

LEAVING HOME

By Steven Blair Wheeler

Ted and Natalie Prentice sat in the breakfast nook feeling a strange mixture of apprehension and hope as the mantle clock tolled nine solemn strokes. Having cranked up the emergency radio, Ted flicked it on with his best encouraging smile.

The broadcast opened again with the governor's recorded plea for community cooperation and civic duty:

"I urge all able-bodied Oregonians to join civil service teams in clearing important roads," she'd said. "Participate in your community council to share food and care for neighbors in need. And remember: for neighborhood security and your own safety always observe the dusk-to-dawn curfew."

Natalie anxiously took her husband's hand. Every day brought fresh reports of looted stores and home invasions. Ted warmed her cold hand with both of his seeing in the curvy brunette beside him the lovely young bride he'd been proud to marry.

Their twenty-year-old son Nick, his dark brown hair uncombed as usual, came in to lean against the kitchen counter as the announcer described relief convoys escorted by federal troops that had reached Klamath Falls and Baker City. "Food and medical supplies should arrive in Portland within two weeks," the announcer said.

Natalie exclaimed, "Two weeks!?"

Their food supply was low. They were already down to two spare meals per day. The entire city needed food. Within hours of the first earthquake grocery stores had been emptied. Those not sold out were stripped by mobs. With the police department overwhelmed, people were killed over a few cans of soup.

The Prentices listened to the broadcast knowing that huge swathes of Portland lay in charred ruins. Most bridges in the city and across the state had collapsed or were unsafe to use, including those across the Columbia River. The freeways had become parking lots as thousands of people were stranded on the wrong side of one river or the other, in one state or the other. Portland was cut off from interstate and inter-regional commerce.

While the radio announcer tried to make it sound like help was starting to pour in, Ted knew that they had to decide between staying home and starving, or heading east. He could not bear to think of leaving their home. It was not only depressing, it was frightening. But he could not give in to weakness. He had to be strong for his family. He squeezed his wife's hand before turning to look away to master his fear and grief.

Across the street, their neighbor Brent Roberts and a buddy were loading a big drone into Brent's Hummer. Ted frowned in disdain. Brent was the type who never saw a gas-powered tool he didn't love. While Ted used a rake and broom to deal with leaves,

Brent fired up his leaf blower and relished giving it extra revs. While Ted rode his bicycle to the store for small errands, Brent rolled out his Harley and repeatedly gunned its harsh engine. Ted liked to go for hikes in the Columbia River Gorge, but Brent preferred his big aluminum fishing boat with an outboard engine that looked like a giant black octopus swarming aboard.

Ted had no passion for high-tech things. His technical trainer job demanded that he use mobile devices, but his cell phone was a basic model. Not Brent. He took a child-like delight in gadgets. And like the behemoth gas hog, his drone was super-sized. Ted figured the large vehicles and toys were compensation for having been stunted by nature.

As Brent got into the Hummer, Ted saw that he wore a big pistol in a shoulder holster. It looked like a Smith & Wesson .44 magnum like Clint Eastwood carried in *Dirty Harry*.

The Hummer's engine roared over the news causing Natalie to sit back in her chair. She crossed her arms. "Where does he think he's going?"

"Play with his drone, I guess."

"He must have gas to burn," Nick said.

Ted said, "I'm sure he found a way to fill the behemoth after the first one."

He meant the first earthquake that walloped the Pacific Northwest on February 3rd, at 3:21 PM. The dreaded Cascadia Subduction Zone cut loose with a magnitude 9.1 terror that spawned a sixty-foot tsunami. Every Oregon and Washington coastal community was obliterated.

Ted thanked God that he had been working from home instead of the Beaverton office. He could only imagine the chaos on the roads and the panic scenes along the Willamette River where every bridge save the newest was destroyed or heavily damaged. Tens of thousands of people became instant refugees.

Along with emptying grocery stores, gasoline filling stations ran dry as prices soared above \$40 per gallon. There would be no more gas until interstate freeways could be reopened because the fuel tank farms north of Portland had been hit hard.

The second quake destroyed them.

Five days after the subduction zone slipped, aftershocks triggered a Portland fault line that devastated the city with a magnitude 7 quake at 6:54 AM. Hundreds of unreinforced masonry buildings were destroyed. Ruptured natural gas lines caused dozens of fires that could not be fought because fire trucks that had fuel could not get through rubble-choked streets. Entire city blocks became raging conflagrations.

Nick, Ted, Natalie, and niece Elaine had stood in a knot on the lawn wearing coats and jackets against the chill winter dawn to witness the red glare of Portland ablaze. From five miles away, they saw and heard the fuel tank complex erupt in massive explosions. Huge flames shot into the air as shock waves and fireballs annihilated hundreds of people in the adjacent town of Linnton and ignited buildings across the Willamette on Swan Island.

Sick with grief and despair, Ted had clung to his wife and his son trying to reach within himself for strength even as his knees threatened to buckle. The only thing in his experience even remotely like that day was the 9/11 coverage of the collapsing Twin Towers. Horrible as that was, this devastation was on a biblical scale: shocking, frightening, personal. The searing cataclysm tore at his soul causing trauma that Ted suspected might only be recognized and understood in some future time when the world quit shaking and burning – if they could survive that long.

Their house, built in 1936, withstood the quakes remarkably well. Although the top of the chimney was gone, and windows and plaster were cracked, the house remained on its foundation. As far as Ted could see, the foundation appeared undamaged, but he worried that the basement drywall might hide serious fissures. In any case, he and Natalie were relieved that the hot water heater remained strapped to the wall. Their basement had not flooded and they escaped natural gas leaks. But utility services were broken and remained out nineteen days later.

