

SEASONED

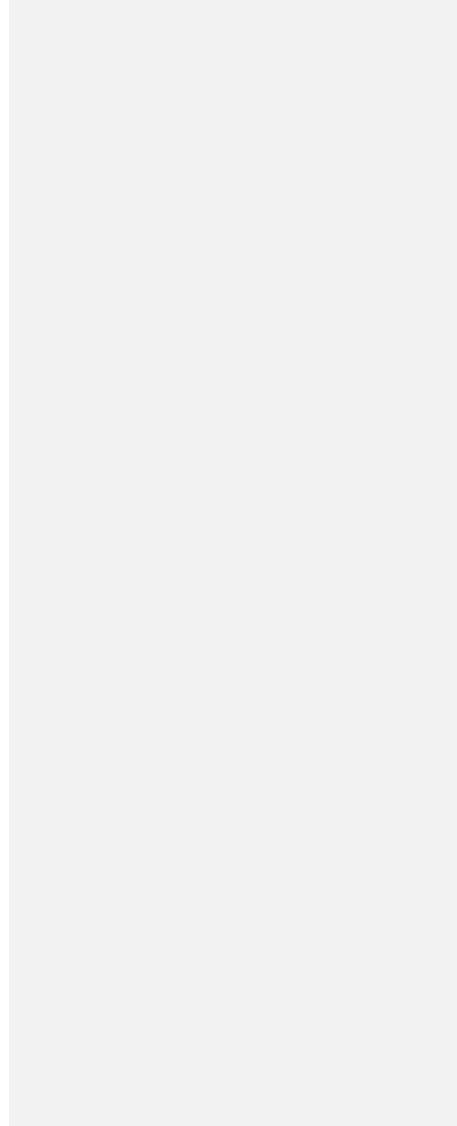
Stories of the Husband I Never Knew

Karen Grosz

You don't get to be seasoned if you don't live. Seasoned is not what they call you if you tend more towards metrosexual than rank mountain man. Seasoned is not something that happens to desk jockeys but comes with scars and bruises. ~ Karen

“I never thought of myself as book worthy. I still don't, but I know this; you have one life. Live it.” ~Paul

Dedicated to Liz, who completed our lives.



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SEASONED

"The crazy bastard"

I didn't know how to describe him when my high school girlfriends asked about Paul.

"Is he tall?"

"Yes."

"Is he funny?"

"Yes."

"Is he cute?"

"Well . . ." Cute wasn't the word; he looked like he was 28 the day we met, I think of 28 as young and strong, but wise.

"Is he handsome?"

"Well . . ." That wasn't it either.

At 20, even though he looked 28, he had not come into himself. He wasn't the man I know and love now, yet at 20, he was the most level-headed man I'd ever met. Laughing when my dad would have been yelling, teasing when others were cussing, Paul stood tall and

made the most of a shitty situation. I liked that very much then and appreciate this trait 38 years later.

After weeks of careful flirting (with a break for all-important hunting season) he kissed me as we stood in the hallway. Gently. Quietly. With passion and reserve. (Sorry, mom.)

That's when I knew I loved him, that I'd love him forever.

I was a silly teenage girl, too young to make a life decision, yet it's the best decision I've ever made. To love, honor (but not obey) this man. Actually, that was his idea to strike the word "obey" from our vows, I didn't know how much that would mean in our marriage, to be equals, didn't care. I do now. Then, I was just in awe. Protected. Admired. Loved. Honored. Married. So glad to be married.

But, still, how to describe him? Thirty-nine years later he is not cute, but in my heart and eye he is the most handsome man ever, a strong jaw, thick lips, crazy-ass eyebrows, with eyes as kind as Valentine's cards, hands as rough as 80-grit sandpaper, and a grip as strong as a bench vise.

Hollywood would cast him as a backup tough guy, which is funny since I married him because he is a nice guy.

So, how to describe this man? Well, that's what I didn't know, not until he lay in a hospital bed, not until his friends were calling his name, telling him jokes, being the people that made him whole, did I know what to call him.

Seasoned.

This is the story. He was at a fishing clinic with Doc, a Chiropractor with a mean back cast and a hell of a putt, whom he met at Mossy's Fly Shop when the name stuck.

Now, you should know that next to a good cup of coffee, and holding my heart, there is not much that ranks above fishing in Paul's heart. (He says, "Yes there is—family and friends." I tell him to stop editing my words.)

Back to his love of fishing. In his mind, there is no need to shave before you go fishing, no reason to match your gear; just buy the best, hit the road, and stand in the water. After a day of fishing Paul is neither cute or handsome, which is why I loved the word.

Seasoned.

In the hospital room, which you will hear about later, friends and I laughed when Doc told us the story. They'd been at a fishing clinic on the Kenai river, sunlight, cigars, and the stories old fisherman tell, when an old guy (emphasis on old, which is funny since Paul and Doc won't see 45 again) who was sitting at a booth, "just shooting the breeze with the proprietor," did a double take at Paul and said, "You look seasoned," which made both Paul and Doc laugh.

Seasoned.

You don't get to be seasoned if you don't live. Seasoned is not what they call you if you tend more towards metrosexual than rank mountain man. Seasoned is not something that happens to desk jockeys but comes with scars and bruises.

Seasoned is invited to dinner, because the stories will add a certain flavor. Seasoned is the little something extra that makes a dish come together, wood accept a fine finish, and Paul fill the room with laughter.

You see, as he lay in the hospital, not the morgue as statistics said he should, story after story filled the room. Close encounters with

bears and man, chances that should not have been taken, and a count of lives that puts him closer to a cat with one left to go, than a man with one life to give.

My Paul.

The crazy bastard. He's ridden ice flows, chased bears, and sat in a café for four days, while his buddy sat in the cold. That's a story I'll tell you later.

Seasoned.

I've asked him to tell me the stories, and you're going to learn them right along with me. How he got the grizzle in his beard and the titanium in his chest.

I think it's a book we shall both enjoy, so let's get started.

STRAIGHT SHOOTER

*With apologies to the women in
our family who did not know the
stories either*

When you get the call that your husband is being moved to intensive care, that his life is on the line because of a fall, you think you have heard everything. If you are married to *Seasoned* you find out this is not the case, that the rest of the story, as they say, is about to unfold.

Normally shy, a behind-the-scenes type of guy, Paul asked me to write a book about him, while under the influence of drugs. After 38 years of wedded bliss I have grown wise, so I made him put it in writing, and sign it, in case there was a back-out attempt later.

There was.

So, dear reader, here is the story I think he didn't want me to know, because, well, he never told me, and it turns out it is not just one story, it is three. Yes, three.

I'm damn glad I got that signature.

