



JENNA ANN MILLER

the
PHENOM'S
wife

how a caregiver lost
and found herself in her
family's trauma

a memoir

THE PHENOM'S WIFE



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THE PHENOM'S WIFE
*how a caregiver lost and found herself
in her family's trauma*

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dedicated to

Steve, Aria and Payton

I love you.

CHAPTER 1

In the Blink of an Eye

“ARE YOU Steve Pelaez’s wife?”

I have been afraid of that question for my whole life with my husband. Steve used to tell me he was going to die young. I hated when he said that but I didn’t believe him. Inside my carefully curated world my husband was indestructible and besides, I would *never* let the father of my children die young. If I worked hard and smartly enough, I could choreograph my life to prevent bad things from happening. But the world was laughing at me. My husband’s soul was obviously chasing death, despite my attempts to buffer Steve from Steve himself.

We live ten minutes north of San Francisco in the tiny town of Mill Valley, nestled between a bay, a mountain, and the Pacific Ocean. Waterfalls, parklands and coastal bluffs surround us. Our downtown is so charming it looks like a movie set with City Hall inside an English Tudor and a library that could be mistaken for a ski lodge. Our unassuming 1940s neighborhood has a few hundred original cottages sandwiched together, plus a sprinkling of new homes. It feels more cozy than crowded, especially with Mt. Tamalpais spreading herself in the distance.

Steve moved our family to Mill Valley to be close to her, where mountain biking was discovered. His Spirit explodes barreling down her endless trails to freedom. Steve says he empties his mind and breathes life into his soul whenever he rides Mt. Tam, and he does so daily. Cycling is a family pastime. We mountain-bike with our children, who cycle to school and everywhere in-between. To us, Mill Valley is paradise — and somehow we ended up here.

It's 9am on Friday April 21, 2017, another warm, sun-drenched day. I'm heading out the door to yoga when the phone rings. I pause for a moment and decide to turn around to grab it. "Hello."

"I'm calling from Marin General Hospital. Are you Steve Pelaez's wife?"

There are more words but I hear only "accident."

"Oh my God. Is he alive?"

She responds, "Yes, but you better come quickly."

"Payton, Dad's been in an accident! We need to go to the hospital right now!"

My hands shake as I dial. "Mom, Steve's been in an accident! I'm going to the hospital. Please call everyone and let them know."

My hands tremble as I drive to the hospital. Payton, twelve, is with me in the car and I am scared to death. I meditatively say the *Hail Mary* and *Our Father* out loud over and over.

Payton breaks the silence to blurt, "It's Dad. He's going to be fine. Dad's always fine..."

I stagger into the emergency room and see my friend Gillian, a physician's assistant in the ER. "Jenna, what are you doing here?" she asks.

Quivering, I whimper, “Steve...”

I collapse into her arms feeling weightless, like a sliver of myself. I’ve never felt this way before. My chest feels hollow, like it’s stretching out to infinity. My heart is expanding as if it could fill this entire room.

Gillian ushers me through the ER doors and sits me down. She’ll find out what’s going on. Steve’s friends John and Chris are here, and their facial expressions slay me: *It’s bad. I’m terrified.* My head sinks toward the floor; it feels so heavy. I stare into space. My body is trembling but I’m not cold. My breath is slow and deep. A chaplain greets me. *Oh, is this a religious hospital?* I feel lost. What do I do? I’m so scared. *Does anyone know what to do?*

So many friends and family are with me but it’s not comfort I feel, it’s a mute stillness. *This is all a dream.* I feel like I’m peering out into the world from the back of my head. Everything seems far away. My body is suspended, floating six inches above the ground. *Please God, don’t take Steve. I love him so much.* After repeatedly asking and waiting, my stomach drops as I nervously enter to see my husband.

Steve is buried beneath bruises, bandages and blankets. There are so many braces, tubes and medical devices he looks like a robot. I see my husband’s physical body but his life force has vanished. *Oh my God. How did this happen?* Steve is sound asleep but terror is stamped on his face. All I have to give Steve is my deep, abiding love but I cannot reach him. How can I save him if I can’t reach him? I tremble looking at his frail body. I keep calling him *my baby boy*. My heart pounds from witnessing his severely damaged state.

The nurse says it’s time for me to leave. Gillian shepherds me through the emergency room haze. I am drowning in agony and

pain, drenched in love and helplessness, and she is an earth-side angel keeping me afloat. *Dear God, what are we going to do?*

Soon I am sitting quietly with friends, family. People keep coming. One of the police officers who responded to the accident walks in. He says he couldn't get Steve out of his mind. "Why? What happened?" I ask him.

He shrugs his shoulders. "She didn't look."

I look down at my phone; my Dad is calling. *"Jennifer, I'm so sorry."*

I'm crying. I say, "We had a perfect life, Dad. It was too good to be true. He's so badly hurt. There is nothing I can do. This is our life..."

A young doctor wearing light blue scrubs with operating glasses is here. I say goodbye to my dad as the doctor leans forward in his chair. He tells me they've been resuscitating Steve all morning. I nervously ask, "When you say resuscitating, do you mean like on TV?"

"Not exactly. He's been getting lots of blood transfusions and fluids and is on blood pressure medication to keep his blood pressure up. There are three big things that we're worried about; bleeding is what we're focused on now. The brain is another concern. The third one is the lungs and breathing and for now that's stable."

I softly reply, "Okay." I sign the consent form for two surgeries, for the liver and the brain. I learn that the human body has five or six pints of blood; Steve has already received seven. Gillian tells me that out-of-town family members are calling the hospital and are being told to fly in immediately. My heart drops. *Oh my God. It must be really bad.* I am told Steve's stepfather, Mario, booked a red-eye. *Is he packing a suit?*

There is nothing for me to do except wait. I'm sitting here staring, not crying, not asking questions. I'm terrified, standing on the precipitous edge of a cliff, peering down into a dark void. The only thing available to me is surrender. I surrender to God — the only one who can save Steve.

