or of our friends. How many degrees of separation? I wrote back to my friend in Afghanistan, "You might as well stay put. It isn't safe anywhere anymore."

— Sharyn McCrumb M.A. '85, author of several *New York Times* best-selling novels.



A black flag was hung in the atrium of the College of Architecture at Texas A&M University.

