

Our landlord from hell

He's behind bars for alleged arson while family was in apt.

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The torment of a Brooklyn family with six small kids began with late-night door knocks, followed by a dead cat dumped in the hallway.

Then, in a harrowing episode, the family narrowly escaped an early-morning blaze that authorities allege was set by an unhinged landlord with a fiery past, including an unsolved arson at another one of his buildings, in Queens.

Rafiqul Islam is now behind bars at Rikers Island, indicted for attempted murder after the reign of terror targeting tenant Andriana Edwards, her boyfriend and her half-dozen children after the family fell behind in their rent.

Islam, 66, was arrested in October, a month after the family fled their burning second-floor apartment by smashing a window, climbing onto the burning building's roof — and tossing the children into the arms of good Samaritan neighbors waiting below.

"I just had to think quick," said Edwards, recounting the terrifying scene at the burning apartment building on Forbell St. near Glenmore Ave. in Cypress Hills. "Either we get caught in the fire or miss [our] chances. ... I'm just shaking them, telling them, 'Come on, we've got to go. It's an emergency.'"

The six kids, ages 2 through 8, were dropped 20 feet straight down on Sept. 26 before the two adults escaped the flaming finale of an ongoing rent dispute.

Edwards, who jumped from the roof to safety moments before her partner, believes the family survived only because they suspected an attempt on their lives was imminent.

"He'd [say] 'Oh, get out of my house or I'll burn the house down,'" she recounted. "So from there, I felt like something bad is gonna happen. I kind of figured he was going to try to do that, that's why we went and bought fire extinguishers."

Edwards, who moved into Islam's building in May 2021, recalled she was unnerved by him from day one. She recalled how Islam ignored her calls to make numerous repairs to the three-bedroom apartment before her move-in date.

"The walls was chipping. It was infested with rats, mice and roaches," Edwards said. "It was very hard for him just to fix something."

In the weeks between the fire and his arrest, the brazen Islam made Housing Court filings demanding Edwards pay him more than \$26,000 in back rent on the burned-out apartment, court records show.

An FDNY source said the suspect was



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wearing a hooded sweatshirt on the day of the blaze, making it initially difficult to identify him in surveillance footage that was recovered. But fire marshals continued scouring nearby video cameras until finding a damning clip with his hoodie pulled down and arrested Islam on Oct. 25.

Defense attorney Samantha Chorny said she believes a language barrier prevented her client from understanding questions posted by investigators in the case.

"There could have been a lot more done before arresting him," she said. "There are so many unanswered questions."

Edwards landed in her residence with assistance from a CityFHEPS rent supplement to cover her living costs, moving into the building from a family shelter.

Tensions with Islam escalated after the city stopped covering her rent following an inspection showing a lack of upkeep to the property, she says. The city's Human Resources Administration, which runs CityFHEPS, did not reply to multiple requests for comment from the Daily News.

This past February, the Department of Housing Preservation and Development slapped Islam with multiple violations for the Brooklyn building, including for vermin infestation and roofing cement slathered on treads in the hallway, according to city records.

"Once the city stopped paying him, he was harassing me," Edwards claims. "He'd come and knock on my door at 12, 1 o'clock in the morning, to give him his rent. They didn't give him his money in time so it mostly backfired on me."

Edwards claims Islam turned off her gas in September and placed a dead cat in

the hallway two weeks before the blaze. The NYPD confirms that Edwards filed a harassment complaint over the cat incident, but no arrests have been made.

On the day of the fire, Edwards and her partner were awakened by the smell of smoke.

"My spouse [was] like, 'Come back in the room because it smells like something's burning,'" Edwards recalled. "Then he opened up the door and smoke is already entering the house."

Edwards rushed to the bedrooms where the children, four girls and two boys, were sleeping and quickly woke the kids up. The mom recalled she was hesitant to take the two-story leap herself after getting the kids to safety.

"I was kind of procrastinating," said Edwards. "Once we got all of them down, I was like, 'Hold on.' I banged my knee really hard. But then I didn't think too much about it. I automatically got back up and kind of fell on my knee again. I'm like, 'We got a fire, I can't keep falling.'"

Edwards said her children remain traumatized. The mom, though still shaken after losing all their belongings in the fire, was pleased by the landlord's arrest.

"I'm happy," said Edwards. "I'm happy, but it was kind of shocking, because a lot of people in his community, they wasn't expecting [him] to get arrested."

A year earlier, an unsolved arson fire forced a second family years behind on rent from another building owned by Islam, this one in Queens, The News has learned.

The May 31, 2022 blaze, at a house on 78th St. near Liberty Ave. in Ozone Park was deliberately started when carpet on the second floor was set on fire, FDNY

officials confirm. No arrest was made in that case.

According to a Brooklyn Supreme Court filing this past April, Islam tried to collect money for the damage from Union Mutual Fire Insurance Co. and Community Mutual Insurance Co., but they fought back, alleging in court documents that the landlord misrepresented the number of units in the building and claimed no tenants were behind on rent when he took out the policy.

After the fire, Islam informed the insurance companies that the second-floor tenants forced out by the blaze hadn't paid rent in six years and owed him \$60,000, according to the companies' filing. The fire was "intentionally set on the top of the second-floor stairwell landing," said the documents.

The parties have since resolved the issue. Andrew Friedman, Islam's lawyer for the case, said the issues were resolved "pursuant to a confidentiality agreement."

Carmen Ibarra lived in the Queens apartment with her husband, their five children and her sister.

"I stopped paying rent my third year there," said Ibarra, 27, who says her building was overrun with roaches and mold.

"He used to come visit us a lot," said Ibarra. "He used to tell me 'Pay me, pay me.' He used to be screaming and shouting."

She says CityFHEPS decreased the amount of money they paid Islam. After she went on a rent strike, Islam tried to take her to Small Claims Court but the pandemic delayed the process.

Ibarra repeatedly told Islam they were not moving out, insisting she needed documentation saying her family was getting evicted.

Tenants at the Queens residence made dozens of complaints to the Department of Buildings over the years — some ending in violations — including construction without a permit to convert the two-unit building into several apartments and for the house "shaking and vibrating," city records show.

Last year, Islam was fined \$24,000 after officials discovered he ignored an order to vacate an illegal extension added on to the back of the home. Two adults and five kids were living in the makeshift apartment, where there had been another fire in 2014.

Ibarra's family wasn't home when the blaze broke out around 2:30 a.m., with Ibarra and her husband working night shifts and their children luckily staying with her mother. They arrived home to discover the fire and were able to rescue their cat, but the family was forced back into the shelter system, where they still remain.

"I was devastated because it didn't have to go that way," said Ibarra. "I lost basically my whole life."

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