

FIRE IN THE CLINIC: A MEMOIR

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Shortly after midnight on Wednesday, December 23rd, I was awakened by Dominique, my wife. "The clinic is on fire". She had received a phone call from another tenant in the building. Sleepy, unfocused, I put effort into dressing warmly. The weather had been record breaking cold for Colorado, and as I left the house, the temperature was minus 15 degrees. No cars were on the road. A mile from my building I could see a great plume of white smoke, and when I arrived there were four large fire trucks. The scene was surreal as the cold emphasized the steam and smoke. Firefighters were serious and intent, much like soldiers during a long campaign. I was the first of the tenants to arrive.

"My office is in here," I said to a nearby fire fighter.

"What's in there?" he asked. "Is there any manufacturing?"

"No", I replied", mostly doctor's offices."

"Are there any oxygen tanks?"

"No", I said. "They are mostly chiropractors. What's the situation?"

"The fire is in the ceiling of the second floor. We don't know how deep it goes".

Firefighters emerged from the building tired, steaming with smoke, gas masks and oxygen tanks firmly in place. They went to service their tanks by a truck, and each helped another to remove the heavy tanks. More trucks arrived - medical emergency, ambulances. Everyone was grim and determined.

I walked around the building. There was another truck on the west side, a ladder sent to the roof. Another truck on the south side - where my office is, again a ladder reaching to the roof. I returned to the main entrance on the east side. Eventually other tenants - all my friends - showed up. We did not ask any questions, not wanting to bother them or get in the way, just letting the firefighters do their work. Five fire fighters would emerge at

a time, bone tired, and five more would go in. They were all working the stairs to the second floor.

At first, we were confident that the fighters would successfully put out the fire on the second floor. We anticipated some smoke damage to our clinics, and one doctor spoke of renting an ozone generator the next day to clear out the smoke smell. We all anticipated going back to work after Christmas. It was exciting, adrenalin flowed, and there was a certain amount of black humor and good will. Only one office seemed threatened, and it was on the second floor, north side. By 3 o'clock, I was ready to go home. I joined the others at the north side of the building. That's when it became obvious that flames were emerging from the roof. This was a more serious development. Up until then, it was smoke or steam, but now flames were getting larger and larger through the roof top. Don't the firemen see it? Why aren't they responding?

I walked past the rescue car that served as the command center. Two men sat in the car, one of them talking on the phone. When I asked for any news, they were forthcoming in updating me on the situation. "We have decided to abandon the north side. The fire has spread throughout the ceiling and roof. It is too dangerous to keep our people on the second floor, and the roof is melting. We cannot put anyone there. Our decision is to abandon the north side and save the south side. We are going to cut a trench between the two sides so that it does not spread".

This seemed possible. The north and south sides are separated by a large open air atrium, with very little roof connecting the two halves. I was personally encouraged, because my office was on the south side. I returned to report the grim news to my compatriots, still watching the flames on the north side.

"They are losing the north side". I told them what the marshals had reported. Those who had offices on the north side developed looks of deep concern and sorrow. Up to this point, we were watching a dream, one that would have a happy ending. Now, at least for a few, there might be no happy ending.

It occurred to me that the fire could spread to the south side, and that my own first floor clinic was in danger. If I lost everything, I thought, what would be the most important thing to save? I decided it was my patient payment cards, one for each patient, each with an address and telephone number. Could I save my card files? There was no way the

firemen would let me in, they were too busy, and tenant needs were secondary. My clinic was on the south side, there was no fire there, no danger. Firemen surrounded the building, except, ironically, for the burning north side. My friends had returned to the east; the north was deserted. I walked quietly and directly to an open stairwell, and disappeared into the garage. It was dark and eerie, save the lights of the fire trucks along the open borders of the building. I found the back garage door that led up to my clinic going through a pitch black stairwell. I emerged into my hallway with only the faintest of light. It was surreal. I quickly located my files and appointment book and returned down the stairs to the garage. I walked back to the northside, going back the way I came. Nonchalantly, I walked to my car. Jay Wilson, my next door tenant and old friend, saw what I had done. "Can you do that again with my files" he asked? "Jay, follow me," I responded, " we'll do it again".