An emergency radio broadcast after the second quake had reported the initial government casualty estimate was at least 20,000 deaths from the temblors and tsunami. Horrible as that was, Ted believed it was a mere fraction of the true number. And since then, people with chronic medical conditions were dying all around. Unable to get to dialysis treatment, the elderly lady next door had died after the second quake. A neighbor around the corner died of a stroke due to unregulated diabetes. People in hospital died in the dark as drug supplies ran out and back-up generators fell silent.

Ted knew this through his work with a community volunteer group led by a retired police captain. The captain retained a wide acquaintance and just the day before had said that relief convoys were three weeks away. He also said that he and his wife were down to twelve hundred calories each per day.

Natalie switched off the radio with dread plain in her brown eyes. “We’re going to be a lot thinner by the time the roads are reopened.”

“People are going to start eating squirrels and pets,” Nick said. He had taken to wearing a Browning High Power pistol in a hip holster. “I could shoot a few squirrels around here, but that won’t do us much good, will it?”

“No,” Ted agreed. Their young tabby cat Davis sauntered into the kitchen. Ted hated to think of someone eating him or their older cat Lucky. Cat food was getting low, too.

Their niece Elaine, tall, fair-haired and slender entered the room looking angry. “We really need to go to the ranch. We need to get out of this damned city!”

The ranch was Elaine’s home. Her mother, Sally Henderson, was Natalie’s aunt on her mother’s side. Sally’s spread was near La Grande way over in eastern Oregon about 100 miles shy of the Idaho border. Ted figured it was a nice place if you didn’t mind living in the toolie weeds.

The idea of going to the ranch had come up after the first quake. Elaine had wanted to leave Portland then. The university was closed and there was no telling when it would reopen. She’d had to evacuate the dormitory and bargain for a boat ride across

the Willamette River worried about her missing boyfriend. When the city quake devastated downtown, she became convinced that he was dead. Since arriving at their house, Elaine had become fixated on leaving Portland and once she made up her mind, wild horses would have a hard time changing it. It was a family trait.

"Maybe we should go, Dad," Nick said. "This town's going to be a wreck for a long time."

Elaine looked at Nick with an unusual flicker of appreciation. They were the same age and got along, but they were not close friends. Nick was studying geology, while Elaine was aiming for a career in theater production. She seemed to think Nick was a bit dull. Since she was more mature in some ways as well as two inches taller, she often treated him as her little cousin. But evidently they had discussed going to the ranch.

"Leaving here won't be any picnic," Natalie said. "For one thing, we don't even know if the roads are open. We might get ten miles away and find there's no way out, and then come back to a looted house. I want Anne here before we leave."

When they had mentioned leaving to their twenty-six year old daughter the other day, Anne said that she would not go with them. Her fiancé Mitchell was a firefighter who felt duty-bound to save the city. He and his company were tightly-knit. Mitchell would not leave them, and Anne would not leave him. Moreover, as a teacher Anne had her own dedication to community.

Nick asked, "You want me to ride over and get her, Dad?"

"Hang on, son. Travelling's going to be risky. Even if roads are open, there might be outlaw gangs."

"I think the outlaws are still in the city," Nick said. His dark brown eyes and eyebrows accentuated his serious expression. "But they might start leaving, too, now that everybody knows relief's weeks away."

"We've got enough gas to make the trip, Ted," Elaine said. "You were smart to stock up. We can take turns driving and be there in six hours." She was practically pleading.

Natalie seemed about to agree. "We should take our important papers with us," she said. "Between the RAV and the Prius, we'll have room for clothes, food, camping gear, and other important stuff."

By "other important stuff," she meant Ted's weapons and ammunition. Ted had a small gun collection that might come in handy for barter. The weapons were mostly World War Two vintage, like the pistol that Nick carried.

In a reasonable tone, Nick said, "We wouldn't be leaving for good, Dad. We'd just stay there until the roads are open and business is going again."

"That could be months, maybe a year," Ted said. "How are we going to live with no jobs?"

"We're all healthy," Elaine said. "We can get work. Anyway, we won't starve on the ranch, and that's more than I can say for this fucked-up place. The sooner we leave the better while we have food and gas!"

“Dad, just think if one of us gets sick or hurt. What would we do? The hospitals are packed with people they can’t take care of.”

“At home I bet the roads are open, and the stores are open, and gas stations,” Elaine said. She sounded like she was invoking a vision.

Ted thought of driving to the supermarket to buy whatever you needed, or shopping on line with free delivery. That was not so long ago, but it felt like another era. He wanted to go back to that time, and taking Elaine home would hasten that by months.

“A lot of people must be thinking the same way,” Nick said. “People that leave now might beat the rush.”

Natalie sat back in her chair with her arms crossed, shoulders square, looking as though she had made her decision. Ted was sick of the devastation and death, too, but taking to the road was risky. They would be vulnerable.

Brent’s return caused him to glance outside.

Natalie said, “I won’t miss Brent and Daphne.”

“Me neither,” Ted agreed. His neighbor stepped down from his Hummer and looked toward Ted’s house before he and his pal unloaded the drone.

Elaine fixed him with an expectant stare, brows arched above her green eyes. “So, does that mean we can leave?”

Nick looked at his father hopefully. With an uncertain frown, Natalie said, “If we can find out that the roads are open, maybe we should try it.”

Gravely apprehensive, Ted nodded once in thought. “Maybe the captain can tell me something. I’ll go see him.”

