

The Siren Call of Disaster At Our Door

Examining the the urban 'hood culture's fascination with catastrophe. Published in The Washington Post, February 12, 2004.

Here in Kenilworth, sirens lure us out of our houses into the night, drawing us to the sight of flames, of quiet forms rolled away on stretchers, of the faces of men in the back of squad cars, of yellow police tape stretched from tree to fence.

We know them all-- the high-pitched wail and short air horn blasts of the fire engines; the slow rise and fall of the ambulances; the shrill, fast-moving police sirens that come with the sounds of gunned engines and squealing tires.

Surrounded by water, woods, and highways, Kenilworth is an urban island. Like the islands of Greek mythology, Kenilworth has its shoreline rocks and treacherous shoals where unwary wayfarers meet their destruction.

For as long as I can remember, since I was a boy here, sirens have brought us out of our houses like no other thing can. Calamity seduces us, and we go. We go to gawk, to gossip, to see from whence destruction has come, summer or winter, rain or snow.

Shod or barefoot, in jeans or nightgowns, unshaven, uncombed or with curlers— we join the crowd.

When I was a boy, my parents tried to keep me away.

“It’s not polite to put your nose into the misfortune of others,” they would say.

Still, sometimes I could slip away, grab my bike and join the crowd that formed where the sirens stopped.

I remember the excitement of watching firemen at work.

Buildings flamed, hydrants sprayed, hoses filled, men with pikes and grimy faces climbed to fight the flames. I jumped my bike over the hoses that lined the streets.

I remember watching paramedics carry a stretcher from house to ambulance. Family members lined the concrete walk and cried as neighbors watched from second story windows.

Twice in my life the sirens came to my front door.

Once, a strange man pointed toward the house next door. Creeping flames were melting the plastic siding.

I handed him the phone. He called a 911 operator while I scrambled to find our garden hose. It was winter. The hose was frozen and the outside faucets turned off. We all shivered as trucks with blinking lights lined our street. Water arced over my house and rained down on the flames. Icicles formed on unburned eaves. That evening, a thin sheet of ice covered the street.

Another time, a stolen car being chased by police couldn’t navigate the corner in front of my house. It ran into a

tree and wiped out in our yard. We had been eating dinner and ran to the windows to watch. I was eight.

One of the car's passengers hid in the shadows for a time, then ran hard up the street, outdistancing the middle-aged policemen who gave chase. Officers pinned down the driver on my neighbor's front yard, pistols drawn.

"They were pointing their guns almost right up at us in our window," my neighbors said later, excited. "We got down on the floor."

Last November, another high speed chase ended in my neighborhood. Three teens in a stolen vehicle rammed a police car out in Prince George's County. "If you try to hurt one of our officers, we're going to catch you," a tall man in a tan uniform said later in an angry baritone.

The chase cars thundered from Walker Mill Road to Kenilworth, home of the chased car's driver. They hurtled past my house once, then again, as I ran to the door to watch. A helicopter's spotlight played along the street, car tires squealed.

When the loud procession came to rest nearby, I walked toward the scene. Along the way, I met an officer. He grasped a gun in both hands and pointed it into the shadows behind the homes that line Douglas Street.

"If you live in this neighborhood, I strongly suggest you get inside your house," he said.

I kept walking. In an alley just off 45th Street, I found the place where the 14-year-old driver of the chased car had been arrested not far from his own front door. His car hadn't quite made a tight alley turn, had hit a parked auto and ended up on a concrete laundry area. Hemmed in by laundry line poles, a brick wall, and a dumpster, he'd decided to get out and run.

Minutes later, the police found and arrested him. His two friends stayed in the car. One took over the wheel and banged the vehicle around in the tight space like a bull in a cage until the officers finally broke the windows and hauled them out.

As the police mopped up, the neighbors stood in clumps around the crime scene, shaking their heads at the bent laundry poles and discussing the evening's events. Someone's little sister was outside in a short night shirt. "Get in the house, girl," we all laughed at her, "before you catch a cold."

She went in; we stayed a bit longer to survey the wreckage.

A news camera man appeared. He talked to the police.

"Hey, cameraman, come over here and talk to me." A teenage girl struck a pose.

"Nah, don't come over here," a neighbor jokingly ducked down behind me. "I don't got no makeup on."

In my neighborhood this is how we see ourselves: bystanders at a crime scene, exposed and without makeup, at the same time victims and voyeurs.

This is how we live in Kenilworth; this is how we live on the thin edge between the good life and destruction. When we sense the sirens on the highway, coming our way, we go to see the flashing lights, feel the spotlight's glare, hear the sirens, and watch the scenes that destroy our peace but give us our most active communal life.

We don't want to listen, but we can't help ourselves.

