

Learning to Fly

By APRIL HENRY

Saturday, October 14, 5:20 p.m.

The moment before Free Meeker drove into the dust storm, the sky was a clear bleached blue. The next day, Free would read in the Oregonian about how a farmer plowing his fields, eleven weeks without rain, and a wind clocked at eighty-four miles an hour had combined to cause a fifty-two-car chain reaction accident. The same story would also list Free among the dead.

But when everything began, all Free knew was that suddenly she couldn't see a damn thing outside her car's windshield. The Impala had suddenly been enveloped in a brown fog.

"Hang on!" Free screamed at Lydia. She put her foot on the brakes and began to pump. Frantically, she tried to recall the configuration of cars that had been around them before the dirt dropped like a curtain. Outside their windows nothing but boiling brown. She couldn't see three feet in any direction. What had been ahead of them, behind them, to either side? A pack of cars, that was all she could remember. Her eyes darted from the windshield to the side view mirror to the rearview mirror. Nothing back there but darkness. Wait—did the mirror show headlights a few feet behind them, piercing the gloom?

Ease up on the brakes, she told herself. If they stopped abruptly, they'd get rear ended. Turning on her own lights, Free leaned forward to peer through the windshield.

A hundred feet ahead of her, a sudden patch of clarity in the wall of dust opened up. Occupied by a fat white motor home. At a dead stop, angled across both westbound lanes. Old man's face in the driver's side window. Mouth open. Eyes wide behind black-framed glasses. Free was going to T-bone him for sure.

Already knowing it was too late, she jerked the Impala's steering wheel hard to the left. A red pickup loomed up beside her, close enough that if her window had been open, Free could have reached out and touched the yellow flames painted on the side. Could she squeeze through the rapidly narrowing gap between the pickup and the motor home? Even as she formed the thought, Free knew there was nowhere to go.

But then the red pickup bucked as an invisible blow from behind sent it angling away from her, creating a space, or at least the possibility of one. Ignoring Lydia whimpering beside her, Free steered for it, her foot once again pumping the brakes. With a long

squeal, they refused to hold. The car went sliding beneath her, the road as slick as if it were coated with black ice. But this was October.

A second passed, just long enough for Free to think that the old lap belt was not going to be enough to save her from this. Long enough for her to exchange a glance with Lydia. The other woman's mouth was wide in a scream that mingled with the shriek of brakes. They were going to die next to each other, two strangers who had met an hour ago when Free picked Lydia up from the side of the road. And then, miraculously, the Impala's brakes caught and held. The car shuddered to a stop. Close enough to the motor home that you couldn't have slipped a pack of gum between them.

For a second, the world seemed to hold its breath. A gust of wind rocked the car. And then Free heard it coming. The sound of a semi barreling down on them from behind. She didn't even have time to brace herself. The cab of the semi passed them, so close that one of the great black wheels snapped off her side view mirror. The semi slammed into the motor home, pushing it ahead as easily as a breeze scuds a crumpled piece of paper. One trailer, then two thundered past them. Then, like the last player in a game of crack the whip, the final trailer snapped into the front corner of the Impala, spinning it sideways. The impact so hard it knocked Free out of her Birkenstocks.

Another gust of wind rocked the car, clearing things a little. They were looking at dead yellow grass. The Impala was sideways, facing the side of the freeway. And, Free realized, as she looked past Lydia's shoulder at a big gold-colored car that popped out of the swirling dust and headed straight toward them, they were back in play again.

"Oh, God," Lydia screamed. Or at least she started to. All she got out was the "guh" sound before the car slammed into them broadside. Free's head snapped against the side window as the car sloughed around. Her vision narrowed to a dark tunnel. She couldn't tell if her eyes were closed or open. Another impact, this one from behind, followed immediately by one in front. They were being knocked around like a pinball. The only way they were going to survive was to get out of the car and away from the road. Free blinked rapidly, trying to focus. The passenger's side window was gone. Lydia was slumped unmoving over the inward bulge of the door.