“All right!” Elaine exclaimed. She actually hugged Nick, which so surprised him that he barely moved to return the gesture before Elaine sprang away. “That damned gun poked me. Do you have to wear that thing?”

Nick wisely ignored her. “Dad, do you want me to go with you?”

“Not this time. Just stay here and get things ready. If there’s a way open, we should go as soon as possible so we can travel in daylight.”

Natalie sat forward peering through the window. Brent Roberts was coming toward the house carrying a green and chrome coffee thermos. He had assumed a friendly smile. Her voice flat, Natalie said, “Looks like we have a visitor.”

Elaine left the room snarling, “What the fuck does he want?”

Ted moved to the back door wondering the same thing. Brent was the one neighbor with whom he was not on friendly terms. It was strictly a case of mutual tolerance. Ted viewed people like Brent as the root of the country’s political and social problems. White middle-class, late 30s, Brent had some kind of business degree, cared little for the environment, voted Republican if he voted at all, was overweight, an over-consumer and had never been abroad. He considered himself a patriot, but couldn’t be bothered to put up a flag even on July 4th, and probably viewed military service with disdain. He

and his type were too busy making a buck and playing with motorized toys to pay attention to issues before the public. Ted supposed that he watched Fox news if he watched news at all. At the fall block party Brent had deplored homeless people declaring what a nuisance they were. "I'm tired of seeing beggars everywhere."

Ted had asked what he thought should be done to help them.

Brent had said, "Panhandling should be outlawed."

"Maybe we should beef up social services."

Warily, Brent asked, "How?"

"Raise taxes on Wall Street traders."

Brent had replied, "Why force job creators to give hand-outs to lazy bums?"

He now appeared in the side door window with a used-car salesman's smile. Ted opened up and Brent said, "Mornin' neighbor! I've got an idea to talk over with ya, and I brought along some hot coffee."

"Come on in." Ted stood aside. At six-two, Brent was four inches taller and at least fifty pounds heavier. His full jaw bore a three-day beard and he wore a red and black UNLV knitted cap and a heavy plaid shirt. He mounted the steps up to the kitchen greeting Nick and Natalie. "How're you today?"

"Fine," Natalie said. "Were you flying your drone just now?"

"Why, yes I was. Say, I have some hot coffee here if you want."

"Thank you," Natalie said. "Won't you have a seat? I'll get some mugs."

"Thanks." Brent moved toward the nearest chair saying, "What're you carryin' there? A Beretta?"

Nick said, "It's a Browning."

"Are you any good with it?"

"Pretty fair."

Ted said, "We'll be more comfortable in the dining room. Come on through."

He pulled out a chair for Brent and their cat Lucky jumped down and ran into the hallway.

"Well, there's somebody's dinner," Brent joked.

No one laughed as Natalie placed a mug on the table pad for Brent and handed mugs to Nick and Ted. Brent loosened the thermos cap. "I didn't bring any milk or sugar."

Natalie said, "We haven't had milk for some time, either. But if you want some sugar..."

"Oh, that's alright. I don't mind black coffee."

"It's a bit chilly in here," Ted said, "but I'll take your coat if you want."

Brent declared, "I'm good."

Natalie set a small dish of sugar on the table. Brent helped himself to a heaping spoonful and stirred his coffee. "The weather's gonna be clear for a couple of days."

Ted was not a coffee drinker, but to be polite he poured some into his mug. He asked, "Did you hear the latest broadcast?"

"Yes, I did," Brent said. His eyes gleamed beneath his dark brows. "Sounds like relief convoys are still two-three weeks out."

"Umm hmm," Ted agreed. "That's what the captain said yesterday."

"Anyhow," Brent said, "that's what I came over to talk about."

Ted took a sip of the bitter coffee. "What's on our mind?"

Brent drew himself up straight. "I want to go to my place over by Redmond, but I don't have enough gas. I know you've got some extra and I figured you ought to let me buy it. I'll pay \$100 a gallon."

As Brent regarded Ted, Natalie rolled her eyes scornfully. Nick glanced warily from Brent to his father. Ted put down his mug keeping his expression neutral. His first reaction was to say thanks for the coffee and not just "no," but "hell no!" Instead, he paused to view the matter from a different angle. "So, you're leaving town?"

"Us, my buddy Rocky and his family, and his brother. We're ready to go, but I need twenty gallons of gas. That's two thousand dollars." Brent got out a hefty roll of paper money with a one hundred dollar bill on the outside. "Cash on the barrel head."

Ted was offended by the ham-handed offer and by Brent's familiarity with the contents of his garage.

"A hundred dollars a gallon..." Nick scoffed. "Anyway, our gas isn't for sale."

Brent looked at Nick before speaking to Ted. "I'll offer one hundred twenty a gallon. Make it 2,400. And I'd also buy a rifle and ammunition. I'll pay a thousand for a rifle, and a dollar a bullet for as many as I can get."

Ted asked, "What makes you think I have a rifle for sale?"

"I've seen you and your boy carrying rifle cases. If you have an AR 15, I'll pay two thousand, plus fifty for each full magazine."

Ted sat back in his chair and looked at Nick to warn him to remain silent. He asked Brent, "How do you know there's a road out of town that's clear?"

Brent's smile made his cheeks and chin bristle. "That's what my drone showed me. The route's clear out through Gresham and Sandy. And people I know tell me the State Police are keeping the pass open through Government Camp – but only in daytime."

From nearby, but out of sight came a muffled, "Yes!"

Ted looked from Nick, whose frown conveyed smoldering hostility, to Natalie who could not fully suppress a smile.

