

BONUS READ

...Autumn couldn't say exactly what she'd expected, but the cramped 65-year old propeller plane wasn't it. As she boarded, she texted her boyfriend: "I'm totally going to die."

BY ANITA BARTHOLOMEW

PLANE DOWN!

SATURDAY, JULY 11, 2015

Miles above America's northwest wilderness, Autumn Veatch, 16, watched through the window of the six-seater plane as it tracked the lonely highway snaking across the mountains.

She'd been visiting her mom and stepdad in Kalispell, Montana, and had expected them to drive her home to Bellingham in Washington State. But at the last moment her step-grandparents, Leland and Sharon Bowman, offered to fly her back instead.

Though her mom, Misty, had married Robert Bowman four years earlier, Autumn had not got to know Robert's parents well until now. Over the past two weeks she and Leland had bonded over their shared love of music. Sharon, meanwhile, reminded Autumn of her mom, always knowing how to make her giggle. Flying home with them sounded like a great idea—until she saw the plane.

Autumn couldn't say exactly what she'd expected, but the cramped white-and-red Beechcraft Bonanza A35 propeller plane wasn't it. Built in 1949, it was older than Leland, the senior citizen piloting it. As she boarded she texted her boyfriend Newt Goss, "I'm totally going to die."

Over the past couple of hours the plane hadn't done much to increase her confidence, shimmying and bumping through the turbulence.

They were now above the magnificent but forbidding Cascade Mountain range that extended 700 miles south from British Columbia, Canada through Washington, Oregon and northern California. Dominated by dormant volcanoes and blanketed by an often-impenetrable evergreen rainforest, the winter weather on its highest peaks could rival that of the Himalayas.

Bellingham, Washington, Autumn's home, was just west of the range.

A cocoon of clouds now wrapped itself around the aircraft, obscuring

the mountains, the sky—everything. It might almost feel cozy if it weren't so disorienting.

Still, Leland seemed utterly confident and at ease at the controls. He and Sharon kept up their usual jovial chatter as she, using the GPS, navigated the thick gray soup for her husband.

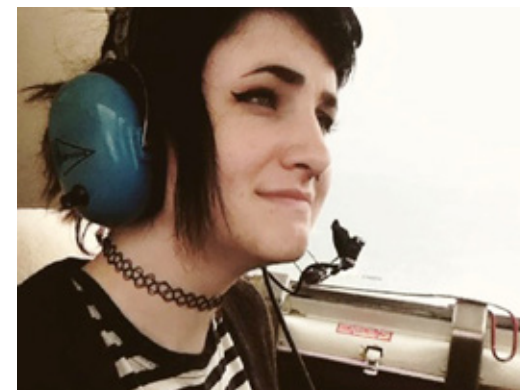
Through a brief break in the fog, Autumn saw a tree-covered mountainside from her window. They were going to slam into it! But no—Leland smoothly banked to the right.

Fog again enveloped the aircraft. She knew she had nothing to fear. Leland would get them through it, and yet...

She grabbed her phone to text Newt for about the twentieth time this flight. But her cell signal was gone. She pulled her cardigan closer against the high altitude chill. She'd soon be safely back on the ground, she told herself, and Newt would be waiting. He and his mom would pick her up at the airport when they landed, just after 4:00 p.m.

AUTUMN HAD LONG suffered from severe anxiety, depression and other emotional problems, her rapidly shifting moods leaving her feeling fragile and alienated. More than once she'd

contemplated suicide. Her father David Veatch, with whom she'd lived most of her life, didn't seem to understand the depth of his daughter's distress. Worse, Autumn had convinced herself he didn't care enough to understand. After a number of confrontations she'd moved in with friends on the other side of town. One good thing that had come of it: the move meant



Autumn sent this "selfie" from the plane to Newt before she lost reception.

transferring to the same high school that Newt attended. With him she felt understood and appreciated.

LELAND AND SHARON had been laughing and joking throughout the flight but now their tone changed dramatically.

"The GPS isn't working," Sharon cried out. Leland responded in disbelief. What would they do, surrounded by fog and mountains, without GPS?

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"THE GPS ISN'T WORKING," SHARON CRIED OUT. SURROUNDED BY FOG AND MOUNTAINS, THEY WERE FLYING BLIND.

PHOTO, PREVIOUS SPREAD: COURTESY CIVIL AIR PATROL

PHOTO: COURTESY AUTUMN AND DAVID VEATCH



Leland and Sharon Bowman perished in the accident.

They were flying blind.

