

**“Precious Possessions”—*Self* magazine, August 2003**  
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The Santa Ana winds blew all night, gusts so strong they lifted a six-foot glass table over our deck railing and catapulted it onto our side lawn, where it shattered into 10,000 pieces on the grass. In western Malibu, power lines touched down and sparked blazes that sprinted across the hills. It’s hard to believe just how fierce a dry, hot wind can be. Windows rattle maniacally, roof tiles take off like ceramic Frisbees, garbage pails soar. As I waited in the car at my older daughter’s bus stop on Pacific Coast Highway that afternoon, I watched fire trucks from all over Los Angeles County screaming up the coast. The smoke pouring out from the mountains fifteen miles to my west looked like a huge gray blister spreading across in the sky.

We live on the easternmost edge of Malibu, in an area of the Santa Monica Mountains that burned in 1993. When we bought our house four years later, the state of California required us to sign a statement that began, “I understand this house is in a designated fire zone.” Every spring we and our neighbors clear the flammable brush to beyond 100 feet of our homes and we dutifully follow the instructions the local fire department puts in our mailbox at the beginning of each year. Everyone I know has an evacuation plan. We live with one eye on the horizon.

Still, none of this offers any guarantees. On the day of the Malibu fires this year, my neighbor Steve called from his office to ask which way the wind was blowing on our street. I looked out the window, where the pepper trees were dancing violently in our backyard. “South, I think,” I said. “Not in our direction. Anyway, the fires couldn’t come down *this* far. Could they?”

“Probably not,” he said, but he sounded cautious. “In ’93 they told us fire can travel thirty miles an hour if the winds are right.”

That’s when I started to get scared.

In the garage we had several big, plastic tubs, the kind people use for storing holiday decorations. That evening, as my husband fed the baby, I carried two empty ones upstairs and plopped them squarely in the middle of the living room floor.

My husband looked up. “What’s that?” he asked.

My husband. He is the exact opposite of an alarmist. He is always calm and measured, rational and cool, the perfect counterweight to my tendency toward panic. My nickname in our house is Drama Queen. His is The Great Minimizer.

“I’m packing up in case we have to evacuate,” I said.

He looked at the boxes. He looked at me. Behind us, the wind howled like a bad imitation of Halloween.

“Good thinking,” he said.

When we moved into the house we’d bought a fireproof lockbox, where we keep our birth certificates, passports, marriage certificate, car documents, and title for the house. I took that first. Next, I went for the photo albums, because photo albums are the one possession everyone says you can’t replace.

Then I stood in the middle of the living room and looked around—at the furniture and books and wedding crystal, at the lamp from my childhood home and the tribal masks hanging on the wall, at the framed photo of my great-grandparents and the Tibetan prayer wheel my husband gave me for my 37<sup>th</sup> birthday. How was I supposed to choose?

When I was single and living on the ninth floor of a highrise in New York, a fire broke out in the middle of the night. It took me about a minute and a half to evacuate the building, time enough to throw on some clothes and grab my wallet, the computer disks filled with my book-in-progress, and my cat. Ten years later, with a husband, two children, and all the paraphernalia that accompanies family life, the process had become much more complicated. I had handpicked nearly every item in our house, from the antique hat rack I waited two years to find right down to the little kitchen basket I’d bought on the beach in Belize. They were just things, but they were

*my* things, chosen slowly and carefully over time. They were an extension of me, of my tastes and my travels, and I couldn't stand the thought of leaving so many of them behind.

Still, there's just so much you can fit in a car when two car seats and a stroller are along for the ride. I went for my daughters' baby books, in which I'd meticulously recorded every milestone in their lives. This led me to pack all the videotapes we'd ever taken of the kids, which then inspired me to throw in the videocamera itself. I took our new digital camera, too. A quick scan of the china cabinet yielded our wedding album and the menorah from my childhood that I still light every year. Monetary value didn't matter. Sentimental value did. Small was good, too.

From the dining room buffet I decided against my favorite Waterford vase (too heavy) and my grandmother's china (too hard to wrap), but I took my older daughter's bronzed baby shoes. Through the dining room window, I could see palm trees swaying wildly, but no smoke or flames in the distance. Then I noticed the lineup of framed family photos on the windowsill in front of me. I packed those, too.

Throughout all this, I kept thinking about Mary Tyler Moore. When I was eight or nine, I saw an episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* where Mary's Minneapolis apartment house caught fire. One of her wacky neighbors came banging on her front door, hollering for her to leave. Caught by surprise, Mary frantically surveyed her living room, looking for something to save. Finally, with a cry of comic anguish, she reached out and grabbed the nearest item—a potted houseplant—and hugged it tight as she fled.

That's what we've dubbed "the 30-second plan" in our house: forget about the firebox; just get out the door. We also have a 24-hour plan, where the fire is slow moving and there's time to pack suitcases and take pictures down from the walls. But I had chosen to operate under a 30-minute plan that night. It gave me some time to deliberate, but not much.

As I headed upstairs, Maya, my five-year-old, ran over asking if she could help. "How about you bring me the three most precious things from your bedroom?" I suggested, and she ran off to choose.

From my bedroom, I took my jewelry box. From my office, I took all my journals, dating back to 1984. My college diplomas came off the wall. The first editions of my book came down from the shelves. I was getting into a groove. One by one, I tossed in the items we'd either need--recent bank statements, a copy of the homeowner's insurance—or miss the most. I'd never moved so efficiently or with such decisiveness before.

The two pieces of embroidered linen my great-grandmother brought from Poland 95 years ago? Yes--impossible to replace. The stack of library books due in three days? Nah. If our house burned, I reasoned, the Malibu Library probably would, too. The stack of Maya's art projects from preschool and kindergarten? Ouch. I'd have to leave those behind.

Maya ran up with her Nutcracker snowglobe, her ballerina jewelry box, and a handful of inch-high crystal figurines we'd chosen together in Prague. We put them in, along with a few cherished toys. Then I turned to my husband, who'd been watching the whole scene with mild amusement.

"We're done," I said. "Your turn. What do you want to add?"

He thought about it for a moment. "Nothing," he said.

"Nothing?"

He shrugged and felt his front pocket. "I've got my wallet. You've got my passport. We'll all get out safely. What else do I need?"

*"Nothing?"*

"I can't think of anything," he said, and he meant it.

I shouldn't have been so surprised. My husband is a man of action, who seeks out and relishes experience. I am a woman of sentiment, the one who tries to preserve it. There are almost no photos of me in our albums, because I'm always the one taking them. I want memories to last forever. I buy antiques because I want furniture to last forever, too. But what's "forever," really, when it all can be destroyed in an instant? When you get down to it, what in a house do you really need?

I looked at my boxes, stuffed to capacity, and I felt foolish for having packed them at all. Could I fit my husband in one? Could I fit my kids in the other? The Albanians driven from their homes in Kosovo, the Iraqis forced into bomb shelters, even we Americans who've survived earthquakes and hurricanes and terrorist attacks: we've all learned the same thing. The most valuable thing—the *only* valuable thing—in a house is the life that inhabits it. Standing there in my bedroom, I looked around at all the items I'd chosen to leave behind. And in that moment, I saw that every material object in a house is equally valuable and equally worthless at the same time. That's what Mary Tyler Moore's lunge for the houseplant was about, and probably why that image has stuck with me all these years. A potted plant, an antique hat rack. What's the difference? Who cares? In the thirty-second plan, your priorities are clear. When the ground is on fire and the wind is headed your way, you grab the people and the car keys, and you drive as fast as you can.