You see, what I learned in the middle of the night, as we were quietly thinking about life, enveloped by moonlight, having been wakened by pain, is that Paul has been shot at three times.

Okay, not actually shot *at*, never in an argument, a robbery, or a mall, but three times bullets have missed ending his life. And not once was it his fault. Okay, yes, he was in the spot where the bullet sailed, but he wasn't holding the gun. He says these facts are supposed to give me some sort of comfort, to help me fall asleep when the words stop flowing.

They don't.

Bounding around in my head is the fact that three times I have almost lost this man to the path of a bullet. Not only did I not know this, but his mother, daughter and sisters won't like this either.

How will I tell them that once a stray shot whizzed over his head while camping? He was sitting by a fire with teenage buddies, and no one could figure out where the bullet came from. They just heard the *szzzzzzzzzzz*, felt the chill of knowing what happened, but not *what the hell* happened. I asked if they got in their trucks and went home. He scoffed. Did you tell your parents? Scoff and eyeroll. "There is no sense making people worry about something that didn't happen, and won't happen again," Paul told me.

Yeah.

Turns out there were two more incidents that we, as he says, didn't need to worry about.

Both incidents were caused by hunters who did not know what they were doing, made stupid mistakes. I believe this is always the first quote after the hunting tragedy headline. "It was just a stupid mistake," says the dead guy's buddy. In both of Paul's hunting

stories the punishment, in my humble opinion, did not really fit the crime.

In one case Paul said, "After the bullet landed right beside my leg, we made him walk in front of us."

Really?

Walking in front of a group of hunters is so humiliating the offender will never have a bullet in a chamber again? His finger will never be on the trigger unless he is ready to shoot, all because he walked in front of you? Paul is adamant it was enough, that the dressing down and subsequent shunning to the front of the pack, by the offender's brother-in-law, who happened to be a retired drill sergeant, was sufficient to cure the guy of stupidity.

I hope so.

I am also glad Paul gave up hunting with that particular group, after that trip.

For the next incident, another hunter, another finger in the trigger when it shouldn't have been, another bullet whizzing past his head, Paul reported, "I told him, in my biggest voice"—which I assure you can scare lichen off a rock—"hunt's over, get in the boat!" (I hope there was a cuss word between "the" and "boat," but Paul seldom cusses in front of me.)

I suppose that is something; a client paying top dollar does not want to be taken out of the field by his guide.

But, a guide in the prime of his life, does not want to be taken from his family, either. I, personally, would have left the offender sitting on the shore, in grizzly country, without bear bells, but perhaps pepper spray, and taken the boat to the lodge myself. Paul was just Paul, the man who is unflappable about these things, and

simply refused to guide the offender again, also making sure the guide who drew the proverbial short straw knew to check the gun's chamber himself. The client, wisely, did not argue.

As he told me these stories, bullets that missed his leg, his head, it was with his normal timber. Just a straightforward, this-is-how-it-happened sentence. Never mind my pounding heart; Paul told me these stories like he tells a Dimensions of Carpentry client their choice of wood is not the best choice, a fellow fisherman which fly to use, and a teen why their behavior is going to get their ass whooped.

Straight and to the point.

With Paul there is no need for drama, to make up a story, or embellish the truth. There is right, there is wrong, there is fair, there is unfair, there is a line you do not cross, and a path you do not take. Life, when you are becoming Seasoned, is full of choices and consequences, full of times to tell it like it is, and moments to say only what needs be said.

I think that is one of the things I admire about Paul, that he is a straight shooter. You know where he stands, you know how he feels, and in a world of waffling, spinning, and parroting, it is a style, much like the good guys in the westerns he watched as a child, of shooting straight from the hip and being true to your word.

So, on your way to becoming Seasoned, if that is the path you choose, I hope you too will be a straight shooter, and that you will, for the love of all that is right in the field, keep your finger off the trigger, unload the chamber, and tell me the story before I think there are no stories I don't know.



Paul's company is Dimensions of Carpentry and as one of the best finish carpenters in Alaska, he won many Golden Hammer awards and had two of the top contractors fight over who he would work for. He didn't want to be a "big" contractor, choosing instead to hire one employee, a man who needed a break after a bad rap, Pete, who worked for Paul for eight years, and is now a good friend. Paul's clients, both in Montana and Alaska, are still willing to wait for months for his work, as he is honest ("That will look like hell.") and diligent.

Yes, I am proud of him. No, I won't delete these words even though he will ask me to.



SNAKE EYES

"This isn't how I am going to die."

Seasoned says he was six, playing in the backyard, the first time he caught a rattlesnake.

I'm trying to imagine where you, dear reader, will snag on that sentence. Are you thinking six-year-olds should not be playing with rattlesnakes, or does the idea that he has caught more than one gives you pause?

For me it is the words the first time.

You see, it was only about a year ago that I got the snake bite kit for my minivan; apparently, I should have been carrying one for many years. Most minivans, of course, carry Cheerios, and an odd assortment of sporting goods or tools. My minivan, called Connie because she is as plain as plain can be but terribly reliable, somewhat like an administrative assistant in a beige sweater set,

carries all of the above, plus team building supplies, and—pause for effect—the new snake bite kit.

The kit was purchased in a moment of “*what the hell was he thinking?*” after a week-long camping trip along the Boulder River, in Montana.

We’d been driving along, miles and miles from the last place we’d seen a passenger car. This isn’t unusual for us; we once took a minivan to the top, or backside, or one mile past no-where, in the Big Horn Mountains of Wyoming. When they saw us in their territory, Jeep drivers shook their heads while we just smiled and bumped along. When we got back on the freeway the minivan bumped, bounced and gave us more of a thrill than the road in backside of nowhere had.

It was us who shook our heads when the tire store said we’d broken the bands in all four tires. (Anyone wanna buy a van?) This was day one of our ten-day road trip, and that’s a story for another book, but I want you to know, we are not above saying, “Should we?” and “Yes!” when possibility appears. Even if we shouldn’t.

It’s a lifestyle. Or a problem.

Let’s return to the Boulder. Driving along, feeling the hot summer wind, the only music the gravel road, which sounds like not a care in the world played by the Rocker Panel Dings.

Suddenly, not just breaking but completely shattering the reverie, Paul slammed on the brakes, popped the shifter to park as he jumped from the van, and ran back several yards, as if being chased by angry wasps.

By the time I was out of the van he was dropping a snake . . . and grabbing it again. (!!!)

The first catch was a bad snatch, so he jumped like a cat (I, I am sorry to write, honestly thought his cat like days were past) and grabbed this venomous rattle firmly by the head.

I slowly grasped what was happening and did not, I can assure you, call out words of praise. Not a one. I may, and there is no witness to say for sure, have called out something like, "Put the snake down you kind and loving man." Kind and loving may have sounded differently to his ears.

