



Episode 7 Transcript Trapped By A Fire, He Texts Goodbye

Torah Kachur:

Robert Craig and his best friend Chris are on the Trans-Canada Highway... being chased by a wall of flames.

Robert Craig:

The fire was probably about 50 to 75 yards off the highway.

Torah Kachur:

They come round a bend, and screech to a halt, the highway in front of them is blocked.

Robert Craig:

In front of us approximately 200 yards... the flames were a hundred feet high.

Torah Kachur:

On one side is a mountain - the entire face of it is on fire. And on the other, a cliff - a 200-foot drop to a river.

Robert Craig:

There was no realistic chance of escape... There was no way out. and so myself and my friend, we both... texted our mothers.

Torah Kachur:

I'm Torah Kachur - and this is "Tell Me What Happened - True Stories of People Helping People" - an original podcast by OnStar. Because we all have moments when we need help from a stranger.

The mountains of western Canada are rugged and beautiful. The highway from Kamloops to Vancouver that weaves between them, has been called one of the most beautiful drives on the planet. It can also be one of the most dangerous - winter weather can make it deadly.

But not today - Today it's gorgeous. It's late June - a hot, sunny day in a long string of them. For two buddies from Vancouver, it's a perfect end to an epic trip.

Robert Craig:

We've been close since I guess grade two.

Torah Kachur:

The windows are rolled down. The radio's on. And the way the highway winds

through the forest, it looks like a car commercial. This is the final day of their adventure – Robert and Chris have spent the whole week on a backcountry canoe trip in one of the wilderness parks.

Robert Craig:

It was very enjoyable. One of the most beautiful trips I've ever taken.

Torah Kachur:

But today they're headed home, and they've got a full day of driving ahead of them, so they stop at a roadside burger joint for an early lunch.

Robert Craig:

We'd been on the water eating freeze dried meals for the last eight days and we were kind of craving something a little bit more fatty.

Torah Kachur:

It's a place called the Sugar Shack – It's sort of low-key legendary in the area: Good food, friendly people. It's the kind of 'middle-of-nowhere' place where people take a break from the road and share stories about what they've seen, a herd of elk, a black bear... or smoke.

Robert Craig:

They said there was some sort of forest fire that was near Lytton but that it wasn't too serious and that they had no trouble getting through.

Torah Kachur:

Lytton is two hours away, but very much on their path. The Trans-Canada highway runs right through it. With a population of 250, it's a village tucked in a valley where two rivers meet. Reports of wildfires are unfortunately getting quite common in this part of the country in recent years.

Robert Craig:

We didn't really think anything about it to be honest. We were just like oh okay. I guess there's a fire. So we jumped in the car and started making our way back to Vancouver

Torah Kachur:

For the next 100 miles, life is good. Then, something odd appears on the horizon.

Robert Craig:

We saw like a cloud in the sky. like a thunder cloud. It was big It was bigger than pretty much anything I'd ever seen. It was really, really thick and it was incredibly black.

Torah Kachur:

The cloud is weird, big, and black. But still, it's just a cloud, what are you going

to do, right? So, they keep driving.

Robert Craig:

Lytton had been like the hottest place in North America according to Weather Canada. So we just assumed that after such an incredible heatwave having a massive thunderstorm was something to be expected.

Torah Kachur:

The miles tick by, but they never do see any rain. The cloud just keeps getting bigger and darker. Finally, they put two and two together, that cloud is not a thunderstorm.

Robert Craig:

As we got closer to Lytton we started to see some smoke. Like hazy.

Torah Kachur:

This is where Robert and Chris start getting worried. But traffic on both sides of the highway continues moving - it hasn't even really slowed down. I mean, if cars are still coming towards them, the road ahead must be clear, right?

Robert Craig:

We had the radio on the entire time and we were listening and there was no mention of any closures so we just sort of continued on not really expecting trouble at all at that point. Like at all.

I think once we started getting closer to Lytton the smoke sort of changed.

