

# Where I go, the lights blow

Personally, I blame Boz Scaggs. For years to come, 50 million people will remember where they were when the lights went off. Others will ask them what they were doing.

Me, I was with my 18-month-old gorgeous genius niece (is there any other kind?) while she was examining a ladybug. As we paddled in her pool, and as I was explaining the delights of ladybugs, she took it between her adorable little girl fingers and crushed it. Its lights went out at about the same time ours did.

At the moment it met its maker, my niece's neighbour came into the garden reporting that the power had gone off in parts of Toronto. Really unusual, thought I and my friend Paddy, both more concerned about whether or not we would be able to attend the screening of *Johnny at the Fair*. This starred our friend Charles Pachter as a four-year-old lost at the "Ex", a summer fair, about six decades earlier.

The updates kept coming as news of the devastating power outages across parts of the north-east and the mid-west of the US and Canada were described.

Naturally, we all immediately thought

"terrorism". It's been that type of year for Toronto, still suffering the effects of Sars.

Boz who? Well, on July 13, 1977 Boz Scaggs, a Grammy Award-winning soft rock musician, was giving a concert at Avery Fisher Hall-Lincoln Centre in New York. That night Paddy, a family friend, had decided to take me to New York as a treat to see Scaggs's concert. I was a good excuse to indulge her passion at the time - Boz.

In Hollywood North, as Toronto is now known (as so many American movies are made here), she had met someone from his band, and he had invited her - and me as fashion accessory - to go backstage and meet the great man.

I'm sure it was an epiphany of sorts - only I can't remember much. He seemed OK. The real thrill was being in Manhattan for the night. Then the concert began. Then Con Edison blew and the lights went out.

Somewhere in Gotham City my mother was trapped too, at the Algonquin Hotel, where Dorothy Parker and the Round Table made literary history.

Power outages seem to follow me around - not that I'm paranoid or anything. On the way home from my niece's house I

drove past many Torontonians who had decided to direct traffic. Well-behaved Canadians obeyed their instructions, many handing them bottles of water for their good deeds.

In Baghdad, nobody paid the slightest bit of notice whatsoever to the random lunatics who took their lives in their hands and played traffic cop, trying to restore some order.

Then reality struck. The real state of emergency was no lattes in the morning.

They say it will take weeks before they work out how the largest power failure in American history, which began shortly after 4pm on August 14, happened. In the most powerful nation in the world, said a US official, there is a Third World energy system.

I'm going with the theory that it's down to privatisation. The Conservative government of Ontario believed that if they privatised electricity production, then private enterprise, at no cost to them, would leap into the market and create expensive generating equipment.

Instead they created a cut-throat private market in the sale of other states' capacity



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## ON THE AGENDA

to Ontario, where the price was determined by need and desperation. They could make the same amount of money without spending a penny on creating extra power.

At the same time, public ownership of the delivery system, the grid, was maintained, but not modernised. And, indeed, existing safeguards fail.

Ontario still uses dirty coal, which it buys from the US, which itself only uses clean coal. This causes problems with air quality, with which large numbers of people can't cope, and which causes many long-term problems down the line.

The US couldn't wait to blame Canada for the disaster. Rather like the *South Park* song, *Blame Canada*. Of course we were all outraged. In retaliation Canada blamed the US. Almost everyone during the first few hours blamed Osama bin Laden.

Me, I blame Boz Scaggs.