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## **Flee the Fire, Pack the Panties!**

Opinion

For one night, her Los Feliz family turned into scruffy evacuees.

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I WAS SITTING on a plane Tuesday, flipping through the channels on my seatback TV: makeover show, makeover show, home decorating tips, CNN breaking news story on a fire, Maria Bartiromo has great hair.

Wait a minute. Gee, that CNN shot looked familiar.

I flipped back. It was my neighborhood. No, it was right above my house. My family lives in the hills that back up to Griffith Park.

Even in these reality-TV-saturated days, no one wants to be featured in a breaking news story. Breaking news is never good.

As the plane flew, I watched the fire burn, unable to phone home. Only the day before, I had seen TV pictures of the residents of Greensburg, Kan. — and their neighborhoods and houses, or where their houses used to be — looking bedraggled, struggling to cope.

I started to cry.

But there was no way of knowing how seriously my family was affected. So I stopped crying and watched the end of a "Law & Order" episode.

As soon as we landed, I called the house. The fire was under control, my husband said, but as I drove home from the Burbank airport, I could see the fire right next to the freeway, lighting up the trail my son and I hiked only last week. The sun was shining, and the park

glowed an eerie yellow. It was kind of beautiful, in an end-of-the-world way.

I went to my son's school to pick him up, and we could see the fire on the hills, right where we were headed: home.

"Front row seat," my son said excitedly as I assured him everything was going to be fine.

But not long after that, helicopters circled above us and the neighbors gathered in the street, transfixed by the fire line. Gallows humor set in. We unfurled our hoses and took bets on whose house would go up in flames first. Then the word spread: the police had ordered a mandatory evacuation.

I've always wondered what I would take with me in the event of an emergency. Now I know. I packed our cat, our son's favorite stuffed animals, my grandmother's silver and a really expensive pair of shoes. No underwear, but our wedding invitation and some designer shampoo! What was I thinking?

It's weird to drive away from your home as flames shoot up in your rear-view mirror. As I sped away in one car and my husband and son took off in the other, I had the same barely-in-control feeling I had watching the '92 riots unfold. Roads closed off, street lights out, police and firetrucks racing by me, cars honking. Across Los Feliz Boulevard, crowds gathered.

My cellphone rang. In that spirit that unites people in a crisis, everyone in our two-block radius called each other: "Do you have a place to go to? Do you have your medication?"

"I have no panties!" I kept telling people, in what has to be the most inappropriate observation made all night.

My family spent the night at our friend's house further west in the hills. We could see the flames kicking up until we went to sleep. We woke up at the usual time. I

insisted that my son do his homework over breakfast with our friends.

The not-so-breaking news was good. No houses were lost in Los Feliz, and soon enough word would come that we could return home. We were grateful for devoted firefighters.

As I drove my son to school, I kept repeating the mantra I heard from Katrina survivors, and then the Kansans: "I just want to get back to normal."

And I found myself thinking about how everyone looks the same in an emergency, how quickly my family had been transformed into those sweat-pants-wearing, dirty-T-shirt-sporting, tangled-hair evacuation people. And how easily the transformation could have gone from one night's evacuation to something much worse.

We became the breaking news, and breaking news is never good. But it can serve to remind us of how closely linked we are to one another. And to always pack underwear.