"Lydia, come on, we've got to get out of here before we get hit again." Lydia didn't move. Free shook her shoulder. The other woman's head bobbed on her boneless neck, turning toward Free. Lydia's mouth was loose and her eyes somehow flat. A black SUV hit them, a glancing blow that tore off the back bumper with a long shriek. Lydia fell forward, sprawling against the dash. Free leaned down and picked up her shoes. At first, she couldn't get her door open. She rammed it again and again with her shoulder, finally creating a gap. Oh God, something was still holding her back. She was trapped. Then she realized she hadn't undone her seatbelt. She pressed the latch. Ignoring the scraping of her hips, Free managed to just squeeze through the door. At the last moment, she remembered to keep her belly centered so that nothing touched it. The air had

lightened a bit. She could see about twenty feet ahead of her. It was like being in a brown fog. Grit coated her teeth, scratched her eyes. For a minute, Free couldn't think. The Impala was in the middle of a nest of cars, some with their hoods pushed up, others with their doors torn away. A few feet away, a trucker hauling the long cylinder of a tanker had managed to stop in the median strip. Looking at the warning flames painted on the back, Free was thankful it sat untouched.

In between the tanker truck and what was left of Free's Impala, a semi was shooting steam into the air. The hissing sound was punctuated by a continuing series of shrieks and bangs, as more and more cars drove into the dust with their cruise controls still set at seventy miles an hour. Free walked around the semi, then gasped in shock. A small white car was embedded in the grill of the truck's cab. The body of its owner, an elderly woman, lay stretched out over the hood of the car. Her hands still held the steering wheel, which was no longer connected to anything. Free was glad she couldn't see the woman's face.

Everything had the unreality of a dream, the vivid texture of a nightmare. Absurdly, it reminded Free of the time when she was twelve and chewed one of Bob's blotter papers.

A balding man walked past her, talking on a tiny cell phone, so excited his words ran together in a single shout. "We've got people dying out here!" A small purple car popped out of the dust and hurtled toward him, bouncing him up over the hood and the top of the car before Free could even think to shout a warning. His body was thrown behind a tangle of crushed and crumpled vehicles. The wind shifted, and so did the visibility, leaving her temporarily blind. The grinding sounds of another crash, very near, made Free jump.

She had to get away before she got killed too. Free began to run up the slope, away from the accident. Dirt coated her throat. She heard a shout to her right. "Run up that hill, girls! Run!" Free saw a woman pushing two girls, about eight and ten, ahead of her. All of them dark-haired and dressed up in what Free thought of as "churchy" clothes. The four of them ran over the clumps of scrub grass, hearing the sounds behind them as more and more cars rounded the bend and drove blindly into the dust storm.

A wire fence. Free put her back against it and turned to face the way she had come. The woman and the two girls stumbled to a stop, and they, too, turned to face toward the scene of the accident. All of them too stunned to make any noise, or even to cry.

The air seemed to be getting lighter. Free's watch read 5:23. She spit blood and dirt into her hand, and then wiped it on the back of her jeans. Realizing she was still barefoot and holding her sandals in her left hand, she leaned over to slip them on. Dizziness pressed down on her. She stumbled sideways until she finally righted herself. With her girls' faces pressed into her soft-looking body, the woman watched Free. Looking at them, Free wished there was someplace she could hide.

"What happened?" Free asked.

The other woman shook her head. "It must be like the dust bowl or something. All I know is that my husband tried to pull onto the inside shoulder, but we hit something in front of us. Then we were rear-ended, and I think we might have spun around and hit another car."

Looking at the woman's face, contorted with grief and fear, Free knew enough not to ask where her husband was. The girls didn't, though. Their voices muffled by their mother's pleated paisley dress, they were beginning to cry and ask for their daddy.

The wind shifted and the open space expanded, giving Free her first overview of what had happened. To their left, dark clouds of dirt still boiled on one side of the pale blue sky, like ink spilled into a bowl of milk. Below them was the curve of the four-lane highway, bordered by weeds and split down the middle by a grassy median strip gone yellow from drought. On their right, the air was beginning to clear.

The highway was filled with dozens of cars, two lines converging in a knot that crossed the median strip. Where Free stood was just above the center of the knot. Near the ends of both lines, cars and trucks were pushed together, bumper to bumper, one vehicle having rear-ended the next to form long, snaking lines. In the center, the damage was much greater. Cars and semis sat steaming in a jumbled mess that sprawled past the boundaries of the road. There were cars jammed nose to nose, or rolled on their sides, or half climbed on top of each other, reminding Free of humping dogs. Some were completely overturned, as clumsy-looking as beetles on their backs.