"Somebody likes my offer," Brent said, "What do you say?"

Nick regarded his father with stern disapproval. Natalie said, "We probably ought to discuss this."

Ted said, "Yes, I think we should. Brent, we won't keep you waiting around here. Just give us a few minutes, and I'll come over and let you know."

Ted stood up, as did Nick. Brent hesitated a moment, then rose to his feet. "Well, alright. But don't take too long." He tucked his money roll into his coat. "We want to get going as soon as possible."

"I understand," Ted said. "I'll be over in a few minutes."

Moving to the side door, Brent said, "\$3,500 cash might come in pretty handy."

Nick said, "I don't know where we'd spend it."

"We'll talk it over," Ted said. He opened the door for Brent. "I'll see you shortly."

As soon as the door closed, Nick said, "We aren't selling that asshole any of our gas, are we?"

Ted ushered his son back into the kitchen. "We've got thirty five gallons in the garage. That's way more than we need to drive to La Grande, and our cars are pretty full." He looked to Natalie.

She said, "I have about a full tank. Normally, that would get me there with gallons to spare."

Ted asked, "It's about what? Three hundred miles?"

"About that," Natalie said. "But that's driving on I-84 all the way."

Thinking aloud, Ted said, "So figure 350, or even 400 in case of detours... I think we could sell 20 gallons. Nick, do you have any gas in your car?"

"Maybe three gallons or so. But we're not taking it, are we?"

"No. You can put it in the garage, and we'll drain the gas out of it."

"So, we're going?" Elaine asked. "Today?"

Crossing her arms as though hugging herself, Natalie said, "I hope Brent knows what he's talking about and the road is open."

"I know," Ted agreed. "I still want to talk with the captain. But in the meantime, we'll sell Brent twenty gallons. And I'll also sell him a rifle and ammunition. You know, I'm tempted to see if he'd let us travel through the mountains with them."

Elaine asked, "Why would we want to do that?"

Nick said, "Safety in numbers."

"That's what I'm thinking," Ted said. "But I don't know if we can be ready to leave by the time they want to go. I want to talk to the captain, and we can't leave anyway until I can tell Anne and Mitch that we're going."

"I hate packing in a rush," Natalie said. "I might forget something important."

"Well, it'll take us at least an hour and a half to pack and get ready," Ted said. He looked at his watch. "We have to start by eleven if we're going to make it through the mountains in daylight."

Ted's worry earned him a hug. Natalie said, "I wish we could stay, too, but going east for a while is the best thing."

Ted returned her loving embrace feeling her rich brown hair against his cheek, her familiar body against his. He said softly, "I hope so."

He knew that she was worried for Elaine. The poor girl was at the edge of her sanity. After losing her boyfriend and the life she had wanted to make, she needed to be with her family. At night, lying next to Natalie in their cold house under a press of blankets, Ted battled with despair and grief. Having Natalie beside him and knowing that Anne and Nick were safe made all the difference. If he were separated from them now, he would be on the edge, too.

He gave his wife a squeeze and kissed her forehead. "I'll go bargain with Brent. Nick, will you move your car into the garage and drain the gas?"

"Sure."

"I'll make a list of the things we need to take," Natalie said. "Elaine can help me. I'll also try to call Anne. If I can't get her, maybe I can leave word with Cynthia."

One of the weird things since the city quake was that sometimes they could get a call through to Natalie's friend Cynthia in Medford when they could not connect with Anne just three miles away. Ted had also been able to call his friend Steve in Denver. "Try Steve's number if you can't get ahold of Cynthia."

Ted walked across the street in the cold February morning. The sky was mostly clear, except for smoke rising in the west and northwest. The absence of traffic noise, sirens, planes or helicopters was no longer jarringly odd, but the neighborhood was unusually quiet. *Is everyone inside discussing the news? How many will decide to leave today?*

Brent opened his back door as Ted passed a toddler's plastic playhouse and slide in bright primary colors. He caught a waft of wood smoke as a German Shepard appeared beside Brent to bark hello.

"Quiet Hilda! Go inside," Brent commanded. "Ted, come on in. We can talk in the living room by the fire."

Daphne, a bleached-blond several years younger than her husband, greeted Ted as he entered the kitchen. At the table were their three-year old son and five-year old daughter busy with coloring books. Ted said hello, but the children just stared.

The front rooms were dominated by a modern painting that out-glared the fire. It looked like someone had applied a coat of white and flung crimson paint off a brush at random. Neither framed nor hung, it was just propped on the mantle. The man who had helped Brent load the drone rose from an angular modern sofa as red as the painting. Brent said, "This is my neighbor Ted. Ted, this is Rocky Boudreaux, a good friend of mine."

Rocky shook Ted's hand. He was about forty, at least six feet tall, fit, had thinning red hair and a thick mustache. He wore a red plaid wool shirt that went with the painting. Ted gripped the man's hand and noticed tattooing at his wrist.

Ted asked, "Are you a neighbor?"

"Near enough. My place is up above Fremont on 47th."

"By the cemetery?"

"Uh huh. That side of the street's pretty quiet."

"The lawn always looks nice, too," Brent said. "Have a seat, Ted." He indicated a scarlet cubist chair near the fire. "Rocky painted that picture."

Ted tried not to show his surprise as he sat down. "Sure is eye-catching."

Rocky smiled as Hilda came over to sniff Ted's leg.

"Lay down!" Brent told her, not unkindly. He sat on the near end of the couch. Rocky sat at the far end by an old-fashioned six-shooter in a western pistol belt. The pistol had stag grips and a nickel finish. The filled belt loops gleamed brassy-gold.