Leland shouted something about having descended too low. Autumn's stomach lurched as he pulled back hard on the flight stick and pitched the aircraft upward.

At last, in front of them, the fog broke. And both Bowmans screamed. Where, seconds before, all had been gray and white, now a panorama of evergreens—hundreds of them, blanketing the summit—filled the cockpit window.

They were going to crash into the mountain.

Frantic now, Leland worked the controls, demanding the impossible from the small craft's engine.

Too late. The Bonanza collided with the slope—and kept right on climbing, its nose still pitched upward. As it slashed through the thick woods, debris pummeled the plane, ripping

away one of its wings.

Shrieking, groaning, howling, the aircraft cannoned into a tall tree. Its cabin split from its tail section. Finally, it came to rest.

The speed at which the fire erupted didn't seem possible. Flames spat out in every direction, reaching for Autumn from between the front seats. She somehow wriggled out of her seatbelt and then she was standing outside with no idea how she got there.

She could see Leland and Sharon were still trapped in the front seats. She had to get them out. Leland was closer; Sharon, beyond him, inaccessible. Both moaned in agony.

Batting at the blaze that singed her face, her eyelashes, her hair, she struggled to get to a dazed Leland. Reaching for him, Autumn's hand sizzled in the fire. The pain barely registered.

She pulled at Leland's bulk but he

was pinned inside and losing consciousness. Even with adrenaline pumping, the petite teen couldn't budge him.

"Unhook your seatbelt," she pleaded.

Beside him, Sharon went limp. Autumn had never seen anyone die but she knew as certainly as she knew anything: Sharon was dead.

She refused to let panic overtake her. *Have to get Leland. Come on.* And then the life drained from him, too.

She was alone.

Feeding on fuel, fire greedily licked the mangled fuselage, the Bowmans' bodies. An odor rose that Autumn recognized as burning flesh.

Horrified, she backed away.

BACK IN BELLINGHAM, David Veatch knew only that his daughter was due to return sometime that day, not that she was flying home in the Bowmans' small plane. He figured she'd go straight back to the friends she'd been living with. He tried not to dwell on their estrangement. She'd get over it.

AUTUMN HAD TO GET AWAY—from the fire, and from the sickening odor that filled her nostrils. The terrain they'd crashed on, a mile or more up the mountain, offered no path through the thick, dark woods, but she began to stumble through and make her own.

Thoughts and emotions tumbled together and, unwittingly, she spoke

them out loud. "If only I could go back to yesterday. If only we'd never left."

Scrambling diagonally downward, half-walking, half-sliding, grief overwhelmed her. *Is it my fault they died?*

The rocky slope was slick with rain. Within minutes she was soaked. Alone in the wilderness, wearing only t-shirt, leggings, cardigan, socks and sneakers, she was certain this would be her final resting place.

She thought of the people who meant most to her: her father, her mother, Newt. *What if I never see any of them again?* The past strain in her relationship with her father seemed trivial. *I'd give anything to be home with him right now.*

She barely noticed where her feet were landing until suddenly she was toppling over a cliff, falling ten, 12, 15 feet. Grasping at the empty air, she landed with a thud on her bottom on a level patch of ground.

She stilled for a moment, quietly assessing. The fall should have snapped her neck like a dry tree branch. But, miraculously, nothing seemed broken.

The fall jolted more than Autumn's body.

She was only 16. She hadn't yet lived. She wasn't going to just lie down and die. If there was a way out of this, she was going to find it.

In the distance, she heard a faint rushing noise—a highway? *If I go downhill, I might meet it.* Hopeful now, she followed the sound.

As it got louder she soon discovered that what she'd been hearing was just a stream, about two feet wide, gushing down the slope. *That's all right. It might be just what I need*, she thought.

She and her dad had always loved watching survival shows together on TV—anything that pitted humans against a harsh environment made for great entertainment. Now, those shows just might save her. She remembered their lessons. Find water. Keep going downhill. Eventually you'll find civilization.

She trod carefully along the bank through brush and rocks, until she found her way blocked by a thick tangle of jungle. Stepping on smooth stones jutting from the water, she crossed over to the other bank. Blocked once more, she balanced on a fallen trunk and crossed again.

Within a half hour the stream had grown deeper and wider, and more difficult to negotiate. Soon it was a river. She carefully picked her way down.

NEWT AND HIS MOM had been at Lynden Airport, 16 miles north of Bellingham, since about four o'clock. The texts from Autumn had come regularly through the afternoon, then just stopped—and his last one to her hadn't been delivered. Her phone battery must have died. He couldn't wait to see her. But where was she? They'd been waiting for two hours.