The stench of scorched rubber and spilled fuel was stronger even than the smell of dirt. Near the tail end of the pile-up an old Datsun Z-40 took off, weaving around wrecked cars, driving in the breakdown lane. His rear bumper dragged behind him, leaving a trail of popping sparks. Free braced herself for the explosion, but it never came.

She looked back at the main knot of accidents. Lydia was beyond help, but there must be people down there who could benefit from the little first-aid kit she kept in the trunk. From watching a Petorium training video, she even knew a bit of first aid.

"I'm going back down," she told the woman who still held her daughters close. "Maybe I can do something. Help somebody."

The other woman nodded without speaking. Free picked her way down the hill. The first person she saw made her realize how nonsensical her task was. A young woman, obviously dead, sprawled on the ground, her legs cut off mid-thigh. Free looked away as fast as she could, already knowing it was too late, that the sight had burned itself into her brain. She hoped the woman up on the hill stayed put with her daughters.

Only a few feet away, two men stood close together, arguing with each other about whose fault the accident was, ignoring the chaos all around them. Free couldn't blame them.

Everything was so overwhelming that maybe the best you could do was to focus on one thing at a time.

Heading in the direction she thought the Impala was in, Free edged her way around a pile of debris, like the sweepings from God's broom. Tangled scraps of metal, curving pieces of black rubber, all of it covered by glass that glittered like diamonds. The only thing Free recognized was a door, wrenched from its hinges. The wind gusted again, pushing against her so hard Free couldn't catch her breath. She had to cup her hand over her mouth to provide a space to inhale.

A man in his forties ran up to her. "Help me!" She could barely hear his shout over the wind roaring in her ears. His face was so red she worried he would have a stroke on the spot. "My wife!" Still shouting, he slid back the door to a crumpled purple mini-van, and now he climbed in. Free looked in the door. Two women, one about forty, the other about sixty, sat in the warped back seat. Free leaned in and helped him unfasten their seatbelts, already knowing it was too late. The two women sat slumped and silent, not breathing, not moving, no pulse when she rested her fingers tentatively against the sides of their throats. "I'm sorry," she said, then backed out of the van. She left the man with his head buried in his wife's lap.

As Free made her way to where she thought her car was, a man in his mid-fifties walked by. His hand was over his heart as if he were about to say the pledge of allegiance. The wind had died again, so she could hear what he was saying to himself. "My chest," he was mumbling. "My chest hurts." Bruised from the steering wheel or the first pangs of a heart attack? Either way, Free figured there was nothing she could do.

She came upon an old man, his squinting face furrowed into wrinkles. A young boy held his legs so tightly that the older man was in danger of tumbling over. "I've lost my glasses," the old man called out, his face turning blindly back and forth. "I can't see." Free walked them up the hill, taking care to angle away from the woman without any legs, and helped the old man sit down on the brittle grass. Taking the boy's hot, wet face in her hands, Free said, "You have to help your grandpa, okay? You have to stay with him and help keep him calm. Help is coming." He nodded vigorously. She thought of the man with the cell phone and pushed the thought away.

Finally, she spotted the distinctive flat mint green of the Impala, a color that Detroit hadn't used since about 1975. The car itself was nearly unrecognizable. Looking at it, Free felt her heart squeeze within her chest. The car had been her freedom, her personal space, her one valuable possession. Now it was nothing but scrap. One of the front tires had been turned until it ended up nearly parallel to the axle. Most of the front of the car was crushed backward to the firewall. The back bumper was gone. Whatever had hit the passenger side had done so with so much force that it had left its license plate behind.

Free reached through the still open door to get her keys from the ignition. She was careful not to touch Lydia's body, which now lay draped over the center of the seat. Still, Free's groping fingers touched something unexpected, and she jerked her hand back until she saw what it was. Lydia's purse. Free never carried one, fitting everything she needed in a man's wallet tucked into the back pocket of her jeans. She picked up the purse. Even though Lydia had said she had no family, someone would want to know what had happened to her, and Free figured it was her duty to tell them.

While Free tried to fit the key into the Impala's trunk, a woman wearing a red-and-white print dress and only one red high heel walked past. She was screaming, "Gary! Gary!" without pausing for an answer. Maybe she knew there wasn't going to be one. Free's key refused to turn, and finally she gave up on the idea of getting the first-aid kit.

The wind gusted again, hard enough that it felt like she could lean into it and let go without falling forward. If only she could let go. A few yards away, a man in a white VW pickup was trying to free it from a gray Plymouth Col. Reverse, forward, reverse, forward, rocking the wheel from side to side, trying to shake the two vehicles apart. He was oblivious to the fact that even if he succeeded, there was no place left for him to go.

