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Experiencing the Santa Barbara Jesusita Fire

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Coming from the East Coast, nothing could have prepared me for experiencing a Western forest fire. When it comes to forest fires in the desert climate dense scrub, "contained" a misnomer. The back country forest fires aren't contained, at least by man. What happens depends largely on the weather, terrain, and pure luck.

In the midst of such fires the fire department makes it very clear--their job is to save lives and protect homes when and where they can. They try to slow the expansion of the fire but the winds, terrain and luck rule the day. The winds can be ruthless beasts. In the late afternoons and evening, "sundowner winds" can blow with hurricane velocity. Every canyon and every mountain slope can have its own wind velocity and direction. Burning embers can be carried over half a mile, creating spot fires well ahead of the main fire lines. The fire can create additional winds as well, churning the air and flames into angry vortexes that look like the devil's evil. Nor can the fire be contained on the

steep mountain slopes; fire wants to travel upward. Containing such fires is seemingly futile.

In the back country beyond the populated areas, the fire departments can't even get in to fight the forest fire's heart on the ground. There are no roads up there and the high scrub is so thick it is impossible get through on foot. In the case of the current fire, the area hadn't burned in over 40 years so there was almost limitless dry fuel for the fire to consume. In such areas, aside from slowing the fire with helicopter and airplane water drops, there is no choice but to let the fire burn itself out while hoping the winds don't carry it further.

The first I saw of the Jesusita Fire, a small plume of smoke about 3 miles away was the only evidence of 4 to 5 acres that were burning high up in a mountain side canyon.

Despite that, the birds in my neighborhood were already acting very differently. Lots of them were frenetically flying about despite no visible smoke coming this way. A huge numbers of crows had taken wing, calling out in their grumpy sounding voices as if to warn all living things that danger was afoot. The swallows, which usually at that time of day would be up in the mountains playing on the winds, had returned early. The fire department already had helicopters and airplanes attacking the fire from above.

Five minutes later I saw flames coming over a small ridge. In 40 minutes, the Southern California Santa Ana winds, also called sundowner winds, had created an immense fire wall that had already consumed 150 acres. It was racing to both to the east and south

with seemingly nothing to stop it. This was just a hint of things to come. Smoke obscured all of downtown Santa Barbara.

As the sun set, the winds continued to grow, as did the fire. A back canyon obscured by a hill was radiating a huge orb of orange. Flames that resembled immense serpent tongues were leaping as much as a hundred feet into the sky from closer hillsides. The western most edge of the evacuation area was more than 2 miles from my home.

Throughout the evening, I could see hillside after hillside consumed by the fire as it grew ever closer to homes. That night I slept well. Because the winds were blowing to the east and south, not to the southwest, I mistakenly felt relatively safe. Helicopters could be heard but they were a long way off. The only preparation measures I had taken were to get out my gas lantern, coffee maker, and camp stove in case we lost electricity due to the town's high power lines being burned.

The next morning I awoke to a calmer world. The winds of the past afternoon and night were no longer present. A gentle breeze carried the inferno's smoke east of me allowing me fresh air to breath. By mid-afternoon that had all changed. Palm trees were again dancing back and forth in the building winds like Hula dancers shaking their hips to a frenzied dance. Literally minute-by-minute the fire was growing in multiple directions. To be accurate, there was not one fire but many fires—each being blown in a different direction. Throughout the afternoon I watched the fires grow tremendously in area, height, and intimidation. By evening the view from my window felt like staring into the jaws of hell. Hour by hour official evacuation areas grew; minute by minute unofficial

evacuation warnings were being broadcast on the local television station. The fire was consuming lovely mansions and homes. It was threatening to possibly take out whole neighborhoods, even burn into the heart of the city.

By early evening the evacuation area was only a block from my home to the east and two blocks on the north and west. Neighbors were frantically packing their most valuable and irreplaceable possessions. Others were hosing their homes and property down. Helicopters continually flew back and forth just above the roof tops while police and fire sirens raced about on all sides of us. It feels like a war zone. It was a war, a war against the wrath of nature at its worst.

The entire horizon to the north was a glowing orange wall of fire. Falling ash had transformed my world into a huge snow globe, only the snow was gray and black instead of white. The smoky air burned the eyes and throat. I tried wearing a mask but it was too hot to keep it on. Tears were constantly rolling down my cheeks from the airborne irritants. All one could do for one's throat was to keep drinking water. Because my neighborhood was so close to the fire I dared not go to sleep in case the fire continued to run in our direction. For 48 hours I could only get 10 to 15 minutes of sleep at a time.