Torah Kachur:

The sky becomes very dark, and takes on a new color: a deep reddish orange. They have to turn on the headlights.

Robert Craig:

There was still traffic coming towards us. It was our thought was that this traffic was still coming through the highway in Lytton.

Torah Kachur:

They round a bend, and from the top of a hill they can see the whole valley, the two rivers, the small town of Lytton. They've both been here a dozen times before - but they've never seen it like this.

Robert Craig:

We could see the far side of town was on fire. We could see houses on fire. We could see buildings on fire. And we stopped seeing any traffic coming towards us at all.

Torah Kachur:

They stop the car. Both of them in shock.

Robert Craig:

The south side of town was completely ablaze. The flames were quite high I'd say 50 and 60 feet high. We were absolutely stunned by what we were seeing... we saw the hospital of Lytton burning, numerous houses. The gas station was completely engulfed. It was pretty incredible. I've never seen anything really like that before.

Torah Kachur:

There's a phenomenon in psychology called Temporal Dissociation, you probably know it better as that feeling when 'time stands still.' That's what happened to Robert.

Robert Craig:

So we were very... I don't know how to describe it. Overwhelmed. The town of Lytton that was actually burning in front of us.

Torah Kachur:

They step out of the car - unable to process what they're seeing.

Robert Craig:

It looked about over half of Lytton got consumed in that two to three minute period of time. It sounds fast and it was fast. It was the fastest moving thing I've ever seen. I've never seen anything on land move like that.

Torah Kachur:

Still, they are unable to move.

Robert Craig:

This entire town was just wiped off the face of the earth in seconds. In seconds. Happened so fast. It was hard to really grasp that.

Torah Kachur:

Done with the town - the flames start marching up the hill.

Robert Craig:

Our adrenaline was quite high and we didn't really realize, we didn't feel the smoke entering our lungs but the heat of the fire you could feel it on your face. It would hit you like a wave.

Torah Kachur:

But they still don't realize how much danger they're in.

Robert Craig:

We saw a gentleman sort of come out of the smoke. Covered in soot and blacked out by the flames.

Torah Kachur:

They have no idea who it is. But it doesn't matter.

Robert Craig:

He was pretty clear that we needed to run for our lives. The tone in his voice definitely indicated that the situation was far more serious than maybe we realized .

Torah Kachur:

Robert and Chris jump back in their car. They do a U-turn, pound on the gas.

Robert Craig:

We didn't feel like we had to wait for the gentleman in the truck to lead us out. So we just immediately started driving... the direction we had just come from... At that point we assumed that we would just be able to drive out the way that we had driven in.

Torah Kachur:

Pedal to the floor. They drive as fast as they can through the thick black smoke.

Robert Craig:

The intensity of the flames and the smoke had turned the sky... I mean, I can't even describe the color that I saw. It was just so red and so dark that it was almost black. It was like the blackest red that you've ever seen.

Torah Kachur:

They race along through what has become a surreal landscape. A cliff and the river on one side. A burning mountain on the other. Behind them is a village on fire. All they can do is keep driving.

Robert Craig:

In front of us approximately 200 yards we saw the fire jump the highway and the flames were a hundred feet high I would say.

Torah Kachur:

A curtain of flame cuts off the road in front of them. They bring the car to a stop. Just like that - the trap is closed.

Robert Craig:

So there was no realistic chance of escape. There was no way out. There was no realistic way out at all.

Torah Kachur:

Robert and Chris sit in the car. They don't even speak. Their minds are racing. The whole scene feels like a movie.

Robert Craig:

The level of heat is now starting to melt... the part of the car that houses the

side view mirrors. That was starting now to melt and droop off the side of our car.

Torah Kachur:

The air gets hotter. It's difficult to breathe.

Robert Craig:

We both messaged our mothers... and informed them that we may have made a bit of a mistake on the trip home from our canoe trip and wished them well.

