

Sealing the Gaps

“Seal it up tight, Jason,” dad said. “You’re leaving gaps.” He turned to my little brother who knelt by the sliding glass door fumbling with a roll of tape. “Watch me.”

Dad pulled a section of duct tape from his roll and fastened another corner of the front door sealing it off completely. His plastic sheeting went up nice and neat, from twenty years of experience painting houses for a living.

Jason fumbled with his tape. His hands shook. He looked scared, like he was ready to cry. Poor kid. Only eleven years old. I know he wanted to please dad.

Being the oldest son, I helped on projects like this all the time so I knew exactly what to do. But we were in a hurry today and Jason had never done this before.

“I’m trying, dad,” Jason said, his voice quivering. “The tape keeps sticking together.”

From where I stood at the kitchen window, it looked like Jason pulled out too much tape at a time. He was sharp for his age, but mainly with computers and game consoles, not duct tape.

We were lucky to get the few remaining rolls they had at the hardware store this morning, along with the last of their plastic sheeting. We’d already used all of dad’s supplies out of the truck. But we were taping up doors and windows to keep dust out, not to paint anything.

Dad was convinced the red dust coming down from the sky was going to get worse over the next few days. It started a few hours ago, intermittent at first, sometimes heavy.

“Don’t worry, Jason,” I said. “I’ll help you when I get this window done.”

Dad and I had finished the upstairs windows this morning. When we had joined mom, Jason, and my sister Abby downstairs, huddled around the TV watching the news reports, Jason decided he wanted to help. We were just finishing up.

I wished they would turn the sound down on the TV. The news wasn't good.

"We now have word of an unusual reaction to the red dust that has been coming down in Seattle," the announcer's voice blared. "Meteorologists say the storm front that moved through earlier this morning has polluted rivers, lakes and streams around the city."

"Wow, first Denver, then here in Salt Lake and now Seattle," I said.

Abby looked at mom. "Could that happen here?" she said, her eyes wide with fear. "Maybe we need to store some water, I mean more than we have now out in the garage. I could run the garden hose and fill the bathtubs upstairs."

Even at seven years old, Abby always thought ahead into the future. She planned each day the night before and always made sure she was ready for everything on time. Pretty amazing for a kid sister who didn't like broccoli.

"We'll see dear," mom said with a calm voice. But her hand shook as she ran it over Abby's hair. "We'll get some more if dad thinks it's safe to go outside."

Mom was the rock in the family. She didn't frighten easy. I think she wondered if all this taping up of the doors and windows was necessary. But she didn't say anything. When dad got a project started, you couldn't hold him back.

"The dust has stopped for now," dad said. "But I'll bet the stores are all out of water."

He paused from taping the plastic around the edges of the front door. The garage door just became our only entrance or exit from the house. "The hardware store was almost out of everything. I've never seen it so crowded. People were acting crazy."

I sealed the corner of the kitchen window, knelt down to help Jason at the back sliding glass door. "Not sure why we need to do this one anyway," I said. "It seems pretty tight, don't you think?"

I helped him pull a few short pieces of tape and pointed to where he could place them on the plastic.

Jason looked up at me and smiled. “Thanks Bryce. I’m glad we were all home when the dust started falling.”

I shuddered to think what would have happened if Jason had been running around at soccer practice. He had asthma and could have had a bad attack with this dust. His coach called to cancel practice just after the dust started.

Abby stayed home sick with a cold, or at least she said she was sick. Being the only daughter, mom let her get away with stuff. Jason and I could have a fever of one hundred and three before she would take us seriously.

“Yeah, me too,” I said. “There, that’s done.”

I stood up, gathered the last of the plastic sheeting and ran it out to the garage. Dad hadn’t completely closed off the inside garage door yet. I looked at the new truck dad got last week. I liked to think it was for my sixteenth birthday. I walked back inside.

Dad looked at mom and Abby. “Maybe you should turn that TV off and go pull the rest of the vegetables out the garden. And make sure you wash them.”

Dad looked at me. “Bryce, why don’t you and Jason see if you can find some more drinking water? I need to get to the gas station to get enough fuel for the generator.”

“You mean it?” I said.

Dad nodded his head. “Sure.”

“Come on, Jason, let’s go,” I said.

I grabbed the keys from the wall and my wallet from the kitchen table. Jason slid in beside me. I already had the outside garage door winding its way up. This was only the second time dad let me take the truck out and I was totally stoked.

We drove by the supermarket a few blocks from the house. But I didn't stop when I looked at the parking lot. "There's no way we're going in there. It's a madhouse."

People honked their car horns and cut each other off, some smashing together as they fought for parking spots. "Maybe we can find some water at one of the smaller stores."

I slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting a little car that turned in front of me. It hit a white van to our left.

Jason clutched the dash board. "What's the matter with everyone?"

He laughed when an old man jumped out of his car and started pounding on the side of a van he just hit. No major damage done, just a crumpled fender. "You'd think it's the end of the world or something."

"Must be all this red dust," I said. "People don't know what to think."

A woman with a crying baby in one arm waved her other arm out the van's door at the old man who was yelling and wagging his finger ever faster.

"I don't know Jason, but I'm not sticking around to find out."

We drove up towards the university, spotted a small market with only a few cars in the parking lot. I turned in, pulled into a spot close to the door and hopped out. Jason was right behind me.

We were both surprised as soon as we stepped into the store and saw wall to wall people. They looked to be mainly students grabbing everything they could get their hands on - candy bars, milk, flour, bread, coffee and lots of canned stuff.

“Oh, man, see if you can find something in the cool drinks area,” I said to Jason. “I’ll go hunt for anything in the aisles.

Jason made his way through the crowd. For a small guy he could move fast. I elbowed my way past a group of young married students arguing on the corner of an aisle about the last roll of toilet paper.