Then, *oh so carefully*, he pranced the hero's prance through the tall, dry grass and placed the snake about a hundred yards off the road. I may or may not have screamed a few choice words into the summer heat, which gave me the same acknowledgment as Paul.

Silence.

We were too far from a hospital to save his happy ass and had no signal to Google: *Does sucking venom really work*, and little chance of finding someone who would actually suck the venom if Google, and its unfailing wisdom, said, "Yes!"

As we drove away, one of us smiling from ear to ear, the other not, Seasoned said, "Some son-of-a-bitch would have run over him!" Which is probably true, but the act of saving a rattlesnake was unsettling to me, thus the kit. He also said, "Holy shit, snake piss smells like shit." (Again, I seldom hear a cuss word, but this was TRUE, and he was touching MY steering wheel, so I may or may not have said a few myself.)

Months later, cleaning the van after a weekend of summer adventure, Paul saw the kit. He laughed and said, "Don't you know I never roll the dice unless I can win?"

And that is the truth behind the story of Paul catching rattlers. He wouldn't do it if he'd get bit.

He can look at the snake's eyes, he tells me now, and feel no fear. It's the same when being chased by a bear, standing on a high roof, or driving down a mountain pass in my minivan. He is fearless and sure.

I've seen it.

It's not a brazen disregard for safety, it is a sure-footed, quick-witted, power-filled and planned confidence. He knows his body, knows the challenge, and plays the odds. He can roll snake eyes in a dice game, seemingly on command, and tell you the odds of hitting 21 when the dealer pulls his card.

Paul always plays to win.

Sitting safely on the patio of our favorite coffee shop, while his eleven broken ribs heal, he tells me about the snakes he has caught. As a child and a teen, and now a wise and mature man (read: kinda old) but never as a young dad, because men in that role, according to Paul, should take fewer risks. Each catch is a source of pride, and a snake placed out of harm's way.

These are stories I've never heard.

There was a question I never expected to ask but did now. "Did your mom yell at you, you little six-year-old snake charmer, when you caught that first rattler?" She did not. Instead she explained why he should have come inside to alert her, and why catching rattlers was a bad idea.

I wish she had yelled. It might have saved me the trouble, standing there on the gravel road. Maybe she did yell into the

summer heat, like I did, and received as answer the silence only a recalcitrant six-year-old can muster.

Seasoned says part of his courage is knowing these stunts aren't how he will die, which must be true, because after the fall with Jesus (a story I will soon tell), every doctor said, "You know, a fall like this means you should be dead."

So, I drive to Walmart, and team building events, and even church, with a snake bite kit that I'll never use, and the hope that it is truly old age, as he foresees, that takes this man from the world. I also refuse, again, his offer of catching a snake and frying it up "just so" and enjoying a delicacy of mountain men and dare-susceptible drunks. He says, "If you season it right it is one of the finest meals."

I say he is all the seasoning I can handle.

Commented [AH1]: Karen, an amusing side note: When I was one of an army of proofreaders working on the huge revision of *Joy of Cooking*, my editor told me that one of the revisions was to take out the old rattlesnake recipe. Never thought I'd have such a relevant opportunity to tell that story!

Commented [kg2R1]: Oh my goodness, that is fantastic!

Commented [kg3R1]:

GET OFF MY LAWN

The cookies are out back

Of all the things I didn't know about this husband of mine, and am finding out during recovery, the one thing I did, do, and will always know is that beneath that Seasoned exterior is the heart of a stuffed animal. He feeds the squirrels, the birds, and any stray dog that finds its way to our porch. He gets a tear if he thinks I will cry, and as you know, doesn't want even a snake to be harmed in the making of a summer memory.

He doesn't want you to know this, of course. I'm not sure why; I just know that when a neighbor said, "Paul is standing on the front porch yelling, "Get off my grass!" and Karen is standing at the back door handing out cookies," it seemed to complete his persona.

Except for that soft heart problem.

That soft heart problem shows up and anyone who knows him, and is watching him in action, says, "Yeah, he's not a people person," then laughs at the inside joke. It's hard to sell that you're the tough old coot when your fans are off to the side, holding a tissue to their eyes.

During one business trip we stopped in Disneyland, carefree and childless. A balloon vendor popped by. Well, okay, you and I both know they don't just *pop* by. Their appearance is part of carefully orchestrated sales plan, and there we were, with time and money, waiting for the parade. Paul slipped away. I pretended not to notice where he was going, surreptitiously fluffing my hair and practicing my best surprised face.

Paul sidled up to the balloon man, who was in jeopardy of taking flight if someone didn't buy his wares, and I smiled from afar, confident that I'd look both classy and joy filled as I paraded around the park with a Mickey balloon. As I looked the other way, I wondered what could be taking so long . . . where was my surprise? Another fluff and preen. I looked over my shoulder and saw Paul handing *my* Mickey balloon to a child whose mom did not look like she could afford to be there, let alone buy a \$10 balloon.

The look on the child's face was priceless.

A bit of joy, a lot of wonder, and a slice of Disney-designed happiness. Of course, I was preparing that same look, a wasted effort, but still, my heart melted just a little; that was my husband making sure a child had a Mickey balloon while visiting the happiest place on earth.

Love.

Paul, the tough old coot, smiled kindly and turned towards me, and grinned sheepishly when he knew that he'd been caught.

While this story makes a chorus of "It's a Small World" run through our brains, there is more too it, a twisted and sorry plot change.

You see, strange men, offering balloons to little children, in amusement parks, are not always thought of as kind strangers, even if they are just old coots with teddy bear hearts. I watched, saddened, as the mom exited the parade route faster than you can scream, “Get off my lawn,” dragging a boy with my giant Mickey balloon, behind her.

This took a bit of fluff out of our souls but did not close the door on possibility and kindness.

When our daughter, Liz was fifteen, she took up hockey, a sport many played since the age of four, but she found it as a teenager, loved it, and wanted to perfect her skill. Being dutiful parents, we took her to hockey camp right in the middle of the promised land of pucks and the long-held O, Bemidji, Minnesooota. We arrived on the fourth of July, 9:10am, and the holiday parade started at 10:30.

Coincidence? I think not. Kindness potential—yep.

We found a parking spot, assumed our position on the corner, and proceeded to be the obnoxious out-of-towners playing the game of parade goers everywhere, “How much candy can we get,” by interacting with the people in control of joy-filled cellophane. We would yell, tease, praise, cajole, whatever it took to get those bits of plastic-wrapped sugar into our hands, and we’d laugh when fortune shone on us and candy landed at our feet.

Okay, that is what Liz and I were doing. Paul was watching, as he always does, aware of his surroundings, ready to pounce on danger, to protect the unwary. (Usually I am the unwary.) Liz poked me in the side and pointed at an old coot, her long, tall dad, being kind.