Today had brought much needed

rain after weeks of weather so dry that forest fires had sprouted all through the region.

Realizing they were waiting in vain, Newt's mom said that Autumn's plane must have been forced by the lingering smoke to land at a different airport. Disappointed, Newt agreed to head home, never imagining that Autumn's plane might be missing.

THE ADRENALINE THAT had driven Autumn since the crash began to ebb and as it did, the burns she'd suffered on her right hand became more and more painful. She pulled her cardigan's wet sleeve over her hand so it would keep the blisters from further damage. She kept going.

She longed for something to drink but the survival shows warned that any rivers and streams might be contaminated with animal feces. *Light a fire, boil away any bacteria*. But running through the experts' lessons on how to turn a spark into a blaze, she realized that nothing would do the trick, not in this sodden wilderness. At least the water this high up would be cleaner than below; she took a few sips and pushed on.

Any hint of light through the thick tree canopy disappeared by about 9 pm, along with the warmth it generated. In her wet clothes, in temperatures that would drop as the woods darkened, the risk of hypothermia was high. Shivering, she looked for a place to shelter for the night.

On the right bank she spied a small overhang and climbed up to inspect it. It was very flat, had a bit of a wedge that she could lean up against, and it was covered with pine needles. She decided that this would be her bed.

Autumn wrung out her sopping wet clothes and hung most on branches, hoping they'd dry by morning. She kept her shirt and cardigan to wrap around her, pulled her knees in close to her chest and settled in.

Despite a weariness greater than any she'd experienced before, sleep eluded her. Tormented by her memories of Leland and Sharon's last moments, she worried about how the rest of the family would feel. As the only one who got out alive, how could she face them all?

But then, there was a good chance she wouldn't make it out either. *I wonder if anyone is searching for me?* Then she realized they wouldn't even know where to look.

Something massive rustled through the landscape nearby—bear, moose or mountain lion, in the utter blackness she couldn't see what.

She had never been so cold.

WHEN THE Beechcraft Bonanza didn't land as expected, the Federal



In her boyfriend Newt, Autumn had found someone who understood and appreciated her.

Aviation Administration (FAA) set its search operation in motion. Soon the all-volunteer Civil Air Patrol was called in. Bad weather, darkness and treacherous terrain made it too hazardous to send its pilots out that night to hunt for the signal from the plane's emergency locator transmitter, ELT for short. They would fly at first light.

SUNDAY, JULY 12

Exhaustion and trauma had pushed Autumn into an altered state through the night, neither entirely awake nor entirely asleep.

The early morning light broke through the pine and cedar jungle soon after 5:00 a.m. Reaching for her clothes, she discovered they were almost as wet as when she'd hung them to dry. Donning cold, damp leggings, socks and sneakers somehow was one of the hardest things she'd had to do since the crash.

The sooner I get moving, the sooner I'll get somewhere.

It wasn't long before the bank was again blocked and she had to pick her way across the river, zig-zagging above the rushing water from one jutting rock to the next.

Cautiously, she attempted another stride but lost her precarious balance. The current swept the terrified teen under, bumping and scraping her over jagged riverbed debris. Righting herself several yards downstream, a drenched, gasping Autumn pulled herself onto the opposite bank.

THE PHONE IN David Bellingham apartment rang at 7:16 a.m. At first, he let it go to voice mail. But what he heard when he listened to the message shocked him. The call was from Autumn's mother, Misty, filling him in on the few details she knew.

He didn't want to believe what he was hearing. He'd assumed that Autumn was on a commercial airliner, not a private plane. *Could this be real?*

He checked the local breaking news website and found that there was indeed a missing plane.

By this time, Newt and his mother had also got word that the plane had likely crashed. In messages exchanged on Facebook, Newt's mom answered the questions she could for David.

Despite the ominous news, David refused to consider the possibility that Autumn was dead. *No—she's alive, he told himself, out there somewhere, scared and cold.*

Feeling helpless, he contacted the local television news station, hoping that broader media coverage would galvanize the public's attention and mobilize a wider search. Then all he could do was wait.

STEVEN BASS WAS an Alaska Airlines pilot, but this morning he led a volunteer Civil Air Patrol crew of three in a single engine Cessna through the northern Cascades, hoping to pick up the distinctive blare—beer-beer-beer—of the Bonanza's ELT. His crew scanned the impenetrable forest, their eyes searching for anything out of the ordinary. So far, nothing had panned out on their assigned grid of about 40 square nautical miles. At least today the weather was clear.