Torah Kachur:

Those messages were sent... but they never got a reply. On a nearby hilltop the nearest cell tower collapsed in the flames, and the signal disappeared.

This show is called "Tell Me What Happened" an original podcast by OnStar. It's a chance for people like Robert to tell stories about pivotal moments in their lives. And in all the stories... There comes a moment when they need help. Help from someone they don't know. In this story it's pretty clear what help Robert needs, he needs a way out of a forest on fire.

As the flames grow closer, and the temperature continues to rise, Robert and Chris make a desperate plan.

Robert Craig:

We sort of just looked at each other and realized at that point that there was only one chance to escape the fire and it was essentially straight down to the river.

The fire for sure was going to get us but that there was a chance that the 200 foot fall might not. At least a chance. A pretty slim chance but. To stay there was certain death.

Torah Kachur:

They get out of the car. The full heat hits them as they make their way to the edge of the cliff. They look down. Growing up they used to jump off bridges into the river, but nothing this high. They look at each other... and prepare to jump.

But for the second time today - they see a pickup truck coming through the smoke. It's the same guy that ordered them off the hill overlooking Lytton, a peace officer from the nearby indigenous community.

Robert Craig:

The reservation officer got out of his vehicle and started yelling at us. And he said, "Don't panic." "There's a firetruck on the way and they're going to be here in just a moment."

Torah Kachur:

Think of the last time you were in line at the grocery store, or on-hold, trying to reach customer service. Think about how long five minutes feels. Now imagine you're surrounded by flames.

Robert Craig:

Five minutes feels like forever when you're in that. And to be honest, it could very well have been less time than that.

This firetruck came through this wall of flame like nothing I've ever seen. Like an action movie. It was just unbelievable. I don't know what these guys are trained for but I can't imagine that it's driving through a wall of flame to rescue people. One of the firemen came over to our vehicle and told my friend that he would be commandeering the vehicle and driving us out.

I scrambled into that backseat so fast I can't even believe it. And that fireman, he jumped right into the driver's seat and told us... He looked us right in the eye and He looked us right in the eye and he said, "You know what, we're going to make it out of this. Don't worry." He's like, "Everything's going to be okay." And he started driving.

Torah Kachur:

This is the point in our show when we normally introduce you to the hero; the stranger who shows up at the right place and the right time, and saves the day.

But we don't have that voice for you. We contacted the Lytton Volunteer Fire Department. We have talked to their chief and the four other members who were on the ground that day. And not one of them can remember that moment that Robert is describing: Two guys at the side of the highway. A black hatchback full of camping gear. Jumping in and driving them to safety. Nothing. But why?

Jan Polderman:

I drove through town about quarter after five, and I noticed that there was smoke at the south end of town.

Torah Kachur:

This is Jan Polderman, the Mayor of Lytton.

Jan Polderman:

And so I started making phone calls and I believe it was about 23 minutes later, I ordered an evacuation order, but it was too late. People were already running.

85% of the buildings when I drove through were fully engulfed. I saw the firemen, they were running from house to house, knocking on doors to make

sure that the people were out.

Torah Kachur:

These firefighters are volunteers. Four men and one woman with families of their own to protect. But when everyone else in town was running away, they were knocking on doors, making sure no one was left behind.

Jan Polderman:

I think most people when they joined the fire department, they sort of think of a single structure being on fire or maybe two structures on fire, but I don't think they ever really envision a whole town going up all at basically the same time.

Torah Kachur:

They kept working for 48 hours straight: in the town, and on the three highways that connect it to the outside world. No downtime, no sleep. The fire didn't stop, so they couldn't either.

Jan Polderman:

I'd like them to know is that the community's very thankful... one of the firefighters was working to put out the fire, and her own home burned to the ground.

Torah Kachur:

In that context, the fact that none of them remember the thirteen minutes that saved Robert and Chris' lives isn't that surprising.

