



Semi-charred kind of life

Ryerson's Alex Dodd tells the tale of Toronto's Queen Street fire

TORONTO—When somebody tells you there's a fire but you see no evidence, you assume the best. It must be a product of one too many fire drills and visits from firefighters in elementary school. When I think of fire, I remember Smokey the Bear warning me about burning sticks and dry grass—not half a block of apartment buildings charred beyond recognition.

Nothing about the situation made me panic at the time—but really, nothing is more frightening than the prospect of everything you own being destroyed by flames. I was at home when the fire started, asleep in my brand new bed, oblivious to what was about to be the one of the worst fires in Toronto history. I was disturbed from my sleep that morning by my new roommate as she exclaimed that I had to get up because there was a fire. Not thinking much of it, I threw on my pants from the day before, grabbed a hoodie, put on my coat and gloves, and walked out to the hallway.

I kept asking myself, "If your house was burning down, what would you save?" as I stood on the sidewalk watching my apartment at 619 Queen Street West burn to the ground three weeks ago. Three days earlier, I had moved into my apartment on the top floor above Suspect Video. I had barely unpacked, let alone settled in.

I got up around 5am, turned the corner to the stairs, and realized the situation was more severe than a stovetop fire. I couldn't even see to the bottom of the short stairwell through the thick, yellow smoke. I found myself suddenly fearful that I was about to run into a burning room, surrounded by flames with no way out. But I had no choice; I had to go downstairs. My eyes still stung a week later from the run down those stairs.

As I ran out of the building, two fire engines were already parked in front of the neighbouring building, which was smothered in billowing black smoke. I watched the National Sound building go up in a blaze as firefighters set up their equipment right in front of me. They were organized,

almost militant in their routine, and performed with speed, diligence, and a stiff grace. They were setting up ladders and breaking windows to gain access to upper floors and readying the trucks to pump gallons of water onto the houses.

I stood around with cold, wet, bare feet for about an hour watching the flames climb up the front of the building like burning vines on a Victorian electronics store. I could see the fire poking out from the hole it burned through the roof, high above the street now swarming with police, TTC officials, and Kevin Frankish of *Breakfast Television*.

I sat silently in the bus that was sent for us to wait in and listened as people spoke of their experiences living here, half-shocked, half-excited. A few seemed filled with contempt by the fact that now they were now homeless, already aware that the fire was chewing through their entire lives as they sat there, helpless.

With the fire seemingly contained to the one building, I went down the street and back to bed in my girlfriend's apartment. I woke up to numerous text messages asking if my girlfriend and I were okay. I still wasn't concerned though—I was certain that the fire had been controlled by the battalion. But that wasn't the case. It was all gone.

So what would I have done differently?

Inevitably, the topic of insurance was raised. Nobody I talked to had renter's insurance, including me. I was told that, because of the age of the buildings, it was too expensive. I hadn't looked into it myself. I hadn't had a chance to yet, having only moved in days prior, and neither had my roommates. In fact, in all the conversations I've had with twentysomethings since then, not one person has any home insurance whatsoever. But with all the publicity the insurance companies are getting from the fire, I felt like I could be their new spokesperson.

Other than insurance, I also would have put on my favourite hoodie,

instead of the first one I saw. I would have grabbed my backpack and shoved it full of socks, underwear, and shirts. I would have taken the things I don't even think about when I use them everyday because when you lose everything, those are the things that you need first.

postcards I'd received and collected. I see all of the concrete, irreplaceable things that I kept and loved, and I see that they're all gone.

Despite this, I've witnessed the generosity of the people around me, receiving support from friends and strangers, and was given everything

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I walked by the site every day for a week after the fire, watching the fire chief talk to reporters as the demolition crew waited to go through the debris. I walked by the site in a single line, squeezed between journalists, photo-bloggers, and disaster tourists. I was offended, appalled that so many people could be so amused by this tragedy that has engulfed my life. But it was just my emotions. To these people, it wasn't personal; it was interesting, newsworthy, and, quite frankly, entertaining.

Now I take the Queen Street streetcar by my old home on the way to work every morning and gaze up at what's left of my apartment: my balcony and its wooden fence. The streetcar slows down, and all the riders' heads turn as we pass Ground Zero. But I see more than just a pile of rubble and scorched wood. I see my record collection. I see my books of drawings and writing. I see all of the favourite

from cash to hand-me-downs. I've had countless offers for every piece of furniture I need and for free places to stay for as long as I need. After everything I own was charred and burned, I still have clothes, food, shelter, and friends. Everything else will be replaced in time.

—Alex Dodd
The Eyeopener (Ryerson)