They had more information than usual for their search, thanks to all the texts a passenger had sent throughout the flight. The text signals went to cell phone towers, each message acting like a pointer on a map, showing a place and time. The last signal got through yesterday at 3:49 p.m. Today they concentrated their efforts close

to the last known cell tower position.

Had anyone had survived—and Bass knew that was unlikely—time was their enemy. More than 15 hours had already passed since the plane dropped off the radar.

If the searchers couldn't locate survivors within the first 24 hours, before they succumbed to hypothermia, injury or any of the myriad perils thousands of feet up in the mountains, there was little chance for them.

Without help from an ELT signal, in the thousands of square miles of wilderness it could be months, even years, before the crash site was found.

BY MID-MORNING Autumn had crossed the river dozens of times as the banks became blocked by brambles, bushes and branches.

The river, she believed, was her best hope, her guide—but also her cruelest enemy. It had tested her through her journey.

Now it challenged her with a waterfall, about 15 feet in height.

On either side were near-vertical walls of rock. There was no other way down. But there were cracks and craggy spots in the rock. The choice

was simple: climb down or die here.

Carefully digging her fingers into any crevice she could find, her burnt right hand screaming in protest, she descended. Almost there, almost—but she couldn't hang on long enough. Her fingers slipped. The frigid, roiling water snagged her, pulled her under, threw her downstream.

Sputtering, she rose and climbed back onto the bank. *I did it! I made it down.*

Another enemy vied for her attention as her anxiety disorder began asserting itself, filling her with dread. If it bloomed into a full panic attack, she'd be paralyzed.

She couldn't let her own mind defeat her. *Keep moving.*

Within minutes, Autumn came to another waterfall, this one about ten feet high. She willed herself to climb down and this time she didn't slip. *I can do this.*

It had been more than 24 hours since she'd eaten, though she felt no hunger. Autumn knew it was important to eat, and she was willing; she just couldn't find anything edible. Wild berry bushes grew in thickets on the slope, but their fruits were still

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AS THE LAST RAYS OF SUN LEFT THE SKY,
THE EXHAUSTED TEEN LAY DOWN ON
A SANDBAR: IT WAS SOOTHINGLY WARM.

green.

And now her body joined in the sabotage. Asthmatic since she was little, she was finding it difficult to breathe. Settling on a fallen log, she did her best to catch her breath for a moment, then forced herself to get up and walk. *One step at a time.*

The river grew ever wider as she trudged along its banks, at last giving the afternoon sun the opportunity to break through the thick branches overhead.

Its brightness and warmth both calmed and invigorated Autumn. Small sandbars rose here and there above the rushing water, softening the landscape. The birds of the forest filled the air with a lovely trilling. As the last rays left the sky, the exhausted teen lay down on one of the larger sandbars and found it soothingly warm. *Maybe tonight will be better.*

DAVID ATTEMPTS to get the word out about his daughter's missing flight had paid off. Late Sunday afternoon a couple in Mazama, Washington, called in to the Civil Air Patrol headquarters to say that they had been sitting on their back porch Saturday af-

ternoon, watching the storms, when they spied a small plane trying to shoot its way through the mountain range in an area called Rainy Pass. The couple were both pilots; it was a good lead. With this new information, Civil Air Patrol searchers were able to re-focus their efforts.

MONDAY, JULY 13, 2015

Sitting at home waiting for news had become excruciating. Accompanied by two of the family's closest friends, David headed to the Bellingham airfield first thing in the morning to check on the searchers' progress.

Seeing the massive operation, the pilots, the planes, the planners, made it real for him. These volunteers had come together for one purpose, to help find his baby and the others on board. He felt profound gratitude. But all the emotion that had been building since he first learned his daughter was missing came welling up and David broke down.

AUTUMN ROSE AT dawn from a fitful rest with insect bites covering her back and side; the sandbar had been



AT THE EDGE OF THE HIGHWAY, AUTUMN WAVED AS CARS WHIZZED BY, BEGGING SOMEONE TO STOP. **NO ONE DID.**



After her ordeal, Autumn and her father, David Veatch, reconciled, and she is back living at home.

PHOTO: COURTESY AUTUMN AND DAVID VEATCH

Dad, Mom, Newt—they'll be devastated if I don't come back. She refused to let the river beat her.

