

Things we found in the fire: ‘I’d compare it to the Chinese torture, where you bleed out from 1,000 cuts’

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Things we found in the fire



(Photo by Len Ramsey)

By Kyle Muzyka

WHEN THE fire reached town, propane tanks exploded to the beat of their own drums. Two blocks away, drivers waited anxiously, stuck in a bottleneck with the fire approaching.

Despite years of experience, nothing could have prepared the 7,000 residents of Slave Lake, Alta., for the flames that would engulf a quarter of the town in 2011.

Every May, a strong prevailing wind from the southeast blows through the town, and the rest of northern Alberta. The dead grass provides the fuel, the dry weather provides the ignition, and the wind carries the torch until the rain pours.



I WOKE up at about 6 a.m. on May 14 with severe stomach pain. I woke my mother, who had her arm where my father would be in three hours, sleeping after his night shift ended.

She dismissed the pains as hunger, though I was sure it was more than that. I went back to bed, unaware of the bad omen my stomach represented.

I woke up again, pain-free, at around 10 a.m. It was a bright Saturday morning, with blue skies and light pouring in through the blinds, which were shaking in the crisp breeze.

My mother and I drove the 10 minutes from our acreage to Slave Lake. Skateboarding was on the agenda for me; my mother would visit my aunt.

A slightly sprained ankle already made skateboarding hard, and the 100 km/h winds made it harder. Already feeling subdued by the gusts, I noticed that the air smelled different from the usual blend of grass clippings and dirt, mixed with the sweat on my upper lip. It smelled like fire.

I glanced to the east and saw a tall column of dark, thick smoke. I knew my house was gone.



LEN RAMSEY stepped outside with his son, Hart, to assess the situation. The dark smoke columns looked menacing, reminiscent of a nuclear explosion.

The situation looked more serious to Len than what was projected on the faces of his neighbours and son. However, his trust of authority overruled his feelings of uneasiness. Surely the firefighters and police would take care of it, and if they couldn't, they'd evacuate.

At 54, Len had lived in northern Alberta all his life. So, he felt he was a bit more worldly than his 17-year-old son. Forest fires are a regular occurrence in the boreal forests of the north, and familiarity numbed the feeling of imminent danger for Len and others in Slave Lake.

Hart was a little less trusting of authority than his father, so he had opted to pack a bag the night before. Both looked toward the east and saw a sliver of jet-black smoke within the dark grey column. At first Len thought it was an oil wellhead catching fire, but soon realized that it was coming from the remnants of a structure that was. With the smoke went all the belongings, pictures and memories of the family that lived there.



JAMES MacKINNON had only been lived in Slave Lake a few years. As a member of the Environmental Sustainable Resource Development, his job was to combat forest fires.

However, MacKinnon had been shipped up to Fort McMurray on May 14, because the fire hazard was higher than anywhere else in the province, and May 14 was a multi-start day, one when multiple fires were expected to break out.

“I’d compare it to the Chinese torture; where you bleed out from 1,000 cuts.”

Having multiple fires stretched the fire-fighting resources in the province. Because of the imminent threat to the people of Slave Lake and their homes, resources had been moved to that area. This meant James and his team were on their own in Fort McMurray.

The night of the 14th, MacKinnon returned to his hotel room after a 12-hour day, and got a phone call from his wife, Meagan, who told him she was nervous about the fire outside Slave Lake.

He was torn. He didn’t want to abandon his team in Fort McMurray, whom he had been instructed to lead, but he also had a responsibility to be at home with his wife and family.

By 7 a.m., MacKinnon was on his way home.



MY FAMILY and I got to see the remains of our lives on the morning of the May 15. The fire had been brought under control overnight; this led many, including the emergency workers, to believe the worst was over.

I stood over the ashes, the heat of the smouldering rubble melting the soles of my shoes. My parents held each other with one arm, and wiped tears with the other. My dog, Tazz, sat at their feet, sensing their sadness.

Underneath the rubble we found the odd piece of ceramic, which had experienced this kind of heat before. Collectible NHL cups littered where the laundry room had been, where they had been in storage, waiting for a time when they might be worth selling.

My parents cracked open the safe that held my dad's most prized possession: a Wayne Gretzky rookie card. He swindled his younger brother into making a deal for some other cards in 1980, and had held onto it ever since.

The fire had incinerated everything inside the safe, including the card.

Short a few coins with disfigured pictures of Queen Elizabeth II, there was nothing left. We went into town.

Six structures were lost on the 14th, including my house, my grandmother's house, and a distant neighbour's down the road. Losing any structures in a fire is significant, but many more Slave Lake residents were thankful the fire hadn't forced them out of their homes.

Unfortunately, much worse was riding in on the wind.



TARA BOYLE had been a teacher in Slave Lake for three years before she finally moved the last of her belongings out from Ontario. Her grandmother's china was among

the family heirlooms she brought from Kingston, after deciding that Slave Lake would be her home.

The afternoon of the 15th, she was visiting her future sister-in-law, who was making bacon-wrapped seafood for dinner.

Boyle looked over to the east and saw dark grey columns of smoke, closer than yesterday. To be on the safe side, she walked home to pack a bag.

Since she had been a resident of Slave Lake for only a short period, Boyle wasn't used to seeing smoke nearby. The fires made her uneasy, but her fiancé and friends had always reassured her there was nothing to worry about.

"This happens every year."

Something about this time felt different to Boyle, though. It could have been the proximity of the smoke, the pungent smell of boreal spruce catching fire. Whatever it was, she felt the need to grab some things, in case of evacuation.

