

When It Rains, It Hails

Thunder?

At first, it sounded as if a giant wheelbarrow had grumbled across the mesa top. Whatever it was, the noise was unusual and loud enough to rouse both my husband and I from half-slumber at 6:30 a.m.

"Rockslide," I mumbled, remembering the 4-foot rock that had tumbled from the sandstone cliffs above the orchard the day before, how it had bounced over the railroad track before finding a home in the middle of our gravel road.

Still drowsy, we let any thoughts of the loud grumbling dissipate with dawn. That is, until we heard the distant rumble of the Union Pacific returning to Somerset for more coal. And then the shrill emergency whistle. Brakes shrieking. Scraping of iron. Groan of the track.

"Train wreck!" Eric shouted and catapulted from bed.

My first thought: Please let everyone be okay.

Second thought: My son is going to love this. He lives for trains, setting and resetting his Thomas the Tank Engine track multiple times a day. The Telluride library has created a special Thomas section at our request (awesome librarians!). And we spend hours watching the trains lumber past the orchard house, just a hundred feet from the track. A real train wreck? Finn would be more curious than a monkey named George.

While Eric went to investigate, I stayed home and waited for Finn to wake up, and on rousing, he immediately noticed the stopped train out the window. "Let's get dressed and go investigate," I told him.

He ran to put his clothes on. Amazing. Often, getting dressed requires cajoling and assistance.

The kid got himself dressed in 49 seconds flat and was ready to explore.

The rockslide, about ¼ mile from the house, was much more dramatic than the day before. These were not car-sized rocks, they were train-size rocks. They imposed themselves along the sides of the tracks and in the road below. Where one had bounced at the orchard gate, there was a crater large enough for Finn to stand in and barely have his head poke out.

The train had glanced one of the boulders, pushing it down from the rails, before rounding the curve and sidling a larger one that unsuccessfully tried to pull back the engine's siding as if it were a giant yellow can of sardines. And there, scraped up and slightly atilt, the engine was forced to a stop.

The three engineers were okay, though they had ragdoll legs and white complexions. More than anything, they seemed stunned with gratitude that things weren't worse.

Of course they got worse. The plan was to uncouple the train from the battered engine and move it back along the track, allowing for the blasters to come work on breaking down the giant boulders and also allowing us access to our barn, farm machinery and orchard rows across the tracks.

Another engine arrived to pull the train from the other end, and the uncoupling and reversing operation took place quite slowly. Finn held my hand and watched with great interest as the warning bell clanged, the wheels slowly rolled and the great train hit a spot where the rock damage to the track caused one of the wheels to derail.

The whole shebang came to a halt.

Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer

Word Woman

“Darn,” said one of the engineers, walking over to Finn and I. “We didn’t want that. When it rains, it pours.”

A few minutes later, Finn said to me, “Mommy, do they really want it to rain and pour?”

His innocence about the idiom was sweet. But it unfortunately, it was right on. I had earlier thought, well, at least it’s not raining out, but by 8 a.m. the sky was wearing a dark shade of gray and a storm looked imminent.

It got me thinking about the “when it rains it pours” phrase, which translates roughly as “When troubles come, they come together.” Apparently, folks have been noticing this for at least 200 years.

In 1726, English physician John Arbuthnot published a book entitled “It Cannot Rain But It Pours.” In the same year, Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope collaborated on an essay entitled “It Cannot Rain But It Pours.” The saying has been use ever since.

It also reminded me of another bit of folk wisdom, “Bad things come in threes.”

Maybe it should start to rain, I thought. That would be the third thing and then the whole train wreck effort might go much smoother.

It hailed.

With the use of a shim, the crew got the train speedily back on track. All kinds of Union Pacific workers showed up to blow up and relocate the rocks. A breakdown train took care of the injured engine. Within 24 hours, despite weather and night, the trains were up and running again, transporting coal and sawdust and metal parts along the Gunnison River corridor.

The whole day, I carried that crazy train wreck energy with me, skittish of accidents and grateful for each little thing that went right. Finn dressed himself. We drove back safely to Placerville.

The peas at the City Market salad bar were fresh.

The train wreck is, of course, a fantastic metaphor for life. How fragile we are. How easily we are derailed and caught unawares by obstacles in our path. How often, when it seems things can’t get worse, the sky opens up and pelts us.

And still. The thrill of being able to stand in that storm, hands outstretched, face turned up, and admit (once again) we’re just not in control. And after the rubble, the trouble, the earshattering breaks, the aches, the driving hail, after all that, the miraculous heart still beats.

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