

“Shhh! I think my house is on fire”

-Dara Vernier

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I had an interesting night Tuesday. My former piano teacher tried to take me away in an ambulance. A guy from my high school geometry class searched for the source of a propane smell in my basement while my butcher opened a window to ventilate my apartment building. This wasn't a dream. Let me explain.

I was sitting in my apartment at around 11 p.m. when I began to smell chemical fumes. It wasn't so much that I smelled them, but rather my sinuses felt them, and I began to get a headache. I asked my boyfriend if I was crazy, and if he smelled it too. He wasn't sure.

I opened the door into the main hallway and was greeted by an intense smell of what seemed like propane or gasoline. Not sure what to do, I called the Peterborough police and explained the situation.

Not wanting to cause a big ruckus for no reason, I asked the woman on the phone if I should bother calling the Fire Department.

“You don't want to mess around in these situations!” she said, and suggested that I wake up all of my neighbors and leave the building.

Well, I certainly didn't want to do that. I could just picture my neighbor across the hall ripping my head off for waking her up for no reason, when she has to leave for work at 5 a.m.

Instead, I stuffed my cat into his carrying case, grabbed my boyfriend, and left my neighbors to fend for themselves.

The three of us sat forlornly in the driveway, awaiting an explosion.

“Should I have grabbed my Game Cube?” my boyfriend asked, referring to his beloved video game system.

A few minutes later, two police officers showed up to investigate “the scene.” They went down into my basement, reporting that there was no smoke, but there was an intense oil smell.

Not two minutes later, two fire trucks arrived in front of my building, lights flashing (but, thank goodness, no sirens). I think every member of the Fire Department climbed down from those trucks and bravely tromped into my house. Chief William Naugle was there, and so was Lt. Keith Rodenhiser—who sat across from me in geometry class at Conval 10 years ago.

The fun was just getting started. A fireman came up to me and asked if I was the one having difficulty breathing.

“Uh, no,” I replied. “I had a headache, but I'm fine now. Really.”

“You don't want to go to the hospital?” he asked.

“No. Really. I’m fine,” I said, smiling.

Right then, I noticed an ambulance pulling up. Several EMTs got out and came over to where I stood on the lawn.

Ellen Carter, deputy chief of emergency medical services and my piano teacher from about 15 years ago, asked me again if I was OK. I assured her I was, and she had me sign a release, stating that I had refused medical treatment.

This whole time, my boyfriend was standing next to me, shaking his head in amusement.

“If this turns out to be nothing, I had nothing to do with it,” he said.

“Well, you’ll all thank me when the building blows up,” I replied.

Eventually, the firemen returned from my basement to say that everything was OK, but that the pilot light in my furnace had gone out. They called the oil company, and took the number of my property manager.

And then they were gone.

The reason that I’m relating all of this to you is that I was amazed by how concerned everyone was for the well-being of my neighbors and me, and how seriously all of the rescue personnel took the situation.

We heard a lot after Sept. 11 about how firemen and EMTs and police officers are heroes. But even when the call is for something as small as an oil smell on Elm Street, these people respond quickly and with care.

Not once did anyone make me feel silly for calling them out at 11:30 at night.

“It’s better to be safe than sorry,” they kept telling me.

Even with day jobs to wake up for in a few hours, they all took their time assessing the situation and making sure everyone was safe.

I’d just like to say thank you to everyone on the police, fire and ambulance squads for taking such good care of my community. And since I don’t usually praise things in this column, you should realize I really feel strongly about this one.