

Packing List: Things and Memories to Take With You When You Go

WENDY FONTAINE



image credits

- Black dress
- Black shoes
- Hairbrush
- Lip balm—the one that tastes like vanilla frosting
- Eye shadow—the one that reminds you of summer plums
- The pajama bottoms you should have thrown out ten years ago but keep washing and folding and stitching back together
- Another black dress—the one with embroidered sleeves—because black is easy . . . and forgiving
- Cherry Ice nail polish, which you bought at Rite Aid on the way home from work during your divorce on a day when you needed something, anything, to make you feel pretty
- Audio recording of Mary Oliver reading “Wild Geese”—the way she says the “soft animal of your body” makes you cry no matter how many times you hear it
- The broken earring you bought while visiting Santa Barbara because you felt broken too
- A tank top and yoga pants, flip-flops, the maroon sweatshirt with holes in the cuffs because how many black dresses does one woman need, anyway?
- Definitely NOT your wedding band that you tossed out the car window on a country road in western Maine after the divorce was final; remember that feeling, though—the wind whipping your forehead, your foot on the gas, the tiny yelp of relief as you glanced in the rearview mirror
- The waxed-paper bumblebee your daughter made you at daycare, rainbow-beaded bracelets you made together at the laundromat, the palm-print butterfly she painted at the kitchen table after dinner while you were balancing your checkbook and trying not to cry
- The apology your daughter wrote on lined paper when she was four years old and not being a good listener—the one in which she spelled out, “Mama, I will try hardr. Love, Angie”

- The promise you made to be more patient, more kind, and less sad after yelling one night when your daughter refused to sleep, because trying “hardr” goes both ways
- The way your daughter looked out the airplane window as you flew one-way from Maine to Los Angeles, all your belongings stuffed into the trunk of a gold Mazda, supposedly being towed out to meet you; the endless questions and doubts—would the car make it there? would you make it there? had you just made a horrible mistake?; the silhouettes of palm trees against the night sky as you rode away from the airport, how they looked like fireworks, a celebration of your bravery; the afternoon the tow truck finally arrived, and you met the driver at Carl’s Jr. and then drove yourself home, sunroof open to the west coast air
- The orange fleece jacket your daughter wore that first winter you lived in California, threadbare and pilled, Popsicle stain on the bottom because in California you can eat Popsicles all year long
- The ticket you got on your first day of graduate school when a policeman on La Brea caught you checking your phone for text messages from the babysitter, with whom you’d left your child for the very first time
- The tassel from graduation and the dress you wore under your commencement gown—black, of course, with a boatneck collar; don’t bother with the actual degree—it’s framed and too heavy to carry around (Going to grad school wasn’t about the degree anyway; it was about giving yourself permission—permission to read, to write, to learn and explore)
- The leather boots you bought with the award money from winning your first writing contest
- The four-leaf clover diamond ring in the top drawer of your jewelry box that you bought for yourself after you met the man who makes you feel lucky to be alive, lucky to have a second chance, the man who makes you realize that everything you went through before was worth it
- The sound of Angie barking at him when they met at the airport because she was pretending to be Bolt and he was pretending to be her owner
- Memories of the day you married him outside Griffith Observatory, the moment three dozen tourists huddled around you and him and Angie so

they could hear you say your vows, the way they clapped when the justice of the peace pronounced you husband and wife and you thought: husband and wife and daughter

- Wedding dress—emerald green with a lace overlay because not everything has to be black
- The metallic taste of lake water during summer vacation back in Maine; the pink fishing vest your daughter wore while casting her line from the dock, hoping to catch a giant bass; the swimsuits you both sported all day long because you were never out of the water more than ten minutes; the music you listened to at night when your daughter visited her father because you couldn’t seem to sleep without her
- The relief you felt when the plane touched down back at LAX
- The paper roses your daughter made for you on Mother’s Day during quarantine when nobody was allowed to leave their house or go into a store unless it was for food or medicine or masks
- The awe on her face when Green Day took the stage at Dodger Stadium after eighteen months of pandemic isolation; the way she danced and cried when Billie Joe sang her favorite song, the way you danced and cried at the sight of her
- The guitar concert Angie performed on your forty-eighth birthday with all your favorite Foo Fighters’ songs and two rounds of “Jessie’s Girl”
- The feel of her hand in yours when she was four-and-three-quarters and crossing the street to kindergarten and again when she was fifteen-and-a-half and willing to hold your hand only briefly and only if no one was around to see
- The drink menu from Little Beast, where you and your husband had a date the week she went away to camp, when you caught a glimpse of what life would be like when she goes off to college
- The text messages she sends when she’s out with her friends or nailing a job interview or simply listening to a song that you both enjoy, when you know that you did everything you could and everything you wanted, and there’s nothing—not a moment, not a feeling, not a failure or a triumph—that you would do differently, even if you had that chance ❄️