"Hey, lady!" a man's voice called. "Lady, can you give me some help over here?" Part of Free was reluctant to turn, part of her was glad to think there might be something she could do with nothing but her bare hands to offer.

The speaker looked like a trucker, a short man with a lined, tanned face shaded by a black ball cap. He was kneeling beside a younger man in a red, white and blue Tommy Hilfiger shirt who lay face up on the ground. The younger man was trying to push himself up from the ground, but Free noticed that his legs weren't moving.

"Can you help me get him to be still? The trucker stood up and put his hand on Free's shoulder. In a low voice, he said into her ear, "I think he's paralyzed. And he's tearing himself up inside every time he moves. I can hear it." Free knelt down with him beside the younger man, setting Lydia's purse to one side.

The trucker put his hands on the younger man's shoulders and pressed him back to the ground. "Take it easy, buddy, take it easy. You're gonna hurt yourself even more if you move."

"My bag! I need my bag!" Pale blue eyes wild in his smudged face. Blood matted his short dark hair, bleached to brass on top. A tattoo circled one wrist.

"Not that bad, you don't." The older man's voice was gruff. A cigarette was perched behind his ear. "I think you got a broken back. You gotta stay still or you'll hurt yourself even more."

"What's your name?" Free leaned in.

“Jamie.” Mumbled through a mouth of broken teeth. A line of blood snaked down from his left ear. This close she could see that one pupil was a pinprick, the other so wide it overwhelmed the whole iris. When she looked up, the trucker gave Free a little nod, and she knew he had seen these signs, too.

“You need to stay still.” She touched Jamie’s cheek for emphasis, then had to stop herself from pulling back when she felt how damp he was, clammy and cold. “Um-mm.” Shaking his head in denial, Jamie tried to rise again. “Gotta get my bag.” His voice was equal parts exhaustion and determination.

She winced at the sound of something grinding inside him. Mimicking the trucker, she put her hands on his shoulders and pressed him back to the ground.

“He’s right. You’ve got to lie still. Forget about your bag.”

The word “bag” seemed to only spur Jamie on. “I need it. I’ve got to get it. Don’t kill me if I don’t give it to him.” He managed to half-sit up. Free heard something pop. The sound decided her. “I’ll get your bag, Jamie. What car is yours?” He stopped struggling. “Brown Honda Accord.” His face twisted as another spasm coursed through him. “There’s a sock monkey on the rearview mirror.”

“A sock monkey. Okay.” Free nodded and got to her feet.

“And it’s black Nike bag. In the front seat. At least it was.” He let himself fall back, apparently satisfied that someone was finally listening to him.

In the few minutes that Free had been concentrating on Jamie, she had managed to block everything else out. Jamie had presented a more-or-less manageable challenge. Now when Free stood up and confronted the totality of the wreck again, her knees sagged. It overwhelmed all her senses. Her mouth tasted of dirt and blood. Was it her imagination, or was the smell of blood now as strong as the scent of spilled fuel, a sickening, heavy, sweetish stench? The screams of the injured mingled with the cries of the newly bereaved. And finally, finally she heard the sound of sirens in the distance.

Free began to pick her way back along the line of cars, stepping over pieces of metal, keeping her head down, trying to avoid one more picture that would sear its way into her memory. She couldn’t tell if she were crying, or if it was just the dust burning her eyes.

The ground was littered with what looked like square, white worms, many of them squashed. After a minute she realized that a trucker must have lost his load of frozen French fries.

Approaching her task methodically, Free forced herself to look at one car at a time. It was easier that way, to see the accident in sections. Jamie didn’t look capable of walking, so the car he had been ejected from couldn’t be too far off. But she didn’t see it right away.

Just as had happened with the Impala, the Honda must have been pushed further away from Jamie as it was hit again and again. She walked past a blue Subaru wagon, back end crumpled, but basically all right. Amazingly, its emergency flashers were still working behind shards of plastic, blinking on and off. A burgundy color Ford Ranger with its driver's side door torn off. Ahead of it a white car did a handstand on its front bumper, caught between the Ranger and a pale blue Cutlass. A frail bald man hung from his seatbelt, arms dangling. Even to her untrained eye, both were fractured. Free was sure he was dead, but jumped when he moaned for help.