With Robert crouched in the back and Chris in the passenger seat, the firefighter puts the car in gear. They follow the fire truck... And hit the wall of fire going forty miles an hour.

Robert Craig:

It went from pretty hot to extremely hot. And I can't imagine having to spend longer than just a few seconds in something like that inside your vehicle.

It melted the tires right off our car. Everything was on fire. Our vehicle was on fire, the firetruck was on fire.

Torah Kachur:

Then - they're through.

Robert Craig:

On the other side of the wall of flames there was an abandoned church on that corner a number of the vehicles had also stopped around this abandoned church area.

Torah Kachur:

They scramble out of the car - shocked at the beating it's taken.

Robert Craig:

The whole housing was all sort of deformed and half melted. And then the tires, were just completely gone.

Torah Kachur:

Robert turns to thank the guy who has just driven them out... but he's already gone, back in the fire truck, driving back into the fire.

Robert Craig:

They were gone very, very quickly towards the fire once again. They were going to try and see if the town needed help.

Torah Kachur:

Robert never got his name. He didn't even really see his face.

Robert Craig:

The only part of him that was visible was roughly between the bottom of his nose and his eyes through the visor in his fire helmet. He had a deep, gruff voice. He seemed like he's been in this situation where he's had to tell people to stay calm before.

Torah Kachur:

The guys get a ride to the next town, and are home in Vancouver by midnight.

Robert Craig:

You hear stories growing up. You know firemen are brave. But when you're actually in something like that and you understand that these guys go into this all the time. I just would like to commend that guy on his bravery. I've always known they were brave but I never really realized the situations that they were going into you know.

Torah Kachur:

I'd love to know who it was too. I'd like to know his name, and why he volunteers for such dangerous work. But we probably never will. And maybe it doesn't matter which one it was. Maybe it wasn't one of them. In a way, maybe it was all of them.

The Lytton Creek Fire came on the heels of an incredibly hot and dry week. The day before the fire the temperature in Lytton was 121 degrees fahrenheit. The cause is still unknown, but once started, there was no stopping it. It was pushed by winds of over 40 miles an hour.

90% of the buildings in the town were destroyed. The post office, the police station, the town's only hotel, and virtually every residential home was lost. Sadly two people died, but thanks to the incredible work of the volunteer firefighters, countless lives were saved.

This is 'Tell Me What Happened' - an original podcast by OnStar. Every episode has a story about someone - someone like me, or you, or Robert and Chris.... who found themselves needing help. Providing that help is what OnStar has been doing for 25 years. And it's what I want to do right now.

I'm going to introduce you to Tony Briggs. He's the Regional CEO at American Red Cross of Central California, and he has some ideas about what you can do to stay safe.

Torah Kachur:

So if you do find yourself in this situation, like Robert did, sitting in your car with the wildfire closing in on you, what is the best thing to do?

Tony Briggs:

The first thing you want to do is you want to stay calm. And I know that sounds absolutely crazy when everything around you looks like it's on fire and it looks like the end of days, but the first thing you want to do is you want to stay calm.

And then what you want to do it you want to make sure that you turn your vents and you want to sure that you're not bringing in that smoke into your car. You want to make sure that your doors are unlocked, because if your doors are locked and the first responder is trying to get to you, that's one more thing that you've got to be able to fix.

And then the other thing that we're asking people to do is make sure you can get as low as you possibly can in your vehicle. Lay down on the floorboard, do everything you can to make sure that your profile is as low to the ground as possible.

Torah Kachur:

And that's because the fire is generally going to go over top, especially close to the road?

Tony Briggs:

Correct. And you want to try to stay as low as you can because the smoke is going to be rising around you, and if you can get as low as you possibly can, that will help you with the smoke inhalation.

Torah Kachur:

So, how can you stay safe if you find yourself in an environment where there's wildfire, you're not in your car, maybe you're in your house. What do you need to do if you feel it closing in on you?

