

# Lucky to Be Alive

By Carol Ann Moorhead

Despite Chicken Little's insistence that "the sky is falling, the sky is falling," I never believed him. When I was a young child, the sky was as secure above my head as the ground was beneath my feet. That was before I felt the earth quake, and before I learned that Chicken Little is sometimes right.

My sky fell one summer evening in Massachusetts. It did not fall all at once, nor without warning. It heaved and cracked with the roll of thunder of an approaching storm. It shattered into pieces with cloud-to-cloud lightning as a few raindrops began to fall. My friend

Bill and I hurried down a woodland path, making jokes about lightning and trying to remember tips about lightning safety. Not to worry, we assured ourselves. This isn't a bad storm. As if to prove us wrong, the winds picked up. Black clouds rolled in, releasing rains so heavy that we were soaked within

seconds. Our clothes clung to our bodies, and our feet slogged through instant puddles. We fell silent, fearful of the storm upon us.

Behind us bright bolts of lightning began probing the woodlands, lighting up the forest, and sparking our conversation. We made a plan: Exit the forest, skirt its edge, and re-enter on the other path. The other path, I knew from a previous hike, would quickly lead us to an abandoned car. It was the best option. The storm was gaining on us, and my own car was across an open meadow at least four football fields long.



The sky was so dark now that we could barely see. Carefully we made our way out of the forest and along its edge. Suddenly, BAM! There was an explosion of white light at my feet. I felt a sharp thrust upward, and then heard a muffled thump.

I landed on my back: Ears ringing and skin tingling, I struggled to roll onto my feet, but my legs couldn't lift me. I squatted in the darkness, trembling, and shouting, "Bill! Are you okay?! Bill!"

Bill didn't answer. I strained my eyes to see if I could see him lying near me. If I could only crawl to

him I could help, I thought, but I could see nothing but darkness. Seconds ticked by, maybe minutes. Slowly I raised myself into a skier's crouch. I shouted again, and suddenly a wet hug answered my call.

"I couldn't answer," he said. "The muscles around my mouth wouldn't move. Come on. Let's go!"

By now, the storm was centered above us. A second bolt hit the forest, then a third. Like shell-shocked soldiers, we fell to our knees each time. A fourth bolt. I don't recall being afraid, only angry – angry at this deranged storm that seemed determined to find us. Luckily, on the fifth bolt I saw the silhouette of a small car. "Oh, please," I thought, "let it be unlocked."

Bill lifted the handle. To our relief, it unlatched. We piled inside the abandoned car and shut the door.

Finally we were safe. We pinched ourselves and

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poked each other to make sure we were alive. Our legs trembled and tingled for over an hour as we waited out the storm. Bill complained of a sharp pain on the ball of his foot. My feet ached all over. Once the storm seemed safely past, we walked on wobbly legs back to my car and drove home to my sister's house. By the time we arrived, we felt less shaken. Despite her encouragement, we decided not to go to the emergency room.

The next day Bill and I walked back to the site where we had been struck. A mangled birch tree stood beside the path. Its trunk was split wide open, and a black streak blazed its otherwise yellow insides. Several broken limbs hung to the ground.

Suddenly my eyes settled on four dead grassy spots along the path, only two meters from the tree. Our footprints! We guessed that these were the points where the electricity entered and exited our bodies.

Bill and I knew that we'd been lucky, but just how lucky, we didn't know until later that week when we visited the Boston Museum of Science. The museum had just opened a lightning demonstration and we couldn't resist going. Using large generators, scientists created electrical strikes that

looked like lightning bolts, right inside the museum! Bill ducked at the first strike and I jumped. Despite knowing we were safe behind a shield of grounded wires, it was hard not to be scared.

After the demonstration, Bill and I approached one of the scientists. We told him our story, described the dead grassy spots, and showed him the burn marks on our sandaled feet. "You're lucky to be alive," he said, shaking his head. "If you hadn't been walking, you might not be here today."

The scientist explained that we had survived an indirect lightning strike. The bolt had hit the tree, traveled through the ground, entered one foot and exited the other. Had we been standing with our legs together, instead of walking, the current might have struck our hearts and other organs, perhaps killing us because we had been so close to the tree. He added that being soaking wet may also have helped. Much like the car's metal exterior, the thin film of water coating our skin may have allowed some of the current to pass around us, rather than through us.

Bill and I left the museum, once again pinching ourselves and poking each other. It was a beautiful sunny day and we were lucky to be alive.

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**LA.7.1.7.7 Form A**

**Name** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Directions: Read the passage and choose the correct answer.**

1. According to the scientist, what advantage did Bill and the narrator have at the time of the lightning strike?
  - A. The electricity exited their bodies.
  - B. They were not near the tree.
  - C. They were walking and soaking wet.
  - D. They had been wearing sandals.
  
2. What is different about the way the lightning strike affects Bill and the narrator?
  - A. At first Bill cannot move, but the narrator is able to crawl to help him.
  - B. At first Bill is unable to speak, but the narrator is able to call out to him.
  - C. When they are thrown, Bill lands on his back, but the narrator lands standing up.
  - D. After the strike Bill is afraid of the storm, but the narrator begins to get angry.
  
3. What happened to both Bill and the narrator at the museum demonstration?
  - A. Both hid when they saw the first lightning bolt.
  - B. Both realized they are afraid of loud noises.
  - C. Both were reminded of the real storm.
  - D. Both felt unsafe around the electrical wires.
  
4. What is similar about their injuries after the lightning strike?
  - A. Both have foot pain.
  - B. Both hear ringing in their ears.
  - C. Both have damaged organs.
  - D. Both have injured leg muscles.

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**ANSWER KEY**

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Item #	Answer
1.	C
2.	B
3.	C
4.	A