

NEAR MISS: 2 of 2

Freddi Steele

Continued from August 16, 2014:

About two miles out I heard a train. *Weird*, I thought, since I didn't see one anywhere. Then I stopped in my tracks. Something from the Weather Channel pecked at the back of my brain: when you *hear* a train and there *isn't* one, think *tornado*. Looking east I didn't see anything except that faraway lightning now flashing like a strobe light. As I turned around and ran northwest back to Fort Union, my gut urged me to run much faster. Then I spotted something so incredible it took my breath away. A towering, satin-like drapery hung from the suddenly black sky, and touched the ground just west of Fort Union. It was slowly twisting towards the fort, and, gleaming, a ghostly white under a single sunbeam. Briefly mesmerized by its spectral beauty, I yelled "*OH, S**T!*" at least a hundred times to the oblivious beef cattle along the highway as I raced the gigantic shroud home.

I didn't make it. Just two minutes from the relative safety of my mobile home, huge white splats stomped the asphalt in front of me as if in slow motion. Next thing I knew I was pounded by golf ball-sized hail. I sprinted to an 8 x 8 guardrail post on the Wolf Creek Bridge, ripped off my Tune Belt, Walkman still playing

inside, and clutched them on my head as I ducked beside the post. I crouched in the tightest fetal position I could muster, and prayed.

Out of the deafening whiteout a Subaru station wagon appeared. My friends Ed and Susan and their two grandkids had been visiting me in their 40-foot Bounder motorhome, and realized I was caught in the storm. Ed, a retired Marine colonel, had hopped in their Subi and found me. I managed to jump in as hail bashed away. With visibility only as far as the front of the hood, we crept the quarter mile back to the RV next to my trailer. The hail had shattered the RV's thick Plexiglas roof vents. The two grandkids who were early grade-school age at the time were running around in circles inside, still freaking out as Ed and I drove up. Once the ferocious storm passed, and temporary repairs were made to the vents with duct tape and plastic trash bags, Susan, with her endearing dry wit, asked the only logical question under the circumstances: "Rum and Coke?"

I later told my dad, a retired National Park ranger and naturalist, that I'd used up one of my nine lives that afternoon. In moments my life was changed forever, from someone who hadn't fully realized the fragility and temporariness of life, to someone who almost knew it too well. All these years later I still consider myself one of the luckiest people - period. Any one of those hailstones – there must have been hundreds to form that unearthly veil – could have taken me out had it hit me in the head. With an hour's drive to the hospital in Las Vegas, well, it isn't

hard to see that I had a guardian angel that day. I'd survived what the National Weather Service euphemistically calls a "severe weather event", receiving only golf ball-sized bruises on my shoulders and legs, and on my right arm and hand which I'd used to protect my head. The rum and Coke helped with those injuries. The Walkman worked – sort of – after that incident; Billy Idol's *Rebel Yell* didn't sound quite the same after that. I wasn't quite the same, either.

The caveats were there: lightning, ominous cloud cover, very still air, hail shafts. Yet I ignored them. Only the three-second wail of a phantom horn from a non-existent train got my attention. To this day, I believe the 10-story curtain of hail shrieked that eerie warning to turn around, and run like hell. These days I'm *weatherwise*, so thankful to be a weather geek in spite of occasionally embarrassing family and friends when lightning flashes and thunder roars. Who wouldn't be, after a near miss like that?

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