The aisle with the water was empty. No surprise there. Even all the soda pop next to it was all gone. Damn. I hope Jason had better luck.

I rounded a corner and spotted two cases of bottled mountain spring water just beyond the door leading to the back area. Somebody must have taken them out of stock for some reason. Maybe an employee was hiding them. Mine now.

I grabbed both cases and headed for the front. It took forever to get through the crowds. Jason caught up to me just as I got to the register.

“Score,” Jason smiled as he held up a couple of two-liter bottles of Mountain Dew.

“Were there any more of those?” I said.

“Nope. These were hiding behind some cottage cheese.”

“Well, we’ve got the water for mom and dad. I think those bottles are ours.”

“Cool.”

In this crazy world, looking more and more like a scene from an apocalypse movie, it was nice that Jason and I still looked out for each other. It’s not like we never fought or argued, but for the most part we got along. He wasn’t annoying like some kid brothers.

Jason knew it wasn’t cool to butt in when I was hanging with my friends from school. But we went a lot of places together on the weekends, mostly hiking in the canyons. I wondered what the canyons looked like now with all this red dust.

“Eighteen fifty,” the cashier said. She looked suspiciously at the cases of water but didn’t ask where I got them.

I frowned at her. “What? That should only be about twelve bucks.”

“Look, kid. I don’t set the prices. Pay up or put it back. There’s a long line behind you and I want to get home sometime tonight.” She glared at me.

I gave her a twenty. I just got paid the night before from my job in the restaurant. I didn’t like working as a busboy but it gave me gas money for school and dates.

Jason and I headed for the door after I got my change. A man ran past us with a case of Chef Boyardee Ravioli under his arm.

“Stop,” the cashier shouted. The man didn’t stop and nobody followed him.

“This is nuts,” I said to Jason. “Let’s get outta here and get home quick.”

A siren wailed as we pulled into the street. The police car sped by. Another one joined it from the next block. Cars were running red lights now. We barely avoided getting hit at the stop sign on Seventh South. I never realized how many crazies lived in Salt Lake. They all seemed to be on the road in our part of town.

Dad’s old work truck was already parked in the driveway when we got back. He was lugging two propane tanks out of the back of his truck and into the garage. We pulled in next to mom’s SUV. I saw the gasoline cans already stored under the workbench.

Dad smiled at us. “You boys make out okay?”

He looked like he had run into about as much trouble as we had. His old truck had paint splattered all over the tailgate. Do all painters drive trucks like that? But the side of the truck had a new scratch I hadn’t seen before.

“Mission accomplished,” Jason said, “and not a moment too soon.”

He grabbed one of the cases of water bottles and put it on the shelf next to the four already there. I put the other one right next to it. Jason reached in, retrieved the Mountain Dew and put it in the outside fridge.

I looked at the large water barrels stacked neatly to one side of the garage. Our neighbors had sponsored a water barrel drive through the local Boy Scouts. We purchased six of those fifty gallon jobbers and filled them with water. Someone had the presence of mind to be prepared. Thank goodness for the Boy Scouts.

I looked at the other supplies in the garage and thought about the many storage shelves of mom's summer preserves in the basement. I knew we were set up better than some families. Mom canned everything she grew in our large backyard garden. She even canned the fish dad caught up at the dam, and an elk he brought down last hunting season. We wouldn't starve.

We all stepped back into the kitchen. Dad smiled at us. "Glad you made it back safely."

He eyed the bottles of pop but said nothing. "I had a little run-in with a woman who couldn't wait to pay for her gas. She backed right into my truck. Good thing I took the old one."

The TV was booming again when we walked into the family room. We all stopped and stared at what we saw on the screen. It was a long-distance shot from Tacoma towards Mount Rainier, about sixty-five miles away. If there was ever a classic shot of a volcano spewing lava, this was it. It seemed to be never ending. It was as if something was drawing it out from the sky.

"Oh, my gosh," dad said. "How long has this been going on?"

"It started just before you got back," mom said. Abby sat close to mom on the couch next to her, clutching mom's arm, her face white as a ghost.

"It just suddenly exploded," Abby said. "The lava has been coming down ever since."

Dad's face paled. "You mean, flowing down the mountain?"

“No, literally coming down out of the sky. Listen.”

“We repeat, ladies and gentlemen, if you are in the Seattle – Tacoma vicinity, please leave as soon as safely possible. This is a major eruption. We don’t know how long we can continue to broadcast even from this distance. There are too many rocks coming down. With each blast they are getting closer and closer.”

One of those falling rocks smashed into a car next to the cameraman. It made him jump and the picture on the TV tilted to the right. Abby started to cry. Mom grabbed her up in her arms. “It’s okay, sweetheart,” she crooned. “We’re going to be okay.” But her eyes showed panic when she looked at us.

Dad moved to the couch and took mom and Abby in his arms. “Shhh.”

“It’s a good thing we don’t have a volcano like that close to us,” Jason said sitting down in the recliner. But I knew he was freaked.

I looked at him. “Don’t you remember when we went to Yellowstone last year?” I said.

“Yeah, but I never saw a volcano, only hot springs and geysers.”

“Don’t they teach you anything in school? The whole area’s a huge volcano and it’s only three hundred and fifty miles from here. If that thing goes up we’re going to get some serious ash or maybe we’ll be hit by the pyroclastic cloud.”

“You mean like that?” Abby screamed pointing out the front window.

We all turned to look out the window, stunned into silence. It looked like snow dropping at first, dirty snow. But it got thicker, obviously some sort of ash. There’s no way it could have gotten all the way here from Mount Rainier already.

It came straight down—like falling rain.

I hoped we got all the gaps in the plastic sheeting sealed.