

What survived is surreal in LA's evacuation zone

Helena de Bertodano returns to the Pacific Palisades to find people rescuing koi carp and Jay Leno bringing food for firefighters

I have half my arm in an ash-filled pond outside a scorched house in Pacific Palisades, trying to help a woman called Mel find any sign of life. She is an animal rescuer and the homeowner has asked her to see if her koi carp survived last week's inferno.

"I can see a tail," I tell Mel. "Is it moving?" she asks. The fish glides under a rock, then reappears, with a second, larger koi. Mel rings the owner: "Two confirmed alive." The owner, still under evacuation orders, is thrilled. "Please don't split them up," she begs. "These fish have

been together for years."

It is one sign of hope in this shattered landscape on the edge of Los Angeles. I am here with my son Ben, 23, who moonlights as a photographer and has lived in the city since he was ten. A week has passed since the fires broke out – Ben watched from his West Hollywood apartment as one fire, quickly contained, sped through the Hollywood Hills. The Palisades fire, far worse, is still burning and we have to pass military checkpoints – only journalists and first responders are allowed in. It is like a war zone inside. We

barely see another living soul.

We drive towards The Bluffs, a coastal residential area. "Oh. My. God," says Ben, looking at the piles of charred rubble on each side of the road. "These were always my dream homes."

We get out of the car at the top of the sloping street, the sun shining mean and bright over a tranquil ocean. It is a beautiful day. At the bottom of the hill, which slopes towards the Pacific, blackened rectangles mark the footprints of former homes. "I had a date up here in high school," says Ben in disbelief. "We watched a movie on a blanket overlooking the ocean."

Just down the road, at Palisades Charter High School, he and his younger brother, Joe, played countless soccer matches. Now the athletics fields and many of the campus buildings are destroyed. In the mountains above, where the fire started, we went on many hikes. A picture of a blossom-covered archway on Temescal Ridge Trail has long been the screensaver on my phone.

We drive to the point where the hike begins. The trees are burnt black and the trail signs singed. Ben spots a tiny ring-necked snake on the ground, dead, its bright-orange belly the only splash of colour in sight.

Stabs of savage beauty permeate this devastated neighbourhood, throwing the destruction into sharp relief: a patch of golden poppies sprouts in an otherwise desolate garden. A pair of bright-green parrots squawk from the skeleton of a tree.

What has survived often seems random. A Christmas wreath hangs on a door that now leads nowhere. A miniature wooden book hut offers books to borrow outside a house that has been obliterated. A metal mailbox, blasted open by the heat, reveals an undamaged furniture catalogue inside.

Black citrus fruits dangle from scorched branches. I cut a fallen clementine in half: it is orange and juicy inside. Amid the internal rubble of the houses – all visible from

the street – the only identifiable objects are ceramic pots, chimney flues and the carcasses of gym equipment. Outside, the pools are full of murky water, some with colourful toys floating on top. Cars have all but melted, but a street sign remains: SLOW – CHILDREN PLAYING.

We drive into Will Rogers state park – the actor's old ranch house, built almost a century ago, is on the National Register of Historic Places. Or was. It has almost

burnt to the ground. Ben finds a charred book leaf, the words "Roosevelt" and "Churchill" still visible, a remnant of its library of rare books. On a nearby street, two Red Cross volunteers are trying to locate an elderly woman whose daughter is in the UK and has not heard from her since the fire. Nothing is left of the house but the one next door is still standing. "There's a gate connecting the properties, so we're hoping her neighbours got her out," says Michelle, one of the volunteers.

A fire truck – from San Francisco nearly 400 miles away – turns into the street, suspicious of the Red Cross workers, who have just left. They seemed lovely, I say. "So did the security guard with the gun sticking out of his jacket," one of the firemen says drily, referring to a looter arrested the previous day.

Nothing seems surprising any more. We see Jay Leno in a vintage red fire truck turning into a parking lot on Pacific Coast Highway. The comedian is here with his own 1941 fire engine to bring

barbecued food for the firefighters. "I just have a lot of odd vehicles. This is California."

He has spent the afternoon in the surrounding hills: "It looks like Hiroshima, there's literally nothing for miles and miles." His own house in Beverly Hills is safe but many of his friends have lost their homes: "I've got people sleeping in my garage."

Further along Pacific Coast Highway, we pull up at the address of one of Ben's best friends from his high school days. The beachside villa had wall-to-wall windows and cascades of bougainvillea. His friend's mother, an actress, hosted legendary parties on the roof and Ben often slept over, in a room so close to the ocean that at high tide the waves would splash on to the window.

Today a tiny plume of smoke spirals into the sky from the blackened tangle before us. What's left of the framework looks like a gallows, the sun setting behind it. Ben is speechless. This time he leaves it to me to take the photographs.

BEN REID



Ben revisited a friend's beachside home where he attended parties as a high school pupil