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**The Fire Paparazzi**

**F**orty minutes ago, I smelled smoke wafting through the window of my Upper East Side apartment. I set down my laptop, put the television on mute (for some reason), walked towards the smell, and lifted the window. Through a haze, I saw billows of smoke gushing out of a restaurant down the block – not a hundred yards away. I’ve lived in the city for four years now, and tonight was the fourth time I’ve evacuated because of a fire.

The first time I was alone in my room on a weekend afternoon doing what many young twenty-somethings do when they are alone in their rooms on a weekend afternoon. Then, from behind closed blinds, I heard sirens. “*My God!*” I thought. “*They’ve found me!*” A minute later, when no SWAT team had burst into my room demanding to search my internet history, I walked out into my living room and glanced out the window. The apartment across the alley was engulfed in flames. Literally – *engulfed*.

My heart started beating. I dove back into my room and stuffed my laptop, cell phone charger, and another pair of jeans into a backpack. Then I jogged to the bathroom and added my razor and toothbrush. On the way out, I opened the fridge and tossed a can of Diet Sprite on top of the jeans. Then I scuttled into the hall and locked the door behind me.

On the street, the three-ring circus had begun. For those of you who have never witnessed a New York City fire, allow me to set the scene. A dozen fire trucks are blocking the nearest intersection, surrounded in the far rings by police cars and ambulances. Old school firemen – the kind with axes and gas masks – are the ring leaders. And on the streets below, live-streaming cell phones aloft, is the audience.

That first evacuation, I was so terrified that I hardly noticed the crowd. I walked straight to a friend’s apartment and hunkered down for the afternoon. That evening, I walked back and got the low-down from a few lingering spectators. “Nothing major,” said the well-off bald man who fancied himself an expert. “One, two alarms tops.” I nodded and walked away, making a mental note to literarily roll my eyes at him in one of my essays someday.

Later that night, I had to laugh as I unpacked. I may have run out of underwear in twenty-four hours, but never fear – I have enough jeans to last me six months. The contacts in my eyes may dry out overnight, rendering me legally blind, but no worries – I’ll be clean-shaven and minty fresh (assuming that I can borrow both shaving cream and toothpaste). And while I witness all my earthly belongings burn to a crisp, I can enjoy the light, refreshing taste of a lemon-lime soda. All while watching my caloric intake.

Just two weeks later, I was sculpting my hair when I saw a firefighter on the roof behind me through the bathroom mirror. I stuck my head outside and called out to him in a half-joking manner, “Where’s the fire?”

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"In this one," he said, pointing at the building below him. I thanked him and hurriedly washed the paste off my hands. I had been preparing for this moment every night for two weeks. I filled my backpack with the same supplies as before, plus underwear, shirts, and enough toiletries to stock the shelves behind the cashier at a bodega. Then I jogged downstairs and took my seat amidst the growing throng.

It was then that I noticed the cell phones for the first time. Everyone around me was recording the scene. Most were zooming in on the ring-master busting through the second-floor window. Some were shooting the crowd. One was interviewing her friend. It was surreal. Here we were – in the middle of an honest-to-God human tragedy – and these people were making YouTube videos. I hid my disgust while the smoke subsided.

Two years passed before it happened a third time. Once I got downstairs with my backpack, I realized that this fire was what well-off bald people would refer to as "five alarms." It was eating an entire building. I could feel the heat over a block away. Dumbfounded, I slid behind some scaffolding and stared. A minute later, a girl rounded the corner and saw the fire for the first time. In those first moments of seeing flames lick the night, I saw genuine terror in her eyes. Yet, as I would later learn, neither she nor anyone she knew even lived nearby. Still, I think she was scared because something bad was happening...something that she couldn't control... something that could've happened to her. She listed away from the corner, settled in a seat beside me, pulled out her phone, and started recording.

Flash forward to earlier this evening. The smoke is bellowing out of a building on my block. I go into evacuation mode. I'm downstairs in seconds and on the scene in minutes. Yet again – cell phones fill the smoky air. I noticed that the men and women behind the phones all have one thing in common: they are calm. The circus is roaring at full speed all around them, yet they are all stoic. I fail to make sense of this, but tuck away the knowledge for later.

After giving myself a self-ordained "all clear," I headed back to my apartment where I witnessed the most peculiar thing. Every few seconds, I saw a flash come from one of the windows overlooking the fire. It dawned on me that resident-onlookers were taking pictures. The prudence of using an iPhone's flash to illuminate a street corner one hundred meters away and eleven floors below notwithstanding, I found myself growing angry. Who the hell do these people think they are recording someone else's tragedy? And for what? To post the most-liked status on Facebook? To get #UESFire trending on Twitter?

Then I remember the serene faces behind the cell phones on the street. And it hit me. I realized why we film and photograph fires. It isn't schadenfreude; it's escapism. The places in which we watch videos and browse photos are safe places: our couches, living rooms, bedrooms, and offices. On some base, animalistic, id-like level, we feel safe watching disaster from behind a screen. Perhaps recording disaster is our way of escaping from it.

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We New Yorkers know that fires are a very real danger. But, honestly, what can we do? We can't trust *all* of our neighbors. One man's carelessness is the kind of kindling that can destroy everything you own. And that realization terrifies me. But for now, I can't do much about it. So instead, I plan on clicking *Pg Up* a few times and editing this essay again, enjoying the fleeting sense of safety I feel from behind my screen.