Daphne called from the kitchen, "Want some coffee, Ted?"

"Uh, no thanks," Ted replied. "I'm not much of a coffee drinker. You might as well save it for someone who'll appreciate it."

Brent smiled expectantly. "So, how do you appreciate my offer?"

Glad to get right to the point, Ted said, "I can sell you 20 gallons, but the price has to be \$150 a gallon. That does not include the cans. And, I have a nice Winchester .30-30 I can part with for fifteen hundred and one hundred and seventy six rounds for two hundred. So that's a total of \$4,700."

Brent's smile faded as he heard the price of Ted's gasoline and turned into a scowl when he heard about the Winchester. On the other hand, Rocky said, "A Winchester, huh? Is that a new one, or an older one?"

Brent demanded, "What difference does it make?"

Rocky said, "The older ones were made better."

Ted said, "This one was made in 1954."

Rocky nodded in appreciation. "That's a good one. What kinda shape's it in?"

"Brand-new except for a couple of scratches. I doubt it's ever been in the field."

"I'd like to see it," Rocky said, "Though the price is pretty steep."

"The hell with that!" Brent said. "We want a modern weapon, not some antique. You don't have an AR-15? That's what we want."

"Sorry," Ted said, "I don't. I have a Ruger Ranch rifle, but I'm using it."

"I'll give you two thousand for the Ruger."

"It's not for sale."

"You don't have anything that takes a magazine?"

Ted did not want to sell any of his weapons to Brent at any price, except that he and Natalie needed more cash money. "Well, I have an M1 carbine I could let go, with four thirty-round magazines, and six fifteen-round mags, plus pouches. But all that would run you thirty-five hundred, not counting ammo."

"Son of a bitch!" Brent swore. "I don't believe this guy!"

Rocky said, "How much ammo you got for the carbine?"

"Five hundred rounds."

"How much for that?" Brent asked hotly.

"One thousand."

"Mother fucker," Brent cursed. "This asshole's trying to jew me!"

"So, two hundred per hundred," Rocky said.

"Yes," Ted confirmed. "And those prices are in paper money. If you have hard currency, we can talk about that."

"Hard currency?" Brent asked.

"He means gold or silver," Rocky said. "You got any of that?"

Without enthusiasm, Brent said, "I got this Rolex watch."

"Keep it," Ted said. "I'm not interested in jewelry, just coins, bullion, or cash."

Brent remained indignant over the prices, but Rocky suggested that they go into the kitchen for a minute. Ted remained by the fire with the dog thinking that he did not want to travel with these people. He wondered if they were capable of just taking what they needed. He was unarmed. *And if I was, am I prepared to shoot someone over some gasoline and weapons?*

He tended the fire and added a piece of wood. *The gas is my own means to escape the city, and the weapons are my main barter goods. I need a fair price if we're going to make our way east and have money to live on. It really is a question of life and death, isn't it?*

But could you really shoot someone, if it came right down to it?

Brent's little daughter came into the room to sit by the dog. "This is Hilda," she said in her high treble voice. "Sometimes, she sleeps in my room with me."

"Is that right?" Ted asked. "Does she get onto your bed?"

"Yes, but she's not apposed to."

"But you don't mind, do you?"

"Oh, no! She's a good girl. See, she likes me to scratch her ears, don't you Hildy?"

Ted smiled and doubted that he could shoot this little girl's father even if Brent was trying to rob him.

Brent and Rocky returned looking grim and sat on the sofa. Daphne called, "Dakota, honey, come on in here with me."

When Dakota left, Rocky said, "We'll buy the twenty gallons, and the Winchester and ammo. But we get to keep the gas cans, too, as part of the price."

Ted countered, "I'll let you have one gas can."

Brent scowled, but nodded assent. Rocky said, "Then we've got a deal. Do you want to bring the stuff over here, or do we come get it?"

"You can come over," Ted said, "as long as I get paid first."

"I've got the money right here," Brent said. He brandished his roll. "I'll hand it to you when I see the goods."

Making a mental note to insist on counting it, Ted said, "Give me a couple of minutes and I'll have everything ready."

He took leave of Daphne and the children and trotted across the street. Natalie's car was parked at the curb and Nick had his old Mustang in the garage. He was jacking up the rear end. "How'd that go?"

"Okay. They'll be over in a minute. Get four of the newer five-gallon cans out for them. I'm also selling the Winchester." Eyeing Nick's Browning in its holster, he made for the back door, went in and started down to the basement work room. Natalie called from the kitchen, "What happened? Are they willing to wait?"

"Tell ya in a minute," Ted called. From the gun cabinet he fetched the Winchester. From a storage shelf he pulled an olive green ammunition can that held .30-30 shells. When he popped the lid in the can to check that it was the right ammo, he rediscovered a box of .22 rimfire which he set on the work bench. Hoping that Brent would not cause trouble, he carried the rifle and can upstairs.

Natalie asked, "What's going on, Ted?"

"I'm selling some gas and this rifle. They'll be here in a minute."

The back door was opening across the street as he joined Nick standing by a row of four red plastic five-gallon cans. The end of a pistol butt was visible in the pocket of Nick's jacket. "Do you trust those assholes?"

"Not much. Move over there and have your weapon in your hand. It's loaded?"

Brent and Rocky came toward the street. Both were armed with their pistols.

"Damned straight it is," Nick said. He put his right hand into his jacket pocket and moved to the far end of the line of cans.

Ted said, "If either of them make a move toward their guns, put yours on Brent."

"Did you load that rifle?"

"Nope."