She stepped outside and saw bumper-to-bumper traffic. People were evacuating, and if she hadn't looked outside, she wouldn't have been any the wiser.

"It was surreal; it was like *The Wizard of Oz*."

"I walked out and was like, 'Holy crap!'"

Boyle began to walk quickly. The prevailing wind had returned, picking up the dirt and smacking her in the face.

“It was almost cutting.”

As she scurried down the street towards her apartment building, a voice caught her attention from one of the vehicles waiting to escape.

“Hey, Ms. Boyle!”



I WAS strangely cheerful when I greeted my high school social studies teacher. I had no reason to be; my house had burned down and our town was at risk to suffer the same fate.

Yet I couldn't help myself.

It felt like a dream. I'd wake up in my bed at home, eat some cereal and make plans with my friends. Instead, I sat in the backseat of my dad's truck, ecstatically waving to my high school teacher because I didn't know what else to do.

Despite the gridlock, we made our way to Wal-Mart, where emergency workers had directed us. There was a fire to the east, another to the west, and a fire north of us. We couldn't escape the town. We were sitting ducks.

[VIEW: Annotated map of Slave Lake](#)



TRAFFIC CREPT toward the Ramseys' neighbourhood, though there hadn't been a formal evacuation notice. The local radio station assured the public that there was to be no evacuation, until it went dark. Then the signal was replaced with static.

It became clearer to Len Ramsey that he should leave, too. He saw a friend of his with a forestry background, who was leaving town. Ramsey approached him with a question.

"Should we leave?"

Ramsey received a quick response.

"You see the colours of the cloud over there?" "They're orange. We evacuated Widewater [a nearby community] when they weren't nearly that bad. So yeah, you should go."

The Ramseys piled into their vehicle, Len's mother-in-law included, and joined their neighbours in the escape.

As they neared the main three-way stop, Ramsey could hear the drumbeat of the propane tanks exploding.

The fire was in town.



AFTER THE fire jumped Highway 88, MacKinnon tried to call his wife to warn her to pack some things and leave.

“Your call could not be completed as dialed.”

The cell towers were jammed, adding to the frustration building inside of him. He had to get back to his home to check on his wife. His family had just a few minutes to pack some things and leave their house.

MacKinnon tried to go back to the fire, but kept getting stopped by his neighbours, who were frantic for information. His yellow uniform was a telltale sign of his line of work. He eventually escaped, as the fire was escaping from his coworkers.

Residents were leaving their homes while their back decks were on fire.

Now that the fire was in town, MacKinnon and the rest of the professional, volunteer and forest firefighters focused on minimizing the damage.



RAMSEY AND his family sat in the spillway, about 250 metres from the town, surrounded by fresh, green grass, a firebreak that ensured their safety.

Though his son had had plenty of time to pack, Ramsey’s trust of authority backfired on him, giving him only a few minutes to pack what was important. He had forgotten the

journals he and his wife, Nicola, kept during the many vacations they took over the years.

He had this itching to go and get those journals. Weighing his options, he decided to walk up the spillway with his 22-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, and back into town, against the advice of every emergency worker he encountered.

“It was like a ghost town.”

Fewer than half the vehicles normally parked on his street were left, and the smoke was thicker and heavier than he remembered. Piling the journals and other paintings in their second car, the Ramseys made quick work of their house, like robbers of their own possessions.

Part of the town had been decimated. A single person was riding around on an ATV, presumably looking for anyone who hadn't left. The east side of 12th Street had been partially destroyed. Ramsey was wishing he had brought his camera to photograph what remained, but he had to get back to his family.

He planned to leave the same way he had left the first time; through the Bear Trails – walking paths that weaved through town. This time, however, he faced an obstacle that hadn't been there the first time: The grass was on fire in front of his car.

Thankfully, one of the firefighters, James Soulodre, was there to move his fire truck, so Ramsey could get by. He was a former student of Ramsey.

Ramsey and his daughter returned to the spillway, to rejoin the rest of their family in the wait to escape town. They could do nothing but watch as the fire swallowed houses whole.



THE LINE of traffic was moving very slowly on the highway, but Boyle, her fiancé, his aunt and his sister were on their way out. Her sister-in-law had brought the crab cakes, so everyone got to eat. Aunt Carol was holding a glass of wine in the front seat.

Boyle glanced over at the spillway and saw the Morrison family sitting on the tailgate of their truck. She waved hi.

The Morrisons waved back, looking confused and sombre. Boyle learned later that the family had just left their home with minutes to spare, losing everything, including the cat.

In hindsight, Boyle says, it seems silly. But, just as I had with my over-the-top greeting of my social studies teacher, she waved because it felt like the most normal thing to do.

The situation was so surreal that we all seemed to feel that we would wake up, and there would be no trace of a fire.

**“It was surreal; it was like
The Wizard of Oz.” – Tara Boyle**



WHEN THE smoke cleared enough to let traffic through, we started to move. We had piled into my mother's Pontiac Grand Am, which had an eighth of a tank of gas left, slightly more than was in my dad's pickup. We got onto Highway 2, followed the sluggish traffic, and began our trek into a new life.

Tazz got his name because he was always a bit of a Tasmanian devil, barking at anyone who wasn't immediate family. But even he could sense the dire situation, and did not make a peep throughout the trip's entirety.

No one really said much. There was just the faint sound of my iPod playing in the speakers of the car.

It was the Foo Fighters' "Times Like These." I asked my parents to listen to the chorus.

It's times like these you learn to live again.

We drove southeast. We had no possessions other than the Grand AM, no idea where we were headed, and no clue how we would rebuild. What we had was ourselves, and that was enough.