

Set The World On Fire

Fiction by Allison Sobczak

You reach the bottom of Mount Rainier, and are surprised to see sloping white fields. It's the beginning of July, and it's surreal, feeling the summer sun and seeing winter's snow. You and your sister follow your dad up the ridge towards the viewpoint. You regret wearing shorts. You wish you had been prepared when you got there.

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From this vantage point, Mount Rainier is beautiful. The volcano's rounded white dome blends in with the cloudy sky above. There are other people around you, snapping pictures and posing for selfies, and your sister grabs your wrist and whispers, "This is amazing." You agree.

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It's the middle of that night, hours after you, your sister, and your dad explored the base of Mount Rainier and returned back to the hotel, planning the next day's Seattle adventures, when you first feel it. Creaking and groaning coming from inside the walls that is more than just the building settling in. You know something's not right. You sit up in your bed just as the mattress begins to sway. Your sister, sleeping next to you, wakes up and reaches for your wrist again. She's scared, but you reassure her. "Everything is fine," you say. You squeeze her hand and her small smile is fierce in its trust in you.

Everything happens at once. The building's shakes grow stronger and you grip your sister's hand tighter. You look over at the other bed for your dad, who will surely know what to do. The bed is empty, sheets a chaotic mess. Your heart barely has time to stop before you spot him over by far wall, standing in front of the window. Mount

Rainier is in a prime visual shot, providing a gorgeous view to wake up to every morning. Usually, the sky is bright blue and the volcano is brown and white. Now, the sky is black, with thick, dark clouds pluming from Mount Rainier's exposed opening.

"My God," your dad whispers. His voice is full of both awe and fear. It makes your palms sweat and your breath quicken. You watch the erupting volcano. It looks like a candle on a birthday cake. You make a wish and hope that it will be enough.

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The rest of the night blurs in heat and fire. Your dad brings you gas masks that had apparently been stowed away in the hotel room's closet. You wonder why you didn't notice them before, why you didn't contemplate the possibility of an eruption. The television is static but the radio has a crackling signal that alerts everyone located in or around the base of Mount Rainier to evacuate immediately. Cracks spiderweb across the walls and ceilings, and you can already taste the ash in the air. The three of you take hands and run out into the hallway, joining the masses of panicked people all fleeing in the same direction. Another large rumble shakes the structure. Glass shatters. People scream. Still holding your sister's and your dad's hands, you stumble your way through the emergency exit and down the flights of stairs into the packed lobby. There's congestion at the entrance, people scrambling through small crevices like worms squeezing out from under rocks to get to somewhere safe.

"Follow me!" your dad shouts, and he steers you and your sister back towards the emergency exit and races up the stairs, bypassing the floor you had been residing on and reaching the top landing. There's a door that looks like it hasn't been opened in years, but your dad yanks on the handle anyway. It swings out on smooth hinges, revealing the rooftop. Your sister stoops down and jams the door with a stopper. When she stands

back up and looks at you, her freckles are pinpricks against her pale face. Tears make tracks through the dust on her cheeks. You swipe your thumbs across them and brush a shaking hand through her hair. She says something but you can't hear her through the mask, so you just squeeze her hand once more and smile and hope she understands. You both reach your dad, stand on either side of him, and watch the chaos unfold below.

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Many people found their way to the rooftop as well, and now you all stand terrified together. The ash clouds tumble down the volcano like an avalanche, annihilating everything in its path. You look at the volcano and think about the human body. Lava trails across the mountain's surface like blood travels through veins, and you can almost hear the thick, sludgy movement as it barrels down to the base of the volcano. You feel your own tears trickle down your face. You look at your sister, and she wipes the tears away, reciprocating your earlier gesture. You turn back towards the volcano. Everything starts to melt, reds and oranges and yellows turning runny and mixing like paint on a palette.

When your dad grabs your shoulder and pulls you into his side, the water in your eyes spills over once again. You think the tears might be from the ash and debris, but you're not sure. You decide that it doesn't matter. What matters when the world burns around you?

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It's later, much, much later, (hours later, days later, months later) when you're finally able to look at the statistics from that night.

Mount Rainier's eruption was brought on by a 7.7 earthquake. The immediate population was just over 600 people, the ones who were in the most danger, but the

warning went out all across the Seattle area and Puyallup River Valley. Pyroclastic and lava flows sped down from the volcano at speeds of almost 60 miles per hour. These brought on even more dangers, such as the mudflows and lahar flows, which followed closely behind at about 40 miles per hour. Those that flowed into the city cooled with post-lahar sedimentation, which caused massive flooding in the metropolitan area. You stop counting when the death toll reaches the thousands.

Your dad is compiling as much information together as he can about the eruption. Your sister doesn't talk about it much. Your mom hardly lets the three of you out of her sight.

Some nights, you still wake up with sweat on your skin and a scream at the back of your throat. You dream about being trapped on that rooftop, your sister's glazed eyes glowing through the swirling ash like headlights on a foggy night. You remember the fire, the heat, the darkness, the light, the screams, the people. You remember how Mount Rainier looked like a birthday candle when it erupted. You blow it out, wishing for one good night's sleep.