"Shit, Dad!"

Ted set the ammo can on the driveway retaining wall and held the Winchester in his hands. Brent and Rocky stopped at the end of the driveway to look at the four gas cans, Nick, and Ted.

Brent said, "They all full?"

Ted said, "Go ahead and check 'em."

The two men seemed a little shifty. Rocky said, "That's a nice-lookin' Winchester. Mind if I have a look?"

Ted held it a little higher, but did not move to hand it over. He said, "This is strictly a cash and carry deal. You pay, and you get the goods. This rifle is just what I said it is. I kinda hate to part with it, but you guys just might need a good firearm."

Apparently uncertain, Brent and Rocky glanced at each other. Brent said, "Why can't we look at it?"

Ted said, "Because I don't trust you fellas."

"Neither do I," Nick said. He held his pistol down by his leg.

Rocky said, "You guys're kinda jumpy, aren't ya?"

Brent said, "And not very neighborly."

"It's just a sign of the times," Ted said. "Now, I'm willing to sell you what you need for \$4,700. Do we have a deal?"

With a sour expression, Brent looked at Rocky, then to Ted. He stepped forward and nudged each gas can with the toe of his hiking boot. Then he reached into his coat.

Nick said, "Easy does it, there."

Regarding Nick derisively, Brent pulled the money roll out of his pocket. Ted watched Rocky, who kept his arms folded as Brent counted out \$4,700. Then Brent said, "I think we ought to get all of the cans."

"My offer was one, but I'll let you have two," Ted said. "You empty the first two, then bring the empties back and get the other two. You can set the cash down on the wall there."

Grumbling a curse, Brent moved to the stone wall and glanced up as Natalie came outside. She said, "So, Brent, will we be travelling together?"

Brent dropped the money next to the ammunition can and regarded Natalie with puzzled disbelief. "Say what?"

Ted handed the rifle to Brent and scooped up the bills. "We're leaving town, too."

Natalie said, "Maybe we could travel together?"

Brent looked from her to the rifle which he then handed to Rocky who worked the lever. "Empty," Rocky said, "just like I thought."

"The bullets are in the ammo can," Ted said. He stuffed the money into a pocket. "Anyhow, we'll be ready to leave in an hour or so."

Brent scowled. "We're going as soon as we gas up. We aren't waiting."

Ted had expected that, but Natalie said, "It might be better if we travelled together. Anybody out to cause trouble might think twice about four vehicles."

Brent said, "That may be, but we're leaving right away all the same." He passed the ammo can to Rocky and lifted two of the gas cans. "We'll be right back for the others."

Ted, Nick, and Natalie watched them go. Natalie said, "I guess we're travelling by ourselves, then."

"It looks like it," Ted said. "I don't trust them, anyway. See how they came over here armed? And nice going, Nick!"

Holstering his pistol, Nick smiled.

Natalie said, "You had a gun on them?"

Nick said, "I sure did. That's why they didn't try anything."

"Oh, my God!" Natalie exclaimed. "Was that really necessary?"

"Yes, it was," Ted replied. "And Nick was pretty level-headed."

"Well, I don't like it!" Natalie insisted. She turned to go back into the house.

"Neither do I," Ted said, "but we have to be prepared to defend ourselves." He would have said more, but his wife shut the door firmly behind her.

Across the way, Brent was pouring fuel into his Hummer. Rocky was looking over the Winchester and said something. Brent barked a short, scornful laugh.

Gesturing to Nick's car, Ted asked, "How's that coming?"

"Well, I got a gallon or so out of it, then had to stop for this business."

"We might as well drain the lawnmower, too," Ted said. Along the back wall of the garage their stack of firewood was down to a quarter of a chord. He surveyed all of his tools, ladders; a lifetime of accumulation that allowed him to take care of his home. He sadly realized that he was leaving it all behind. *I should lock the garage when we leave and put the key on the kitchen counter.*

Nick said, "Here comes that Rocky dude."

Rocky was crossing the street with two red gas cans.

"Where's Brent?"

"He's in the house."

Rocky set the empty cans in the driveway and said, "So you're leaving town, too?"

"Yeah," Ted said. "I'd rather not, but I don't fancy starving."

"No," Rocky agreed. He came forward and picked up the other two cans. "Well, maybe we'll see you on the road?"

"If the road's open, then you probably won't. I hope you have smooth sailing."

"Same to you," Rocky said. He returned to Brent's side of the street leaving Ted with an impression that he was a good man.

Ted consigned the empty cans to Nick and went inside. Natalie stood at the counter going over a list. He heard Elaine in the basement bedroom as he pulled out the wad of money. "Well, here's forty-seven hundred," he said. "Add that to the six we had..."

Natalie said, "With that and the silver, we can get along for a few months. Aunt Sally won't charge us rent, but we'll pay our way."

Ted nodded, thinking. "I'd better go see Anne to let her know we're leaving, give her a spare key."

"We're not going anywhere until she knows what we're doing," Natalie said. "I'm sure they'll move in as soon as they can."

Ted looked at his cell phone lying on the kitchen counter. He had been unable to re-charge the battery for two weeks and it was turned off to conserve what life it had left. "Were you able to get any phone signals?"

"Yes. I left a message on Steve's phone. I just said we were driving to Aunt Sally's where we ought to be able to charge our phones, and that we'd be there tomorrow."

"Well, that's something, anyway." Ted would have felt better if Natalie had spoken to Steve. But then, Denver had not been devastated. Steve was working and would pick up the message soon. He'd be there to pass it on if Anne should call.