She reached in through the open window and touched the top of his liver-spotted head, afraid to do any more. His red-rimmed eyes pleaded with her from his upside down face. "I'm sorry," Free said, "but I don't think I could get you out without hurting you." The sirens were closer now. She could see flashing red lights through the gloom. "Hear that? That's the ambulance. People are coming to help. I'll tell them you're here."

There was a bloody handprint on the Cutlass's open door. Ahead of it, a silver four-door sedan lay on its top, crushed down from the roof to half its normal height. And finally, the brown Honda, hood bent upward near the center. What was left of the windshield was a sheet of green glass pebbles. A sock monkey still dangled from the twisted rearview mirror. On the passenger seat, next to a pair of binoculars and a paperback birding book, was a black Nike bag. The driver's side seatbelt was fastened across the seat, the way Free's mom used to do it so that she wouldn't have to listen to the buzzer nagging her. Neither door would open, so Free leaned over the hood, carefully reached in past what was left of the windshield and plucked the bag from amid the broken glass.

She turned to walk back. Ahead of her, a man slipped a cigarette into his mouth and put his lighter to his lips, his hand shaking. All around them, shimmering underneath a coating of brown dust, were puddles of gasoline, diesel fuel, radiator fluid, oil and transmission fluid. Free ran over and grabbed the lighter from his hand before he could snap the wheel. "Are you crazy! One spark and this whole place will be on fire!"

He looked at her with dulled eyes and didn't answer. Slipping the lighter into her pocket, Free turned away and began to pick her way back through the chaos. She was glad to see that four ambulances and two fire trucks had arrived. In fact, one of them was already departing, sirens whirling. Free couldn't find Jamie, and she began to wander in ever-wider circles, searching for him. What she finally found was the trucker. He was helping another man load a gurney with a little boy on it into an ambulance. She realized that the first ambulance must have picked up Jamie.

"But I got Jamie's bag," she said stupidly, holding it up as if he might still be here to take it from her.

"That's all right. I'll give you a ride into town and you can give it to him at the hospital. It will give you a chance to get that cut taken care of."

“Cut?” Free repeated.

He reached out with gentle fingers and touched her forehead. His hand came away wet and red. Something went funny in Free’s knees. She staggered and nearly fell, before he caught her elbow, his brown eyes full of concern. “Whoa, there.” He took Jamie’s bag from her and shouldered it, then put his arm around her shoulders. “Come on, I’ll walk you back to my truck.” They had gone about ten feet before he said, “Was there anybody with you?”

She saw that he was looking at Lydia’s brown leather purse, plump and matronly, and clearly not something that went with Free’s shaven head, nose ring and Birkenstocks. “She - she didn’t make it.”

“I’m sorry.” The simple words made Free want to sit down and cry. Instead she kept walking, following the truck driver as he walked along a line of crumpled cars to a truck that sat next to them, pulled off onto the median. He said, “Here’s my rig. I’m just lucky I didn’t hit anyone—and I can’t believe nobody hit me.” He opened the passenger door and helped her up. “I’m from Tennessee. I’ve never seen nothing like this. My name’s Casey.”

“Free,” Free said, bracing herself for the eyeroll or the spurt of a laugh that nearly always accompanied sharing her name.

Casey just nodded and closed her door. Involuntarily, the squeal and thump made Free jump. Leaning out the window, she looked at her face in the truck’s huge side view mirror. About two inches long, the cut was as neat as a seam, almost tucked into her hair line. It had nearly stopped bleeding, but the blood had washed down the left side of her face, over her temple, then fanned down her cheek to drip off her jaw. Her shirt was tacky with blood, although it didn’t show much against the dark swirling tie-dyed colors.

Casey climbed in beside her, then reached underneath the seat and handed her a white plastic box of wet wipes. He began to back up carefully, accompanied by beeping. When he reached a spot where the median strip was clear, he cut across it. Two more ambulances raced past them, headed toward the carnage. They had driven less than a quarter of a mile when a whump! threw Free forward against the seatbelt. She covered her ringing ears with her hands, and then leaned forward to look in the sideview mirror. A wave of heat washed over them.

“Shit!” Casey said, looking in his rearview mirror. “I was afraid that would happen. One little spark, that was all it was going to take.” The smell of burning gasoline was sickening. There were muffled popping noises as more and more cars caught fire. Behind them, the grass along the side of the road began to burn.