He was the obnoxious guy begging candy and then dropping it into the hands of a child about three years old. You see, this child

Commented [AH4]: Who’s Liz? If your readers are only going to be people who know you personally you don’t need to introduce her, but if you’re expecting general readership you should.

did not fully understand the game, or maybe he was just playing it better than we were, as he stood intently looking down at his hands, which were cupped together, clearly wishing candy would magically drop into them.

Paul would catch a candy, reach over the child's head and drop the candy into his hands.

The little boy would jump for glee, run to his laughing family and return to the exact spot where magic happened, and the game would continue. It is hard to imagine who was smiling brighter, Paul or the boy, but now, as I look at this seasoned face, I imagine a few of the lines formed that day, and others like it, when a tough old mule took a knee and made a child's day.

Still, stay off the lawn, unless you are a squirrel. (The cookies are still out back.)

BROKEN

Pain visits

When the phone rang at 12:30 a.m. I thought to myself, “Is this how I find out I’m a widow?” I am not drawn towards drama, had no reason to assume the worst, but still, it was late, and it was not Paul’s voice on the other end of the line, it was his good friend, Greg, who whispered to me “There has been an accident.” Cold terror. He said, “Paul fell and broke some ribs.”

My mood changed, lifted; I laughed and said, “Call me when there is something important to talk about.”

Broken ribs are just part of the game when you are married to a high-energy, big-living, hockey-playing carpenter. My goodness, just two days before he’d been chased by a bear on the golf course, in Alaska, where he often works, and didn’t even have a scratch to exchange for a free round of golf. Ribs, not to worry, we’ve healed those before.

The phone rang again. “He’s unconscious, going to ICU, this is pretty bad, 11 shattered ribs, punctures, bleeding. You should get on the next plane,” Greg said. I was back to fear and expecting the best, planning for the worst, embracing the blessings, like getting

the last seat on a flight four hours later, and laughing at the irony of his surviving another bear encounter, but landing in the hospital while trying to hang a six-foot crucifix in Greg's home.

How could this happen? Well, Paul was standing on a scaffold 14 feet off the floor, hanging and adjusting this powerful piece of art. The art slipped, Paul grabbed it, and momentum took Paul to the ground, with a bounce on the handrail, along the way. Paul and Jesus were arm and arm on the floor; Paul wasn't breathing, and Greg could not believe his eyes

The Fall with Jesus, as we call it now, broke 11 ribs on one side, multiple times, including right beside the spine, and other injuries.

When I arrived in Anchorage, I had to shower before I could see Paul (to eliminate airplane germs) and stay out of the way of the nursing team, who were both awed by the fact he shook each of their hands and tormented by the reality that each touch caused pain. For days, we did the hospital dance of drugs, visitors, decisions, and tears. The strongest man I'd ever know simply wasn't, and I realized I'd have to open my own pickle jars. I'd always teased him that was the reason I'd kept him around for so long—well, that and killing spiders.

During those days I discovered what true compassion looks like, and I felt the grace of friends and modern medicine. Hope filled my heart as the surgeons reported unexpected and miraculous results. During these days I was surprised to discover that the man I've been married to for 38 years, the one I grew both up and old with, had stories I did not know. A lot of them.

Rattlesnakes he'd caught (I knew of one, not five), bullets that missed his head, his leg, his arm, each in freak accidents, and

Commented [AH5]: I think you need to elaborate on this a little bit. It's clearly a crucial story (no pun intended) and you refer to the "fall with Jesus" several times. Yet you don't actually specify here that this is the big telling; "hang a six-foot crucifix" is too subtle. I know something of the story from your incredible FB posts about it, but I feel like I've kind of missed it here. Maybe incorporate some of the telling from your social media story. Right now it feels less dramatic here than it needs to be. The aftermath is well told, but we need more of the actual action.

chances he'd taken on other scaffolds, with other friends, always playing the odds and never losing. Laughter filled his room as the prognosis went from grim to miraculous and the stories went from hilarious to frightening. Friends had to be put on a rotating visiting schedule and the nurses signed his pain pillow with words of praise and thankfulness for his spirit that they said had lightened their load.

One nurse in particular helped Paul to answer the question that torments all people who join the "That Should Have Killed You" club: "Why am I still here?" Angel (her real name) told us that she was not supposed to be on the floor, that coincidence gave her the option to work with Paul, whom she had heard about. As they talked, she told him that the job is often thankless, patients demanding, and results dire. Then Paul came into her life and showed her light and grace, appreciation and hope, exactly when she needed it. She said, "I think I may be one of the reasons you are still here." We all cried.

A visiting pastor told Paul that there is usually not one reason, but several, some appearing years later, that prove why your life was spared. It was nice for us to see this one played out while pain still wracked his body.

Visiting with friends took on a deeper meaning.

Paul's hospital stay was never easy, but had light hearted moments, and moments of sheer will power. First, his back was so strong that it 'bested' the pain management team. His doctor said, "the epidural will take 10 minutes to insert." It took 50, leaving him with a sweaty brow and a desire to know more about this man who didn't whine even one time.

The surgeon told us about the titanium plates he would install on Paul's ribs, and asked Paul, who was intubated if he had questions. Paul wrote, "fix me" and everyone in the room teared up, including the doctor.

Those rib splints were miraculous, and Paul asked to have the epidural removed at day three to which the pain management doctor said, "No." He also said he wanted to take Paul down the hallway to visit a young man with three simple rib fractures. That patient had been on the epidural for seven days, took every dose and asked for more. Doc said, "I want him to meet you, and maybe then he will man the hell up."

Man-up is what Paul did at every turn. If they told us he would be able to do something in four days, Paul did it in two. When asked to walk around the room, Paul did $\frac{1}{4}$ mile in the hallway. He surpassed every expectation, with grace and grit.

This is when it began to sink in, that the choices we'd made to live our life while there was a life to live were the best choices.

Our bank account might say different, but our hearts know the value of those life choices.

Those early days of healing were filled with stories, love, laughter, rest, our friends Karen and Paul, who let us stay with them while we were still in Alaska, and with Greg, who supported every moment of recovery. And laughter—did I mention the laughter? It filled his room, as it has filled our lives.

You can't cash laughter, but I think you can dine out on it.

Recovery has been a chore. Laundry. Exercise. Patience. Eat this, avoid that, try this, don't do that. But—and I know some of you have lost the ICU battles—recovery has also been a blessing not everyone

receives. It has been a time to recalibrate our lives. Time to sift through the memories, to think about the future, and to be, for a period that seemed both too long and too short, together.