Ted wanted to get right on his bike and cycle over to Anne's apartment, but he thought to write a message just in case he missed her. She might be working on a volunteer crew. Her fiancé Mitchell was certainly on the job somewhere. Ted wrote carefully to make sure his note was legible recalling the last time he had spoken with Anne. She had cycled home two days before to see how they were doing and borrow some flour. He and Natalie had urged Anne and Mitchell to move into the house.

"Well, we can move in, sure," Anne had said. "That's not a problem, except I don't know how we'd get our stuff over here. Not that we have much."

"I can give you a gallon of gas," Ted offered. "But don't carry it home on the bike."

"Hell no!" Anne said. "I don't want to get robbed. Can you stash it someplace where we can find it?"

Ted had thought about it. "I know, I'll put the little gas can in a box and tie that on my bike rack next time I cycle over." Then he had given her an old Colt .32 automatic pistol, two spare magazines, and one hundred rounds of ammunition. "I'll feel better knowing that you have some protection."

"Okay, Dad. But this little thing isn't going to scare anyone."

"It's better than nothing, and it's a good pocket gun. See here? It has an internal hammer. I'll show you how to disassemble it."

Like her mother, Anne was very practical, but unlike her mother, she was not afraid of firearms. Ted had made sure that both of his children knew how to shoot. Anne had quickly gotten the knack of taking the little pistol apart and putting it back together. Then she had slipped it into her coat pocket and stuffed the bullets into her bike bag. She had hugged her mother and father, and cycled off with a wave and a smile.

Ted avidly hoped to see Anne at her apartment. With the note in his pocket and the boxed gas strapped to the rack, he set out on his bike. A few blocks away, he stopped at the captain's house finding it occupied only by Ruby their barking Westie. Ted cycled on wondering where the captain and Lucinda might be. Although the streets were devoid of motorized traffic, the neighborhood watch barricades were all manned. He passed through the first without trouble, but at the second he had to mention the captain's name to get the guard to back off from his gas can.

Anne and Mitch rented a little duplex south of Belmont around the corner from the Horse Brass pub. The pub's brick front had collapsed into the street and part of the second floor had fallen into the ground floor. The street had been cleared by tossing the bricks into the building. One of the dart boards remained on the wall, but the bar had long since been stripped of bottles and kegs.

Anne was not home. Deeply disappointed, Ted slipped the note into the mail slot and hid the box among some bushes fearing that he might not see his daughter again. He waited for some time wondering how many people had seen him stash the box, wishing he had a key to the apartment and feeling time passing, passing. Sad and worried, he grasped his bike wondering just how much misery his heart could take.

“Dad!”

It was Anne. He smiled in vast relief as she pedaled up to him.

“Looking for me?” Anne looked tired, but her smile was as welcome as a sunny spring day.

“Yes, I was. What have you been up to?”

Anne unclipped her helmet and hung it on her handlebars. “Oh, I was helping at the school. We’ve made a sort of food pantry in the gym, though there’s not much left in it now. Geeze, I heard on the radio that we’re not likely to get any relief for another two weeks or so.”

Ted nodded sadly. “We heard that too. Let’s go in for a minute.”

They carried their bikes into the little front hallway and Ted fetched in the box. Anne offered tea and heated the kettle over a can of sterno describing Mitchell’s long days performing search and rescue and trying to contain fires without proper equipment and scant water pressure. They shared a single tea bag and took their cups into the simply furnished living room to sit before the powerless TV.

“So, you’re not just here to visit, are you?”

“No,” Ted said. He set his cup down on the old coffee table. “Honey, we’ve going to the ranch. We’re leaving today, and we need you and Mitchell to live in the house.”

“Oh. I see.” Anne thought a moment. Her wavy light brown hair unwashed in several days and matted from the bike helmet still framed her pretty face. “Well, I guess I can go back with you now, if you can give me a few minutes. I need to leave a note.”

Ted breathed easier. “Sure. Do what you need to.”

Cycling home, the neighborhoods looked mostly normal, not counting the fallen chimneys or occasional houses askew. Here and there, people were loading up their vehicles. Two different families were pedaling east towing bike trailers.

Ted resented the delays caused by neighborhood barricades as he thought of clogged roads. But he and Nick were in their own watch group and had done their share of guard duty to keep looters away. He wondered how the neighborhoods would carry on as people left the city. His watch group was already stretched to man all of their barricades.

When he and Anne stopped at the captain’s house, the guy next door told them that the captain had taken Lucinda to Providence Hospital with some kind of stomach ailment. Ted was immediately concerned. *It must be serious if he’s taken her to the hospital.*

Ted did not want to go there. Volunteer duties had forced him to go several times since the quakes. It was depressing. The waiting rooms and hallways were filled with wounded and sick people desperate for care that the staff could not provide. On top of that, at least one upper floor of the parking garage was now a vast morgue. There was no gasoline for transporting bodies.

Ted shivered at the thought, but he had to know if there was a route open to the east. He steeled himself for the ordeal and asked Anne to go on home, then turned toward the hospital. The upper floors rose above the neighborhood, but the brick building had sustained damage. Blue tarps sagged over gaps in the roofline. Unlike normal times, no vehicles came and went from the medical complex, although vehicles crammed the pavement near the ER entrance. The driveway itself was lined with ambulances. Ted coasted to a bike rack considering the clusters of people standing around them.

Locking his bike, he walked around the nearest ambulance and nearly bumped into the captain. Lucinda was sitting in the ambulance looking worried as she talked with an EMT. The captain was surprised. "Ted. What brings you here?"

"Hi, Captain. I heard you and Lucinda were here. I hope it's not serious."

