

National

‘We’ve got to go!’ A California couple awoke to flames crackling. They couldn’t flee. So they jumped in their pool.

By [Wesley Lowery](#) October 13



The swimming pool at the Pomplun home, where they took refuge as the Tubbs fire burned through their neighborhood, destroying their home. (Stuart Palley/For The Washington Post)

Daniel Pomplun jolted awake. It was 1:30 a.m. Tuesday, and he heard the crackling of flames.

He noticed the power was out, and he rose from bed and went to the window.

They had been fast asleep, and Daniel and his wife, Cindy, had missed the warnings. The residents of Santa Rosa, Calif., had been evacuating for more than three hours already as the rapidly spreading wildfire approached. The red glow through the window told Daniel it was too late. The fire was here.

“Cindy! Wake up!” Pomplun, 54, shouted, shaking her. “We’ve got to go!”

They threw on the closest clothing: for Cindy, a light T-shirt and cargo pants, and for Daniel, a Minnesota Vikings sweatshirt and University of Minnesota sweatpants. They grabbed the car keys and ran to the front door.

For 17 years, the Pompluns had lived in this two-story moss-green home in rural Santa Rosa. There is just one road out of their neighborhood. After Daniel’s frantic fingers found the knob of the front door and pulled it open, he saw the fire had leapt over the driveway. The only pathway to safety was blocked by the flames surging toward them.

The choice had been made for them.

“We’re going to stay here as long as possible,” Daniel instructed Cindy, recalling a television show he’d watched about wildfires that had

suggested it would be safer to be inside at the height of the flames rather than out on foot among them. “And then we’ll run.”

[‘Just ash and bone’: Death toll in California wildfires reaches historically grim heights]

If the house caught fire and there was nowhere to turn, he thought to himself, they could make a dash to the swimming pool, where maybe they could wait out the blaze.

Authorities in Northern California are still assessing the damage from the most devastating, and deadliest, spate of wildfires to strike the state in modern history. With at least 17 blazes still burning as of Friday, officials say thousands of people remain displaced and at least 36 have been confirmed dead.

More than 220,000 acres of land have been scorched in the past week, and the fires have encroached upon — and in some cases leveled — residential areas, forcing people to leave behind houses full of their belongings. Search parties have begun sifting through the ashes of felled homes, looking for the bodies of those who couldn’t escape.

“We all have suffered a trauma here,” Santa Rosa Mayor Chris Coursey told reporters Friday. “And we’re going to be a long time in recovering from this incident.”

Into the water

Before the Pompluns could leave, they needed to find their cats.

Sishi, their 10-year-old calico, was lounging in the sunroom, but they couldn't find Tabitha, their mackerel tabby. They ran toward the back of the house, looking out at the shed where the cats often slept. It was engulfed in flames.

For the next half-hour, Daniel and Cindy stood in the window of the sunroom and watched as their neighborhood ignited and charred. Soon, their garage caught fire, thrusting smoke into the house through the second-floor crawl space.

It was pitch black except for the approaching red-and-orange glow. The sunroom had filled with smoke, with just a foot or so of air left. It was about 2 a.m. It was past time to go.

Daniel carried their passports, a bottle of water and a pair of kitchen towels. Cindy clutched the cat tight against her chest. They slid open the sunroom door and began to run.

To the left, they could see flames on the roof. To the right, red dots speckling the far-off hills seemed to be leaping closer. The cat shed was a pile of ash. Sishi wriggled her way from Cindy's arm, leaping to the ground and disappearing into the darkness.

The grass beneath their feet was crispy and black. The air was chilly and smoky.

They reached the edge of the swimming pool. They stuck one foot after the other into the cold water. Once they were shoulder-deep, they draped wet towels over their heads.

The flames danced across the roof and rolled down the sides of their home.

Then came the popping, as the fire reached the 100 rounds of shotgun and rifle ammunition in one of the upstairs bedrooms. The oak tree just to the north of the pool became a bouquet of fire. Then the pine tree to the west did too. Both trees loomed overhead, the flames licking the darkness.

They stayed as far away from the burning home as they could, but they didn't want to wander deeper into the pool than where they could stand.

Aerial video shows widespread
destruction in fire-hit Sonoma County

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Firefighters began to gain ground on Oct. 12 against wildfires that have killed at least 31 people in Northern California. (Reuters)

After about 30 minutes in the water — the height of the fire around them — the back wall of the house was fully engulfed in flames, pounding their faces with cruel, raw heat. Their heads were burning, faces blistering. Their bodies shivered, shaking uncontrollably beneath the cold water.

During the worst moments, they completely submerged under the cold water, holding their breath for as long as they could, bobbing up for air.

They discussed the things they were losing, watching as room after room of their five-bedroom home burned. The reality of what couldn't be recovered — the photographs, the mementos from college, the souvenirs from family vacations — settled in. But for most of their time in the water, the adrenaline robbed them of any focus other than staying alive.

The house collapsed, and the fire moved on. Their melted and sagging cars sat where the garage had been. A single surviving squirrel ventured down from an untouched tree branch and approached what remained of the Pompluns' home before retreating. Maybe, Daniel suggested to Cindy, it was time they came out of hiding, too.



The remains of the Pomplun home in Santa Rosa.
(Stuart Palley/For The Washington Post)

As the songs of a few returning birds marked the sunrise, the shivering Pompluns slowly emerged from the water. The concrete path was still warm, the ruins around them smoldering. They lay down together and embraced for warmth as their clothes hung from the metal frame of what was once a poolside table.

Occasionally a helicopter or plane would fly overhead, so Daniel arranged stones on the patio to send a message: "NEED EVAC." Cindy went searching for Sishi, finding her snuggled beneath a juniper bush. She came out to cuddle for a few moments before sneaking back under the bush, refusing to budge.

Daniel decided it was time to start walking, but they both needed to find shoes. As he surveyed the neighborhood, he spotted a single house

that seemed untouched. The back screen door was open, so they let themselves in. They found two pairs of flip-flops that fit, and a hat to cover Cindy's head from the sun. They took a few pieces of paper, and a pen, and shoved a couple of bottles of water into a brown paper bag.

Daniel left a note on the floor, apologizing for what he'd taken and promising it would be returned. Around noon they started walking, changing the message in stones outside their home to: "WALK OUT."



The Pompluns wrote "walk out" with stones after leaving their property, to indicate they had survived and had left. (Stuart Palley/For The Washington Post)

A white pickup truck drove past, as a group made their way back into the neighborhood to check on friends who lived nearby. About a mile farther up the road they found a sheriff's deputy.

“Come on,” the deputy shouted out to them.

“I’ll get you to the shelter.”

They spent the rest of the day huddled at a metal folding table in a shelter at a high school in Windsor, making a trip to the hospital to check for smoke inhalation, plotting out how to best fill prescriptions for their burns and figuring out how to get new phones.

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That

night

they

slept

in

the shelter. When people walked across the parquet floor, it made a loud popping sound, reminiscent of their oak tree burning.

“It took a long time to fall asleep that first night,” Daniel said.

Daniel’s employer — where he works as a software engineer — helped them find temporary housing and got them a borrowed car so they could go to the bank and get new credit cards and the eye doctor to each be fitted for new glasses. The insurance claims have been filed for their home and cars.

The Pompluns began discussing what comes next: Do they stay and rebuild? Do they move elsewhere? They don’t know.

They said they think their cat Tabitha didn't make it, probably succumbing to the fire in the shed. But they have called animal control, hoping that Sishi is still out there, nestled beneath the juniper bush.



The Pompluns' swimming pool. (Stuart Palley/For The Washington Post)

219 Comments

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