Holding hands during the dark nights and smiling at the feel of sunshine as we walked, oh so slowly, around the block. Those are moments we did not expect, nor would we give them back. I like to think that when you fall with Jesus he finds a way to catch you.

Later, when it's funny, I'll tell you about driving with a passenger who never complains but makes me feel like I have cracked eggs on the hood of my car that I'm trying not to break. It's been a special kind of pothole patrol! I'll also tell you about holding my hand just behind Paul's back when we are in a crowd and threatening to take out a fellow shopper, who almost bumped the cart he was pushing.

The role of a caregiver is that of an unsung warrior, I tell you.

For now, friend, as we enter the final stages of recovery, I will tell you this: it was the small moments that we are most thankful for, but the big decisions that paid dividends. Two years ago, we did a diet and lifestyle change that has not been easy, but the fruits of that effort were a body ready for a battle and brains easily adapted to the best choices for traumatic injury recovery.

Time and again Paul's vitals wowed his caregivers, vitals that are the result of healthy choices.

Day after day, as we moved him towards strength, good foods fueled that battle. We have been surrounded by fruits, vegetables, stretches, and words that give recovery a strong foothold. More than once we have been glad that we fought the battle for a healthy lifestyle before we were thrust into this moment of recovery.

If this book were typical of my writing, I'd give you advice right now, advice to make the wise choices, adjust your lifestyle, and hold on to your family, not your grudges. I would ask you to find peace, celebrate sunshine, and make the kindest choices. But this is not that kind of book. It is a book about a man I have loved dearly, but find he was the husband I never knew. A man who lives for adventure, and precision.

So, I will tell you this, what I learned while he has been broken: I hope you are living your best life because changes happen. Pain visits.

Today and tomorrow are ever-changing landscapes, but right now is the best moment you have to make a grand decision, to grasp life, to eat apples, and to hug the ones you love while they are here to hug.

Now, I shall go find Seasoned, tell him to stop doing something, or start doing something, depending on what he is up to in the moment, because that is my wifely privilege. And, I'll probably hug him, because those damn expensive titanium ribs should not be wasted.

DINNER BELLS

*"It's not like it's the first time I had
to swat a bear."*

There are two reasons to wear bells when you are hiking through grizzly bear country. The first is so bears can hear you, to know that you are in their territory, so they can make way. Bears, I have heard, are more scared of humans than we are of them; all you have to do is make sure they hear you and they won't be a problem.

As a not-too-comfortable-with-bears type of human, I find that hard to believe.

I also don't appreciate the second reason, which is this, one of my favorite jokes. How do you know if its grizzly scat? Grizzly scat contains hiker bells. That, my friends, is what concerns me—that the bell is not a *make way* alarm, but instead a *come and get it* dinner bell.

If you are hiking in bear country, bear bells are only part of the safety equipment hikers should carry, according to sales clerks and websites that are pure "BS" according to Paul. The second is Bear

Spray, as a bear that won't make way will decide to leave you in peace if you shoot this canned pain maker in its snout.

Paul says not to trust those sales clerks, that bear spray simply makes you taste better if a bear does take a bite.

As you might have guessed at this point, hiking in bear country with Paul is quite the treat. We make noise, but we aren't scared. (I say "we," but you know that is bull; I am scared, even with my trusty can of bear spray at the ready.) We have respect, but no reason to worry. (Again, one of us may be worried.)

Paul's latest encounter with a black bear sums up the situation for me. He was golfing with his friend Shaun, in Alaska. A mama bear with three two-year-old cubs stood on the cart path. Paul suggested, with a booming voice, that they make way. Three complied, one stayed to argue. The contrary player here was a 75-pound male, big enough to warrant respect, but small enough Paul was sure he could swat him on the nose to get the upper hand, if needed. He told me he was glad it wasn't needed, as he is sure mama would have come running, at full tilt, and with a roar and deadly swipe, to even the score if her baby was crying.

Comforting.

I'd heard about this bear encounter two days before the fall with Jesus. Paul called me, laughing, and told me how the little fella took a few swipes at him, stood on its back legs, and pounced. "It was kind of like a kitten," Paul said.

A kitten.

Come now.

If it was like a kitten, why didn't he let it leave a scratch, just one scar, so he could play golf for free the rest of his life? I can hear it

now. "Got this scar golfing in Alaska, it was back in the summer of '18. I was playing Titleist. Yeah, that bear took a chunk out of me, but I finished the round with an impressive 76. Those balls never let you down." This statement would end with a chest puff, I am sure.

This is actually the story that brought to my attention the idea that I may not have been hearing whole truths and complete inventories of Paul's wilderness experiences. As friends gathered in his hospital room and the story flowed, Paul said, "I wasn't worried. It's not like it's the first time I've had to swat a bear."

Screech. Halt. Back the wheelchair up.

Not the first time?

The funny thing is, here we are, me relating the stories I've been told this summer, now that the cork is off the bottle, as they say, and I still don't know when he slapped a bear for the first time.

I think Seasoned and I need to have a little sit-down, but until we do, let me tell you this story.

We'll both want to sit down for it.

When Paul was working as a fishing guide on the Alaska Peninsula, (a dream job that turned out to be more job than dream) he and a fellow guide, Randy, hosted four clients for a lunch on shore. They were cleaning up after a meal of fresh salmon expertly fried. (Expertly fried is Paul's word, and I can't argue. *Randy* is probably a fine cook.)

Along came two bears.

Paul yelled.

Just as Paul suggests, one was excited to make way.

The other bear decided to see what exactly Paul wanted, maybe grab some lunch of its own, since this salmon buffet was in his territory and all.

Paul yelled at the bear again, because apparently bears don't like to be yelled at, something from their childhood, I suppose. Then Paul ordered Randy to get in the boat with the clients (no sense making lunch of paying guests) and told them to go to the deepest part of the river, so the bear could not get to them.

I am pretty darn sure there would have been room for one more in that boat, but no, Paul decided to stay on shore and tell Griz who, in fact, was going to clean up the lunch dishes. (I will tell you now, with wifely adoration, Paul has never been this determined to do the dishes in our kitchen, but I have been gracious and never pointed out this little fact.)

When the bear was 30 yards out, Paul picked up a big stick, waved it around, and yelled again.

At 20 yards the bear, who was still trying to determine what Paul was suggesting (perhaps he was hard of hearing), kept coming forward. Without slowing down. At all.

Now, this is the point I would like to hear Paul tell me, in an upbeat tempo, that he ran across the water, jumped in the boat, and got the hell out of there, wouldn't you? But no, that is not what he decided to do, not by a long shot.

With the stick (which did not have even one bear bell attached, mind you) held high above his head Paul ran at the bear, screaming at the top of his lungs.

Ran AT the bear is a particularly unsettling image for me.