"We don't know. I hope not."

Lucinda was answering the EMT's questions about her stomach pain, where it was, when it had started.

Ted looked away, not wanting to intrude. All of the ambulances were being used as triage stations. By the next one an elderly man was having his bloody head treated. Ted grew squeamish at the sight of blood. He respected those who could care for injured people without qualm. Anne's fiancé had worked as an emergency medical technician before getting on with the Fire Department. Ted could only wonder how many people Mitchell had helped since the quakes. Anne could deal with injured people, too. That made Ted and Natalie worry for their daughter's health. Handling hurt and sick people was risky, but Anne insisted that she took every precaution.

The captain asked, "Are you alright, Ted?"

His thoughts interrupted, Ted said, "Oh, yeah. I was actually here looking for you. I heard that the route through Sandy to Government camp is open. Think that's true?"

"Last I heard it was. You thinking of leaving town?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

The captain regarded him thoughtfully. "You must have someplace to go."

"Natalie's aunt has a ranch near La Grande. We've got enough gas to make it, and we figure we'll leave today. Would you and Lucinda like to come with us?"

The captain looked into the ambulance. Lucinda was laying on the gurney now as the EMT gently pressed her abdomen. The captain sadly shook his head. "I don't think so, Ted. Lucy's not up for travelling. No. We'll ride it out here. But I hate to see you go."

"I'm not all that keen on it. But it's not completely up to me."

"No, I suppose not."

The EMT sat back and looked to her husband. Ted said, "Good luck, Captain. I hope to see you both again."

"Goodbye, Ted. Good luck."

They shook hands, and Ted left hearing the EMT say that he thought a doctor should have a look at Lucinda. Ted unlocked his bike praying that she would be alright.

He cycled home telling himself that leaving town was temporary. They would return home when the roads re-opened and business could resume. At a neighborhood barricade, a man named Bob stood guard with a shotgun. Ted reported that the captain and Lucinda were at the hospital.

Bob said, "Gee, I hope she'll be okay."

"Me, too. Anyway, we're packing up and leaving."

"That's what your daughter told me. Headin' east?"

"Out to La Grande. Anne and her fiancé Mitchell are going to live in our house."

"Mitchell... He's the firefighter?"

"Yes. Anyway, I gotta get back. Be seein' you Bob."

"Good luck."

Ted's RAV4 stood in the driveway with the roof pod in place. Nick had also put a cargo platform on the roof rack to hold their extra gas cans beneath a tarp. The bike rack leaned against the stone wall ready to be mounted in the trailer hitch. He and Nick conferred on tools to take, then Ted inspected the rack installed on Natalie's Prius as he noticed Brent's Hummer and Daphne's Escalade were gone. Even though he disliked them, he wished them a safe journey.

In the house, boxes and bags of belongings covered the kitchen and dining room tables, the counters and chairs. Their food fit into one large cooler for which there was no ice. They no longer had anything that needed to be kept cold. In the hallway were suitcases of clothes. Standing in front of her desk, Natalie was holding her laptop as though trying to decide if she should take it. She said, "Anne's here."

"Yes! Thank God I found her!"

Natalie said, "I'm leaving half of our water and some of our food for them."

The next twenty minutes were spent loading the vehicles with Anne's help. Nick and Ted carefully camouflaged the weapons and ammunition before carrying them out to the RAV. They agreed that Elaine should ride with Ted, and Nick with his mother. Elaine was proficient with firearms and could handle the Ruger carbine.

With the vehicles packed, he and Natalie made one last tour of their home. From the dressers, the walls, and the mantle family members and younger, happier versions of themselves looked back at them. Ted desperately wanted to see them all again in a few months' time just as they were.

They stood in the living room by Natalie's piano. Natalie took his hand and held it tightly. Grieving but determined, she said, "We'll be back, Ted."

He held her close for a long moment wanting to believe her. He kissed the woman he loved and they rested their foreheads together looking into each other's eyes as they had for many years so that time lost all meaning even when standing on the edge of the known world.

They turned back toward the kitchen where Anne stood among the useless appliances holding Lucky. Ted said goodbye to their pet and felt a powerful mix of pride and sadness as he embraced Anne.

"I wish you and Mitch were coming with us."

"I know, Dad. But we'll be alright."

Ted kissed his brave daughter trying not to worry that it might be the last time.

Natalie embraced her daughter, too, just managing not to cry. They walked outside where Nick and Elaine said their goodbyes with Ted feeling a strange weight in his chest that impeded his breathing.

The burdened RAV somehow reminded him of *The Grapes of Wrath* in which folks fleeing the 30's dustbowl drove to California in jalopies piled high with their belongings. Most of those people had no hope of returning home.

He got into the driver's seat and closed the door. He started the engine. Elaine got into the passenger seat with the carbine beside her. She regarded him in mute sympathy as tears coursed down her cheeks.

Ted let the engine warm up a little looking at his home, recalling scraping and painting it, washing the windows, tending the landscaping, cleaning the patio, putting up Christmas lights, all of the birthdays, holidays, and every-days.

He recalled a jury selection panel when a lawyer had asked, "What is your favorite place?" Ted had answered, "Home."

Nick called from the car, "All set, Dad?"

Ted looked at his son and waved. "Yeah," he replied in a tremulous voice. "All set."

He waved to Anne who smiled and waved. He put the RAV into reverse and backed deliberately into the street, pointed the truck east and looked at his house, his lawn, his plants and trees and his beloved daughter. He swallowed painfully and shifted gears starting away with a prayer for a safe journey, and a safe return home.

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