Tony Briggs:

So, I would say the first thing that you want to do is you want to make sure that all of your windows are closed. You want to make sure that your doors

are closed. Everything is unlocked, so once again, and people can get into your home to get you out when it's safe.

You want to make sure that you, you have a sink full of water or a tub full of water. You want to get into an area where you know that you're in the center of your home. And then what you'd really like to do is you just want to make sure that you can get word out to your local authorities. You want to make sure that you can call your relatives and tell them that where you are, because if for some reason the cell service goes down, it will allow everyone to know where your last location was. And by telling someone who's outside of the area, it gives you a better chance of making sure that they can get the word in saying that you were at 123 Main Street when we lost communications with you.

Torah Kachur:

What about preparation? ...do I need a generator? Do I need a "Go-Bag"?
What should I have at my house to feel more prepared?

Tony Briggs:

You want to make sure that if you cannot leave that you have set yourself up for success, and you've been preparing for such an event. That you have food, that you have food that's non-perishable, that you make sure that if you have canned foods, that you have a manual can opener.

You want to make sure you've got a full tank of gas in your car. You want to make sure that you have some cash on hand, because if you are in an area that has been affected by a wildfire, you may not have power. And the one thing that you need to get gas is electricity, and you can't get money from your ATM if there's no power.

I would say your go bag needs to be everything that you need to be able to live off the grid for approximately three to five days. Whenever there's a large natural disaster, such as a wildfire, first responders may not be able to get to you right then and there. And you want to make sure that you have everything that you need to be able to be self-sustaining for anywhere from three to five days. And we're talking about a gallon of water per person, we're talking about any medical things that you might need as far as medicines or devices.

And then, we're talking about is just some of the comfort things that you might need. I've got kids and I want to make sure that my kids have everything that they need as far as, "Hey, Dad, do you have a solar powered charger for your cell phone?" As a matter of fact, I do. And I will tell you that my kids would use it for their cell phone, and then they'd use it for their Nintendo Switch, and they'd use it for all kinds of other things that, when you're just sitting there with no power, you need something to keep yourself busy.

So, those are the things that we're thinking about when we're talking about having that emergency go bag, or making sure that you're thinking about your pets and the things that they might need, as far as medication or play toys or things like that.

Torah Kachur:

What about a go kit for your car?

Tony Briggs:

So, everything that you would need for your car should be in your trunk, and the thing that people don't really think about is, "Hey, I should probably back my car into my driveway. I should make sure that I have everything that I need in my go bag in my trunk, or close to it," and then making sure that everything that you would need as far as paperwork or anything like that is really readily available so that you can grab that go kit, put it in your trunk, and get yourself off to safety.

Torah Kachur:

How do you convince people to prioritize these kinds of things when you look around and go, "I don't see a fire coming," or, "I'm not in a landslide prone area." How do you convince people that this is something to really spend maybe just an hour of their day to think about?

Tony Briggs:

Well, Torah, it's not about the "if" the next thing happens, it's about when. When you think about fires that happen here in California, every single year it turns out to be the biggest fire in history. So we're reminding people that the people who were in Paradise, California, didn't think that there'd be such a large fire in their area, and it was. And we use those lessons to tell people to be prepared. And we are always banging the drum and making sure that people have a kit, that they make a plan, and they stay informed.

Torah Kachur:

Okay. Thanks, Tony. I've got some preparing to do.

Tony Briggs:

Thanks, Torah.

Torah Kachur:

That's it for this episode of OnStar's 'Tell Me What Happened - true stories of people helping people.'

If you'd like to read more stories like this one, or if you want more information about how to stay safe in the backcountry during a wildfire, there's a link in the show notes to take you to our website.

Or you can go straight to onstar.com and tell us your favorite story about a time that a stranger helped you, maybe a firefighter or maybe just a person you met on the bus. Let's share some love for people who help others, in big ways and small.

On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur - and please, "Be safe out there."

Find more episodes of *Tell Me What Happened* at OnStar.com/podcast