



34 Burget Avenue
January 2021

Three days ago, my house at 34 Burget Avenue burned down. It wasn't *my* house—I was renting it. And it didn't totally burn down, either, but it was deemed uninhabitable, all of my belongings inside it irretrievable, and there are wood boards where windows once were. No one was there at the time, so it was our neighbors who reported it. I am not writing this to self-indulge or seek pity from whomever reads it. And I do not want to preach about loss or the relative unimportance of material possessions. This is a modest essay; I just want to write what happened.

I had been at some friends' house the night I found out about the fire. They are twins who played basketball with me in high school. We were sitting around some propane heaters (as one does nowadays) reminiscing about our old coaches and teachers. I drove home at about midnight and began to fry some eggs and toast before I fell asleep. My left hand held a rubber spatula, and my right held my cell phone when a notification banner appeared. The house looked normal, but one window on the side of the house radiated a bright orange. I left the eggs in the pan overnight, uncooked, and ran upstairs to tell my parents.

We still do not know how it started. One of my housemates was there an hour beforehand, and the fire started in his room. These facts lead me to think that he may have unwittingly started the fire. Perhaps he turned on the 90-inch television in the common room, and the small outlet couldn't handle the wattage. Some harmless action like this might have caused it. I suppose in this case, it would be the landlord's fault for not maintaining the house's wiring. Or maybe that housemate smoked a cigarette in his room, as he would often do, and left it lit as he left. I'd like to know how it started, but I don't think I'll ever know. The landlords are not pursuing us for damages.

I saw a few photos and videos of the house. Most shocking is the room where the fire started. The frame is dark, save for a fluorescent strip of caution tape. There is nothing recognizable about the room, which looks like a scrapyard. The shrapnel that used to be his bed, his dresser, his floorboards, and a purple tapestry is charred on the ground. He had a pet tortoise, too, who he thankfully evacuated before the fire. Many tortoises live as long as their owners. Thank God—Fleshy lives another day.

The bathroom separated my room and Sheldon's, and it did not look burned so much as covered in soot. It was not a nice room to begin with. Some of the shower tiles were missing. The shower drain didn't work well either, so you had to take a five-minute shower or you'd were ankle-deep in dirty water. My housemates didn't empty the trash bucket. And when I used the toilet, I once saw a family of cockroaches on the tiles next to me. It will finally get the renovation it has been needing.

Then there was my room, and everything inside it. Being less proximate to the source of the fire, my room remained recognizable. Like the bathroom, everything was covered in what looked like soot. I had a beautiful red rug that burned. I had a piece of art that burned, a painted wooden panel my brother gave to me. My meditation cushion burned. And, most costly, all of my furniture burned. The winter coat my mom gave me burned. The rain coats my dad gave me burned. The electric tea kettle my girlfriend gave me burned. My stack of books-to-be-read burned. Some of the items I will miss most aren't the most expensive, but those given to me by people I love. Those items are reminders of my relationship with the person who gave them to me, and so their loss feels like a loss of relationships. The other ones I will miss are the most used ones: my belt, my winter hat, my socks. These, though, are more easily replaced.

Also lost were the future moments I would have spent with my housemates: cooking, playing Catan, or watching the Super Bowl with one another. All but two of my eight housemates were strangers to me before the three months I spent with them, and I came to love all of them for their quirks and unlike personalities. One was quiet and 6½ feet tall. We would play board games and sometimes work out together. The first week I was there, my housemates cheered him on as he ate five Costco hotdogs in ten minutes, just for the hell of it. He is a brilliant programmer and is going to work at Amazon next year. The other seven residents of 34 Burget Avenue were characters in their own right. There are a lot of good times left un-had, now. For some of them, the tenuous connection we shared burned when the house did.

Now, I am going to move in with more people I don't know so well. I am hopeful that my new home will be like my old one, at least regarding the people who live in it (and unlike my old one regarding the bathroom). I wonder how often I will see my old housemates, or if we will play Catan together again. I hope we stay in touch. I bet I will wonder tens of times, "Where is my pink hoodie?" before I remember my pink hoodie burned a few days ago, the same one my two friends and I bought at the mall and all wore to school the next day. This time, I will close my door when I leave for break, so if there's a fire, it might not reach my room.