The bear, who just wanted the lunch leftovers, turned tail and ran like the wind, out of the area, at long last *making way*. Phew.

The clients—and this is not helpful, in my opinion, as I think you should only celebrate what you want to see repeated—were whooping, and calling out man-sized praise for the bravery of the guide who chased the bears away.

“Whooping?” I asked. “Yes, whooping and hollering like I’d won the Superbowl.”

As they got back to shore one client said, “If I had a picture of that, I’d Photoshop in a set of enormous balls on you.”

And that, my friends, is why women live longer than men.

BANDAGES

Are you sure it's that bad?

I am only going to say this because I am hoping to garner favor and get some of the things on my Honey-Do list completed by the man who claimed the role of honey in my life. Paul is one hell of a carpenter. The best I have ever known. His joints are a thing of beauty, his work the intersection of mathematics and art.

When he runs his calloused hands down a board it is just for show.

Looking at the board tells him all he needs to know. He can see the slightest imperfection, tell which way the board will twist, if it will take stain the way he wants, if there is a spot that needs more sanding, and if, in the end, it will make the client say “wow” when they walk into the completed room.

Paul can calculate the curve of a staircase in his head and is famous for making a square room into a round library. He is fast too. To save time he clamps cabinets with his hands, as real clamps are a waste of time, and can trim a door, with perfect miters by the way,

in less time than most people take to walk through a door. Again, he is good. (The Honey-Do list is on the counter.)

And, in order to be good, to be Seasoned as it were, you need to have a few scars. Scars have stories and since I am the one writing the book, I get to tell this story.

Paul called me from his cell phone, back when cell phones were new, and said, "Bring the checkbook and meet me at the clinic." I don't know about you, but most people, when they get a call like that, run for the door. I asked, "Why?" I mean, if this was going to be an event, I'd be there, but if he could handle it on his own, more power to him.

He said, "I put my finger through a router, and any time you do that it's bad." I, as you would expect in a situation that was bad, asked who was taking him to the clinic.

"I'm driving myself. I'm not dead." Yep, that's my honey.

Dutifully, I headed out the door, checkbook in hand, and met him at the clinic. When I arrived, he was explaining to the receptionist that he'd put his finger through a router. She said, as if on cue, "Oh, that's always bad." Oh, my word. Paul was rushed into a room; the nurse hurried in and said, "Just keep clenching your fist, that's the best thing you can do, as these injuries are always bad."

Good Lord. What was I going to see when he took the paint stained rag off his finger? (I assume I don't need to tell you, at this point anyway, that paint-stained rags and/or duct tape make fine bandages.)

The doctor rushed in. The surgery tray was ready, masks were donned, and the doc said, "Okay, when I count to three, I'm going to

have you unclench your fist, you might want to look away [I know I did!] as it is always bad when you fight with a router.”

Paul and I locked eyes.

He didn't show fear really, he was not whining, and maybe, truth be told, looked just a little bit excited about having a new scar to show.

I heard the doctor take a breath. Oh, fresh level of hell, would Paul be off work for weeks? What about my Honey-Do list? How exactly do you repair a routered finger? My mind was whirring as I looked into Paul's green eyes.

The doctor said, and this is an exact quote, “I think a bandage will take care of that.”

Now to say I was relieved is an understatement. To say I was excited to have heard those words, to know I would use them time and time again, when the occasion arose, oh, friend, you cannot imagine the gaiety with which I watched Paul write that check. I would have written it but he only required a bandage. (See!)

Life has a way of keeping score, of reminding us that we are not ahead of the game even when we think we are so damn funny with a new bandage joke and all, which is what happened several years later.

Paul called, said calmly, “I put my finger through a router, and it needs more than a bandage (!!!), so meet me at the hospital.” I said, with love I am sure, “Are you sure it's that bad?” “Karen, Rob just picked hamburger meat off the living room wall.”

Okay then.

I don't want you to think Paul is careless. That is not the case. (Please disregard the story about falling with Jesus, that would

skew your thinking.) He is the type of carpenter who knows the rules, minds the blades, and yells, with unmistakable clarity, if you are about to do something dangerous.

These slivers (often removed with a utility knife), cuts, and scars are part of the deal, when you run countless miles of wood through a saw. Things will happen, which is what made Paul such a seasoned carpenter in the first place.

What I didn't know until the unwinding for this book, is that the very first time Paul used a table saw he put his finger through it and spent six weeks in a cast, healing from surgery. I knew about the injury, but not the fact he it was his first go! Even though the nurses were attentive to his eighteen-year-old self, and he learned to golf left-handed, he didn't want to go through that again. His little finger is crooked, and has an exposed nerve that can't feel good, which is a handy reminder: safety first.

At eighteen Paul was studying biology, thinking of going into marine science, or becoming a doctor, but he says he already knew he was supposed to be a carpenter.

He says he knew it when he remodeled his parent's bathroom at seventeen that he got the itch as a six-year-old boy standing in front of the workbench his grandfather built for him. At that bench he built boats with so many nails that they floated upside down. He still likes to make sure things will hold, even yelling at the TV when Tom Silva on *This Old House* uses the wrong screws, like some men yell at football refs.

Paul tried other work, left school when finances fell through and a girl stole his heart, and in the end, because his uncle called from

Alaska and said, "Hey, do you want to come work construction for a year?" settled into his life's calling.

To build things.

To be able to see what he has done at the end of the day, to be able to stand back and know he did his best and that the doctors and marine biologists who hire him think he is *just* a carpenter but find out he is so much more.

He is Seasoned, and that makes all the difference.



Oh my gosh, you guys. This chapter gets an addendum, because Paul added a story after I read it to him.

Paul: "Once I used pliers to remove a sliver."

Me: "Get out!"

He opens his hand to show me the scar. I can't really distinguish it; there are several scars, some callouses, and he's been playing plumber under a building while healing his ribs, so there is dirt too, but I say, "Ew," as I should. Then he relates this:

"The three-inch-long sliver was pointed like a needle on one end, and about 3/8 inch wide on the other. I knew if I pulled it out, I'd have a hundred other slivers, so I asked the home owner for a pair of pliers. She asked what for and I said, "A sliver."

She said, "Let me see."

I said, "You don't want to see this."

"Yes, I do."

So, I showed her.

"She said, 'I didn't want to see that!'"

"I *know*."

He finished with this, "She gave me the pliers, I pulled the fat end of the sliver *through* my palm, covered the area with some duct tape and went back to work."

That's how this is going. I hear stories, write a story, read it to him, then hear another story. How did I know so little about this man? When did he become the husband I never knew?



A conversation about pain pills, two weeks after The Fall with Jesus:

K. do you want some oxy?
P. no.

K. What about now?
P. it's always going to be no.

K. now?
P- silence

Driving down the road-

P- the speed limit is 35
K- I'm doing fine. (I mean really,

anything over 20 would be crazy.)