The trauma surgeon Dr. Stahl is here. He's a young man with long dark hair and a goatee. He says, "I've talked to the Stanford Trauma Center and the plan is to send him there for a higher level of care. One is for the multitude of his injuries, and because of how severe the shoulder injury is..." Dr. Stahl says some big words I cannot process, but I understand that Steve's entire shoulder is separated from his chest, and they can't deal with that here: "... we need to get him to a level one trauma center, the highest level."

I whisper, "Okay."

Dr. Stahl adds, "They have to fly the helicopter here, which takes forty-five minutes or so..."

Barely taking it all in I softly reply, "Okay... okay," adding uncertainly, "Can I see him before he goes in the helicopter?"

Dr. Stahl replies, "Um, yeah I'm sure we can make that happen."

Looking down at my wedding ring I murmur, "Even if it's just to look in and say, 'Godspeed'..." my voice trails.

I feel dull. Broken. Empty. Everything is in slow motion. I only ask doctors what they are doing to keep Steve alive; I don't dare ask if he will die. The only way to avoid that thought is to stay right here, holding onto the Divine force deep inside me. That force whispers in my ear, "*Steve is alive. Steve is alive. Steve is alive...*" That's all I hear.

But my beloved husband of eighteen years is broken beyond repair. His physical body is trying to die and I have no idea where

his soul stands. I've seen images like this in movies; occasionally I hear about something like this happening to someone else. But it's happening to me. Right here in this dire moment, I am a stranger to myself. My voice is different. I'm toneless. I speak softly and slowly, using few words.

If I were simply in shock, I would feel numb. This is different. I feel a loving force taking over me, guiding me, holding me. I don't intend for this to happen; I didn't ask for it. It's just happening. I am gifted with love; I feel love for Steve, for our children, for the friends and family by our side. I feel love for God, and even for the teenage girl who did this. I have never felt this before. My husband is unreachable yet for the first time in my life, I am awake to a magnificent sense of love I have never known. Something is happening to my soul.

I can't explain how or why but from the moment the hospital called me this morning, a Divine energy has been holding me. I need to reacquaint myself with this force. It's been a while — or maybe never. I've always had an intellectual and fear-based connection to God, not an emotional or Spiritual one. This feeling that holds my entire being is like nothing I have ever known. There is no separation between me and this feeling of Divine love. I don't know where this came from, but somehow I know it's my prescription for surviving the new nightmare of my life.

The quiet road where Steve's accident happened is Paradise Drive, which lives up to its name. Vibrant, lush landscaping hugs the meandering roadway as it winds up and down, curving along the sparkling San Francisco Bay. For years, Steve spent Friday mornings on Paradise Drive with a couple of dozen cyclists on "The Chicken

Ride”— named after the prize given to the first person who finishes. The so-called winner temporarily takes home the silly, stinky rubber chicken that’s dressed like a cyclist. Although the chicken has camped out in our garage more times than I can count, this wasn’t a training ride for Steve. He was there to be social. Afterward, the group sat outside Peet’s Coffee and chatted. Nearly every Friday, my gregarious husband came home brimming with excitement about someone intriguing he met on The Chicken Ride.

On April 21ST the sun was shining as the cheerful pack of brightly colored cyclists hummed along a wide-open, flat stretch of roadway, seconds away from the makeshift finish line. A teenage girl was driving in the opposite direction, about to drop off her sister at school, when she abruptly turned left. She crossed the double yellow line, right into the stream of cyclists headed toward her, with Steve leading the strung-out pack. With only ten feet of roadway between Steve and her SUV, there was no time to react.

My husband’s head violently smashed into the window of the passenger’s side door. His crushed helmet landed on the backseat of the SUV and his body catapulted onto the asphalt, twenty feet away. As the riders who tumbled into the crash site picked themselves up, they saw my beloved lying face down, unconscious, bleeding from his mouth and ear. Steve had totaled a Ford Explorer with his body. The child who had carelessly turned her two-ton SUV was crying hysterically and screaming, “I killed him! I killed him!”

Three of the peloton riders that day happened to be medical professionals: Otis, Alexis, and Ross. Seconds after the crash, Otis and his daughter Alexis rolled up on their tandem bicycle. Steve wasn’t breathing when Otis approached him. The protocol for a

trauma victim with this level of injuries is *not* to administer CPR. Otis placed his hands over Steve's chest and pleaded, "*Come on Steve, breathe! Breathe!*"

As Ross, a nurse and our neighbor, was consoling the distraught teenager, Steve's chest finally rose. Steve took a breath and so did Otis.

First engine medic John, a friend of Otis, came on the scene. Otis pointed to my dying husband and said, "This is our patient," and John rushed him to the hospital, code three. Friends who had been on the ride came to the ER right away. I missed their messages. It took the hospital social worker an hour to find me. In the meantime, someone heard the doctors say, "We're losing him! We're losing him!"

The Chicken Ride meant so much to Steve because of his passion for connecting. On this fateful day, those connections were life-saving. The brutal accident was caught on a GoPro video that I will never watch. My Dad saw it and told me you can eerily see the exact moment — the true blink of an eye — between joyful life and the terror of near death.

I remember the last image I have of Steve, just an hour before the crash. He was standing in the hallway outside our bedroom, suited up in his bright white cycling kit. I recall his tanned, muscular legs, and how fit and strong he looked. Steve came back to the house because he forgot something. I asked, "When will you be back, honey?"

He didn't answer.