Los Angeles Times

Voices

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Survivor's guilt, dumb luck and the L.A. fires



Five homes, so close to one another in Rustic Canyon.

The one just up the hillside from me, the flames swallowed whole.

Outside another, two doors down from mine, five-gallon spring water bottles in a wooden casing leaned against wooden siding. When the two homes between us — one a Prohibition-era speakeasy — blazed in livid rage, the spring-water bottles exploded. A firefighter said the fire saved the water-bottle house from the fire.

As for me, I have a roof over my head because of (a) Berkeley firefighters ("Berkeley???"), (b) the director of the Charles Moore Foundation, who flew in from Austin, Texas, to protect a Moore-designed house in adjacent Santa Monica Canyon and, along with other fearless souls, hosed down ("What???") smoldering late-breaking embers on the side of my house and (c) a flood of impossible-to-deserve luck. (The Moore house survived.)

When the view from your kitchen window is first mangled metal and ashes, and then a scorched lot, you spend lots of time rethinking luck, why it found you and snubbed your neighbors, how luck and cataclysm work side by side.

The fire here started with the house on the hill on Jan. 8, Day 2 of the L.A apocalypse. Rustic Canyon, lying just below Pacific Palisades, could have so easily been engulfed. But the densely wooded, highly flammable enclave escaped — except for three houses within 30 feet of my refrigerator — due to westerly winds, or the canyon micro-climate, or the two guys who rushed over from Venice ("Huh???") and extinguished a brush fire on Mesa Drive early on. The prevailing theory: Pure dumb luck.

At 2 p.m. on Jan. 8, a full day after I evacuated, someone who stayed behind texted me a photo of my home backdropped by the former speakeasy next door, fully engulfed. *That's it. All is lost.*

At 7 p.m., someone else texted video of the street, my house still standing!

It was weeks before I lightened up enough to say, "Those were the worst five hours of my life since the last time I attended the Emmys."

After six evacuated weeks, there was a remediated, hydroxyl-infused, air-purifiers-everywhere home for me to come back to, a home that felt like a total stranger but is slowly coughing its way back to pre-Jan. 7 Los Angeles.

Sadly, I'm lagging behind the attitude of my own house. Desperately trying to focus on just being thankful for my luck is futile. Inanimate objects in every room goose haunting thoughts: "If the flames had high-jumped 10 feet north, this framed, underachieving junior high school report card would be gone forever."

By the way, did I mention that during the fire, a humongous eucalyptus collapsed, just below the uphill house that burned, and inexplicably fell sideways instead of straight down on my den?

Chi, my (Vietnamese; devoutly Christian) friend, calls: "Wow, that Jewish God was really looking out for you."

As a devoutly secular atheist, I ask, "You think so?"

"Not really. I just thought it was the thing say. You probably just lucked out."

At a certain point, my overdose of good luck started to feel especially crummy. Right on cue, a woman walking by with some kind of doodle scanned one of the ruined homes beside mine then turned to me. "Boy, must be tough to get so lucky when so many people's lives have been destroyed."

After she turned my survivor's guilt into her survivor's guilt by proxy, I called a friend, David Kennerly, Pulitzer Prize-winning war photographer. He recounted running from machine gun fire in East Pakistan when a soldier running beside him was shot to death. He looked down, thought, "The hell with survivor's guilt" and ran on.

Well, that might be a helpful attitude sometime down the road but not now, not when Joni Mitchell keeps singing in my head: *I've seen some hot, hot blazes come down to smoke and ash.*" Not when the kind of questions I'd always eye-rolled away keep popping up nearly three months later: *What did I do in a previous life to deserve this luck?*"

For now, there's only unfulfilling, force-fed reality: *There was no previous life. There is no deserving. It's luck, and nothing about luck makes sense anymore.*

Peter Mehlman's latest novel is "#MeAsWell." He was a writer and producer on "Seinfeld."



Kevin Keim's view of the Mehlman House, designed by Ray Kappe, through a ringlet of garden hose that he used to extinguish flames.