

GTA

Apartment reeked of dying

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City columnist Joe Fiorito logo headshot. Thursday, July 9, 2009. (Aaron Harris/Toronto Star)

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By Joe Fiorito Columnist

Dirty George died last month. He was found in his apartment on his couch. He'd been dead a week. The coroner says it was a heart attack.

That is the merest part of the story.

George was 62 years old. He was a long-term resident of 200 Wellesley. He had problems. He couldn't take care of himself. He was known as Dirty George for a reason.

His stepsister, Annie Wassilyn, is upset. She asked if she might show me the apartment, so I could see what life in community housing is like.

Annie uses a scooter. We met in the lobby. She led me up to the 15th floor, wheeled out of the elevator and opened George's door.

I held my breath. It was not the smell of death. It was the smell of years of dying.

Dirty yellow foam leaked from the couch where George died. His sheets and his blankets were dark from years of human stain.

There were roaches on his stovetop, bedbugs crawling up his walls, and the dry corpses of all kinds of bugs in the cobwebs.

Over there, behind a door, that which should have been flushed away had encrusted the toilet, the bath, and the floor of the bathroom.

George was helpless.

Annie said, “He lived in this place for 20 years. He was an alcoholic all his life. I think they took advantage of his mentality – he couldn’t add, he couldn’t subtract; if he had 90 cents in his hand, you’d have to count it for him – and when he asked for repairs, if they told him no, he accepted that.”

She paused. “You tell me: they did a yearly inspection here and neglected this?”

Bugs scurried from her on the floor as she spoke.

She retrieved an old photo: George, looking good in a powder-blue sports coat, drink in hand.

Elsewhere in the mess, another photo: George, face to face with a magnificent tiger. He loved animals. He had a dog and a cat, and dozens of stuffed animals, including tigers, in the apartment. All his stuffed animals were filthy.

Annie said, “I think he was afraid.” This was the cause of his fear:

He needed a new fridge a while back. One was delivered. The guy who brought the fridge was appalled by the filth and yelled at George.

I know guys who deliver fridges are not social workers. But this man did not recognize a human problem and call for help. He scared the wits out of George instead.

A little while later, when he needed a new stove, George asked for someone other than the guy who brought the fridge. The guy who yelled showed up. George didn’t want to let him in, and he pushed the man away. The man punched George in the face and knocked him down.

I asked Annie how she knew about the beating. She asked me to wait. I did so, mindful of the bugs. She returned with a couple who live down the hall.

A man named William said, “One day, I happened to be coming down the hall. I saw the door was open. George was sitting there on the floor. Then I saw the maintenance guy by the elevator. I asked what happened. He said, ‘He f—— pushed me so I knocked him out.’”

I see.

Do not help; punish the helpless.

William peered over Annie's shoulder and into George's apartment. He said, "This is nothing. There are places in here worse than this. People need help, they're not getting any."

Oh, there is some help – new paint in the hallway, for example – but what's the point of fixing up the outside of a house when the inside is rotting away?

And then William said, "Look, look, look." I followed him a few steps down the hall. He squashed a small roach, or perhaps a fat bedbug; splat.

The question is not why George died. We all die. Why was George allowed to live so long in squalor?

Annie closed the door.



Joe Fiorito is a former Toronto Star columnist.

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