I kept the television on all the time because the local station was broadcasting updates continually and providing live video of the fire lines. That phrase "fire lines" wasn't really accurate. There were no lines, only greater and lesser fires because the high winds

Were carrying burning embers that kept igniting spot fires in excess of a quarter mile ahead of the large burning areas. Each mountain and each canyon cause the winds to be blowing in different directions. All four sides of the fire were advancing out of control. There was no control. The hot shot fire crews were trying to save home after home until doing so was hopeless. Then they would concede, back up to new locations they hoped they could save. Mother Nature ruled to do as she pleased. As the fire department admitted, they couldn't stop the fire; their job is to save lives and homes where possible. The western flank of the fire was charging forward like Roman chariots bent on expanding conquests. By broadcasting minute by minute updates, the television reporters were likely responsible for saving as many lives as the fire department, possibly more.

As you can imagine, all my neighbors were very adrenally charged. Many had evacuated. Some who remained teased me about being so calm and easy going. Assured that neighbors were standing vigil, some of us were able to grasp a little sleep.

The next morning brought an eerie quiet and cool air coming off the ocean. Even the sun was shining overhead, as a slight see breeze pushed the fire's smoke away from the neighborhood. Everything outside was coated with black and gray ash from the day before. Helicopters could be heard far off, probably sizing up the outer reaches of the other three sides of the fire to determine what the today's fire fighting strategy would be.

During such fires the mornings are typically the quiet time, the lull before the storm. As the day's heat would rise again, causing the winds to pick up in the afternoon, we would see what was to come. Life definitely felt like an ultimate adventure as we precariously balanced on the edge of nature's whims.

The second day of the fire was a repeat of the prior day but far more ominous. Flames raced up steep mountain slopes, often appearing to be hundreds of feet tall.

It was uncontrollable cataclysm. News pictures are on the television showing yesterday's devastation, pictures of magnificent mansions, neighborhoods, and wilderness turned to ash by the fire storm. Fourteen air tankers and 15 helicopters were attacking the fire from the air and dropping fire retardant in the hope of depriving the fire of some areas. Over 4,000 personnel were on the ground in hand to hand combat with the fire and making sure that people were safe. Evacuation areas continued to expand, yet for some reason they still did not include my neighborhood. There was now a sorrowful look to my "mistress mountains" with their gray slopes where once green slopes were and canyons had been. It was a profound reminder of what was happening to the wildlife and forest. Yet again another day and a fitful night of snippets of sleep came and went as helicopters kept rattling me awake.

The next morning there was no sun or a hint of a breeze. Cool air and sea fog had rolled in, slowing the fire and cleansing the air. The helicopters and airplanes were not flying overhead. Was the fire waiting like a cat ready to pounce? There was no news of the fire on the television. Though we were hungry for news, its absence was a good

sign. Overnight the winds had eased and the threat to populated areas had decreased, except on the eastern and northwest flanks. The reporters and camera crews were getting a much needed rest after having worked almost continually for 3 straight days. The Santa Ana winds never materialized and the fire department crews from all around Southern California were getting the upper hand on the fire. Throughout the day and days to come, the helicopters could be heard far off trying to put the last of the fire to sleep.

Again the next morning the situation was looking pretty good here—bleak, but good. A cool, thick sea fog had again come in, cloaking the world in gray. Gray fog was far better than gray smoke. Again, taking a breath didn't make one feel like choking and there was no smoke burning the eyes. The cool air and moisture was continuing to slow the fire, not to mention making it more tolerable for all the firemen who were saving our town. The only sound was lots of birds calling out, seemingly saying the world was again safe. It was premature to think we were entirely safe; with so much back country still burning, the situation could change very quickly if the winds came back. But whatever was happening behind the fog, up on the fire lines, it felt scrumptious to have a good night's sleep.

As the days of the fire unfolded, I found myself having very different reactions to the situation than most people about me. I had already been hardened to enduring stress and losses from experiencing immense calamity in my life. I have endured devastation caused not by nature but by biology, by an illness called chronic fatigue syndrome and

by the actions and inactions of people in reaction to the illness. Twenty years ago I became an invisible hostage of an illness. It robbed me of far more than my health. Gone were my career, in time my family and friends, almost all my worldly possessions. All that remained was my loving daughter. But unlike political hostages who have had governments strive to do all they could to attain their release, I have not had that. My government has done meager little on my behalf. In some ways it has actually made the calamity of my life worse. And to make my captivity worse, I know there are untold numbers of others who are experiencing similar aftermaths of their healthy lives being stolen from them by the same illness. They too wait, struggling to endure as hope and faith erodes, in part because of the lack of appropriate governmental action.

Having experienced such loss my material possessions are no longer important to me. My life is about quality of life, not the collection of objects. Throughout the fire I knew if everything I owned went up in smoke, wherever I may have to evacuate to, that as long as I had my priority of embracing quality of life that I would be fine. The threat imposed by the fire couldn't come close to the emotional trauma I had endured 20 years ago as I lost so much of my prior world. And throughout the days of the fire, there were thousands of firefighters and others fighting in part on my behalf. This felt very different than the medical betrayal of my own government that I've endured for 20 years. This is why I appeared so calm to my neighbors throughout the fire; it couldn't take anything from me that I valued, and I knew I would endure.

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