K- bump ahead

P- I'm fine

K- bump ahead

P- try to miss this one

P- the speed limit is still 35

K- if you backseat drive, I'll hit the damn bump, buddy.



FISH TALES

Because he sings to the fish

When we were young marrieds, Paul fished a time or two, but I never really thought of it as a *thing*. Then we moved to Alaska. I expected log cabins, dog sled teams, and glaciers. I got weekends in a tent, a city of slush, and fish tales.

Now, Paul is not the kind of man to tell stories about the ones that got away. Anyone who knows him knows they don't get away. His stories are about the fish he caught, the size, the rock they were behind, how hard they swam away when he released them. Fish do not get away, so why would he tell that type of story?

He says he can just *tell* when a fish is going to take the hook, that he feels it land in their mouth before they close their jaw. I don't know about that. Unless a fish slams the line and rings a bell, I have no idea my hook is full, and so the idea of just being able to tell seems like a fish tale to me.

After thirty-three summers in Alaska, there are more fish-catching stories than I have words, but here are a couple of my favorite lure fishing tales. Yes, lures—I'll have to tell you about fly fishing on its own, because, make no mistake, they are very different things in Paul's mind and possibly yours, unless you're like me and it is all just fishing.

Wait, wait, wait. I have been corrected in the editing phase. Paul feels like fishing is fishing, that spin fishermen, bait fishermen, fly fishermen, and commercial fisherman should stop fighting, and all cooperate on doing the best for the fish, not their pocketbooks. This is about as political as Paul gets in public. You shouldn't kiss and tell, talk politics or religion, and you shouldn't lift the fish out of the water if you aren't going to eat it, just so you know.

Paul's mom, Doris, was the fishing person in their family and was the one who most often took Paul to the lakes and streams.

One of Doris's favorite stories is from when Paul was about seven. She'd let Paul and a friend go to the lake and after several hours they returned. Paul was, as usual, quiet, but smiling. His friend Jimmy was a different story. He was indignant as he told Doris about the afternoon. It seems Paul caught fish after fish, and he, none. Doris said, "I wonder why he caught so many fish?" Jimmy knew. He said, with pointed criticism, "It's because he sings to the fish."

Paul does not remember singing to the fish, but he does seem to have a fish-finding super-power. The first time we went Alaska king salmon fishing it was to Montana Creek, with a co-worker, Andy, who had lived all his life in Alaska, but never caught a king, though not for lack of trying. We settled in and started to throw lures up the

river, following it along as it bounced along down the stream bed (hopefully past a king's hungry mouth), reeled in, and did it again.

Part of what I didn't expect in Alaska was the combat fishing. The magazines (pre-internet) showed pristine waters, green banks, and lone fisherpersons, smiling into the morning sun. The magazines lied.

Okay, maybe not lied, but they sure didn't take any of those photos on Montana Creek. The truth of the matter was that kids, dogs, coolers, and campfires filled the gravel river banks as people, hundreds of people, stood shoulder to shoulder, hip deep in water, lining both sides of the river, tossing upstream, bait bouncing down, reeling in and casting upstream, again. And again. And again.

In the best situations everyone gets into a rhythm and no one tangles lines.

I spent a lot of time with tangled lines and calling, "FISH ON!"—those magical words that made everyone reel in their lines as my dear husband reeled in, head for the net, and the king was landed.

Seldom did I actually have a fish on; generally I had a tangle with a line from across the river, or in one red-faced incident, a small trout caught by the tail. After that tiny trout was dramatically hauled to shore, not one fisherman who stood near me reeled in when I called "Fish ON!" Not even Paul.

Returning to the Montana River story, we were fishing away with Andy, and Paul caught a king. Then another King. Then another. Andy netted the fish but could not catch one of his own.

For the next trip we went to the Kashwitna for silvers. We snapped a picture of then-two-and-a-half-year-old Liz with her first fish, a Dolly Varden. It filled her tiny hand and we realized it was

1:30 am and it was not dark yet. We went to bed, amazed that life could be like this evening, full of sunshine and happy fish tales.

The next day Andy and Paul fished until Andy could not stand it anymore. Paul had limited out, gave suggestions to Andy, and razzed him just a little.

Two weeks later we were on the Montana again. After several hours of fishing Andy had no fish, and Paul had landed five or so, which would not be a lot if you were fishing for bass but was impressive for salmon. I guess I was impressed, but he'd also fished our two-year-old out of the water as she floated by and I screamed, so I was, shall we say, distracted.

You see, when I realized Liz had gone a bit too deep, lost her footing, and started floating in her cute-as-could-be life vest, I expected Paul to toss his rod and high step to his child, pushing unwary fishermen out of the way as he gallantly saved her and ran to me with her in his loving arms.

Instead, he never took his eyes off his fishing line, bouncing a lure along the bottom, he reached behind him, caught the shoulder of her life vest, and deposited her on the bank as calmly as if she'd been a piece of driftwood. Yeah, *I was distracted*, which is why we went home shortly after this, with several fish, a wet toddler, and Andy still had no king.

The very next excursion was to Hope, Alaska, famous for its biannual run of pink salmon. When the salmon are "in," the river boils with movement. According to Paul, catching a fish in these circumstances is like fishing in a barrel and so little challenge he only goes to the river with out-of-town guests who are too old to catch a fish like a *real* Alaskan. (I think that means without a barrel.)

That day Paul hauled in one fish, then another, and pretty soon a woman—who looked like she was prepared to settle in for the long haul with a lawn chair, a cooler, and more than one tackle box—stood up and screamed, “Goddamn it! He’s got another one! I am going home.” She proceeded to toss her lawn chair aside and walked towards the parking lot. While I completely understand her frustration, Paul still cannot fathom how anyone could be on that river and not catch a fish or how they could just walk away from their gear, mad or not. I probably would have tossed it in the river myself.

That was when I realized that I was married to a fishing legend.

I also realized that I was going to have to fish or cut bait.

Sure, I fished, but not at all well. I have a tendency to catch trout when we are salmon fishing and to get distracted by a book when we are in float tubes. I love to halibut fish, but really, only when I am reeling them in, silvers on the ocean—that fishing I could do all day, as long as they are biting and dancing in their tales.

Paul, well, this man can fish in a bathtub, throw a line in a parking lot, and is not the least bit concerned when a bear shows up beside him in the stream. He also does not care to fish a spot for long if the fish aren’t biting. Now, it takes me all day to determine it is them, not me, but it takes Paul about three casts to say, “They’re not biting.”

To say he is fish spoiled is to understate the obvious.