Jay and I entered as before, and quickly got to the clinic space. We have a shared back door, ironically for fire escape purposes. "We need flashlights", he said. I realized I kept a small penlight in my lab coat in the closet. Jay also found a clinic penlight. I helped him get his files, and again we left. This time, when we reached the street, I saw that Scott Storrie had retrieved his files. He was accompanied by a young firefighter, who allowed him that one trip. They had to go through the main entrance, which was busy with firefighters. By now, flames were engulfing the north roof. Jay pleaded with the firefighter if he could get some important things from his southside clinic. The man said yes, but he would accompany us. The south side was still out of danger. The three of us entered my clinic through the garage door, and this time I made every effort to take important things. I was able to grab some framed Chinese calligraphy, pictures of my Oriental teachers, my family, my diplomas, several notebooks. Taking advantage of the opportunity, I was able to take my computer and some important medical machines.

As I walked through my darkened office, I was held in a frozen moment of a dream. The space was lit only by distant flames across the atrium and the rotating yellow and red lights of the fire trucks parked outside. Distant voices of firemen barking outcommands, warnings, locations. I methodically went from room to room looking for irreplaceable things and throwing them into a wastebasket to take with me. I found myself quietly whispering, "Mayday, Mayday, going down, going down." I was reminded of passengers on a sinking ship - dark hallways, the smell of smoke, a sense of impending doom.

"Jay, we really should get Rebecca's files". I had a key to the back door of Rebecca Hutchins, the building's optometrist. She was out of town, gone for Christmas. Jay and I quickly grabbed four large boxes and her appointment book, and left the building. This was our last trip, a total of three; the fire fighter said we really must abandon the building now, it is becoming too dangerous. As we left the building, a different older and tougher fireman blocked Jay. "You have no business being in there. This building is off limits to you. You are to stay away from here".

We got our belongings into our parked cars, slogging though the torrents of water that were being pumped into the building, and down the street. The water was turning first to slush, and quickly to ice. There was no way for any of the northside tenants to enter their space. Jay and I were lucky, and our limited opportunity had been successful.

I watched as flames engulfed the entire second floor. "I just don't believe this is happening," I remarked to Scott. In the next two hours, the firefighters valiantly held the flames on the north side. In the process, they blew out all the sheet glass surrounding the offices. We could see treatment tables and bookshelves inside being flooded with water, and we watched as fire shot up in various rooms. My hopes were that they would keep the fire from spreading to the south side, but any hopes of working out of this building again were getting slim. At 5 am I decided to go home. Minus 15 degree weather and the late hour ended created total exhaustion.

At 6 am Jay Wilson called. The fire had spread to the south side, the building was going.

The next day I returned. It looked like Sarajevo on a bad day. Scattered fires were still appearing throughout the building. Heavy machinery had been brought in, and all the glass and brick walls were stripped away, probably to give the firemen easier access. The second floor had completely collapsed, now just a blackened and charred mess. To my amazement, all of the rooms on the southside were completely intact. No fire, no water damage. All the plants standing, all the pictures on the wall, books in the bookcases, treatment tables ready for the next patients. Rebecca's optometry chair ready and waiting. No glass, no walls. Like a doll house, Dominique later remarked. I think it was Dominique's feng shui work as an architect that saved my clinic, and by extension, the south side, but the north side was not so fortunate. Every office completely demolished. Inside, their patient records, patient card files, computers, mementos, hidden Christmas

gifts; their professional lives now a blank and charred screen. For the south side tenants, an inconvenience; for the north side tenants, a total disaster and tragedy.

Six and a half years ago, fifteen or so practitioners - medical doctors, chiropractors, acupuncturists, massage therapists, rolfers, cranial sacral therapists - had all come together as a group, wanting to work together. We found a happy home at Center Green, and we called ourselves the Center Green Wellness Community. Here came some of Boulder's most experienced and trained practitioners of the natural healing arts. All of us were given an opportunity to have successful practices, to sustain our wonderful adventures providing healing and comfort to our patients. And now all will scatter to the winds to set up new practices, waiting until later to reclaim a working stability that for the moment is lost.