She was singing to herself to feel less alone when another tone broke through, droning and mechanical: an airplane. *Could they be looking for me?* She waved and shouted but no one could see or hear her from way up there.

By mid-morning, her last reserves of energy nearly depleted, she almost didn't recognize the wooden structure ahead as something man-made until she was upon it. It was a bridge—rustic, made of logs. A trail led up to it at one bank and contin-

ued at the other side. She wanted to sob with relief.

Keep going. Almost there... Almost. The trail led to a parking lot. There a sign announced it as Easy Pass Trail—a name at odds with everything she'd been through.

infested, yet the teen hadn't dared leave her resting place in the middle of the river in the dark. The bites stung. Her burns throbbed. Every muscle pained. The chill cut through her thin, damp clothes. She had barely drunk any water since the crash. The one ache she didn't yet feel was hunger.

Autumn forced herself further along the trail. It led to the edge of a highway, maybe the same one they had followed in the plane.

She again followed the river, wading when that was her only option. She kept getting swept away and banged up by submerged rocks.

She had made it. She waved her arms as cars and

trucks whizzed by, begging with her eyes, willing someone, anyone, please stop. Nobody did.

More cars sped past. As she frantically waved her arms, a passenger waved back. No one stopped.

After a fruitless hour, no longer able to stand without swaying, she realized she had to get away from the side of the road or risk being mowed down. She struggled back to the parking lot.

As a light drizzle fell, she limped toward the Easy Pass trailhead sign for the little shelter it offered. Folding in on itself, her body demanded rest.

TO MATT GERMANN, a Washington state park worker, and Chase Euerle, an old friend who was visiting from Arizona, it looked like a great day for a hike. Matt, 34, knew of some wild, unspoiled spots in the Cascades. In the early afternoon they arrived at the parking lot for the rugged mountain trail called Easy Pass.

As they began unpacking their gear, out of the corner of his eye Matt spied movement—a teenaged girl was tentatively walking toward them. *That's odd*, he thought. *What's she doing in the middle of nowhere, alone?*

The closer she got, the clearer it became that something was wrong.

Dazed and shaken, she pleaded as she reached them, "I need help. I'm the only survivor of a plane crash." As the two startled men listened, she recounted what had happened.

"You're okay now," said Matt, as gently as he could. "We're going to get you off the mountain." With no cell service in the wilderness, the men bundled her into their car and headed for the closest phone, in a store about 30 minutes away.

DAVID HADN'T SLEPT in about 30 hours. With friends holding vigil with him he finally lay down to take a quick nap.

He had begun to doze when the phone rang. It was the Civil Air Patrol. Someone claiming to be Autumn Veatch had just walked out of the Cascades and into a store in the remote town of Mazama.

BARELY ABLE TO STAND now, her mind a blur, Autumn only partly took in all the activity around her. Someone handed her a phone and the next thing she knew, she was speak-

ing to her mom, a conversation she'd dreaded. How could she tell her that Leland and Sharon were gone? But her mom was overjoyed to hear Autumn's voice. Yes, there would be grief for the family loss. For now though, knowing Autumn was alive was what mattered, she said.

Paramedics lifted the teen onto a gurney and into a waiting ambulance. Autumn borrowed a phone, called her dad—and a dead weight of tension drained away as she heard him tell her he loved her. He would get there as fast as humanly possible. He was coming to take her home.

For the first time since the crash, after three grueling days in the mountain wilderness, her battered, exhausted body finally recognized what it had been missing. She was ravenous. Before she handed the phone back to the paramedic, she had one more thing to say to her father.

"This would be a great time for some McDonald's."

AT THREE RIVERS HOSPITAL in Brewster, Washington, Autumn was treated for muscle-wasting, dehydration, third degree burns, hypothermia, bruises and insect bites. She was discharged the following day—but not before eating all the Chicken McNuggets, French fries and other goodies that her dad could bring her.

She'd found a strength and determination in herself that she had never known was there. More important,

she'd learned that life was worth living. She was going to live it as well as she could.

The wreckage of the Beechcraft Bonanza was spotted on Tuesday, July 14, near Rainy Pass and Washington Pass, more than 5,000 feet up in the Cascades.

The elevation at Easy Pass Trailhead, where Autumn emerged after her grueling trek, is about 3,700 feet.

Now 17, Autumn has moved back home, into her old room. She and Newt are still together. ■



THROUGHOUT HER ORDEAL, AUTUMN
LEARNED LIFE IS WORTH LIVING
AND SHE WAS GOING TO LIVE IT WELL.