A few years later, fishing for rainbows on Lake Creek, Paul explained to a client, John, how to concentrate on the bounce of the lure. Quietly he explained to John to feel the bottom of the river, that the bounce becomes a rhythm as it sways over the rocks, that all

rocks are about the same size and feel, just breathe and feel. It is when it is *different*, when the bounce has a slight murmur, that the hook is ready to be set.

John swore he could not feel the bounce, Paul, who is not so much a teacher as a demonstrator, grasped John's hand to *demonstrate* the feel. Paul no more than took his hand when he yelled, "Set the hook! You've got a fish!" John set the hook and reeled in the prize, and he still tells stories of how a man I now call Seasoned is such a fisherman he could feel the fish right through his hand.

Paul says it is not all that hard; you just have to pay attention. I say that is a fish tale.

So does Andy, who moved to Nebraska.

WHO'S GUIDING WHO?

Where would you fish?

A small boat raced up the river, slowed so the wake didn't knock us over, and a guide jumped out and handed us a hot breakfast burrito. I decided, at that very moment, that if you have to fish, this is the way to do it. We were at Lake Creek Lodge, and besides the delicious burrito, the handsome guide brought fresh cookies for a mid-morning snack and I already had two salmon on the shore. Life was good as the sun shone down and Paul cracked jokes.

A few years later, when Paul said he would like to be a guide for a few summers, I enthusiastically said, "Yes!" He would be living a dream, filled with hot burritos and amazing cookies.

Sometimes, as they say, the dream and the reality are two different things. While Paul loved working at lodges, building cabins, running boats, and tossing a line, it turns out most of the work of a guide was drudgery, and the clients were often boorish.

Clint was a great example of that. He was condescending, short tempered, and demanded to have things his way, even if his way resulted in no fish. After two days of dealing with Clint's ill temper,

Paul, who is famous for telling it like it is no matter who is in the room, looked at him and said, "You are one big asshole," knowing he'd be sent home in three to five minutes.

Clint was silent for a minute. Then he looked at Paul and said, "We are going to get along just fine."

Now, I am a romantic. As Paul told me the story, I wanted these two to become best friends, so I asked if the rest of the trip was a dream and Paul said, "Hell no, he was an ass the whole trip, but I said what I wanted from then on." He continued, "The next year, when Clint arrived at camp he said, I want the same damn guide as last year, then pointed to Bill, not me."

"Did you speak up?"

"Hell no. I didn't want to have to deal with him again!"

Another client, with almost the same temperament, glanced at the river and told Paul where they would fish. Paul said, "There aren't fish there."

Sternly he replied, "I said, I want to fish there."

So, they fished there.

Two days in a row.

Two days with not one fish.

On the third morning, before breakfast, the client came to Paul, coffee in hand, and asked, "Where would you fish?" Paul told him, and the client limited out in a matter of casts. The next day they returned to the same hole and again limited out. The client thanked Paul by leaving him his high-dollar gear as a tip when he went home.

The joy of most things is that for every negative there is a positive. A fox that became a pet, the opportunity to be close enough

to walrus to know they stink to high heaven, and clients who became good friends.

A guide's job is to know the river, to keep people safe, and to clean the fish and equipment. It is not to catch the fish. One set of clients, the Pierces, felt that was a pointless rule and asked Paul to fish with them for steelhead. He refused several times, but eventually the client put a rod in his hand. Paul said, "I'll only follow you through the hole." He watched as both clients cast and drifted several times and came up empty. When they were done with the hole Paul cast twice. "Boom! Fish," he tells me now. Paul released it, cast twice. "Boom! Fish." The clients were happy watching Paul bring in the fish but when the same thing happened in the second hole, Paul handed the rod back to the client and said, "I can't do this to you."

I appreciate that Paul likes to be the nice guy, wouldn't out-fish even the most jovial client, and I laugh when he sounds like a nice guy but really is kind of an ass, which is what happened to Randy, a fellow guide.

Paul said, "Randy could not fillet fish for anything. They ended up with skin in the wrong places, bones where they shouldn't be, and a fish that looked more can-ready than platter-ready." That's always Paul's goal, the handsome presentation of a fine fish, for dinner.

Paul told Randy, "If you clean my boat, I'll fillet your fish." The deal stuck, and Paul laughs that it took him 10 minutes to fillet the fish while Randy spent at least an hour cleaning his boat each night.

Nice guys don't always finish last.



After we moved to Montana Paul continued to work in Alaska quite often and guided for four summers. At one point he worked in a lodge so remote that we didn't have any communication for five weeks. When people ask about how we do it, how our marriage can have long periods of separation, I like to think it goes back to obey. I don't obey him; we are true equals. He chose our current house, I buy my own vehicles and travel without him. We both make decisions for the marriage and we never have conversations or behave in a way we wouldn't want the other to know about. It also gives us things to talk about—seasoning, as it were.

A HUNTING WE WILL GO

When should I worry?

Here is what I have decided, after many years of watching Paul leave for and return from hunting trips. It is not about the kill.

It is not about the thrill of the hunt, the meat on the table, or man's dominion over beast.

It's about the people.

Hunting is about laughter, coffee in the morning and Jack in the evening. It is about testing your skills against a myriad of circumstances, and finding ways to make do, to improve or survive the situation.

For the spouses who stay home, and other non-hunters who read this book, I don't think we are supposed to know any of that. We are supposed to think our hunters are spending hours trailing game, taking careful aim, and then preparing the meat for consumption. We are supposed to think it is man against the elements, hours of quiet stalking, and one hardship after another. I think we are supposed to stand in awe when they pull in the drive, after hard hours on the road, and be humbled by their success.

Which I am.

I also am not.

Back when I was young and cute, I went on a few hunts. I don't *get* to go anymore because I read when I should be staring at a field of nothing, hoping for moose, and I sit toasty in the truck, watching herds of deer jump the fence to my left, while my hunter slogs, unheralded, through the fog and mist-filled morning, eventually dragging a four-point muley, for at least a mile, through thick sagebrush.

I didn't know the rules, or I would have played along.

From what I have gathered, the rules of hunting are simple. Hunt with good people, the kind who can either tell a story well and or sit quietly, sans book, for hours, when the time is right. Good people treat the game with respect, kill it with one shot, use every part, clean up the mess, and thank the landowner who fed the deer with his crops, and buy a tank of gas for the driver.

There are other, unspoken rules, like always come home with a story. That is the part I relish.

While hunting Dall sheep in the rugged Brooks Range of northern Alaska, with a man named Junior, they hiked 25 miles in one long day. It was cold, wet, and they were up/down/rock-scrambling miles. About 9 pm, Junior decided camp was too far away and hunkered down behind a rock for the night. Paul, nearing exhaustion but with steely determination, decided he wanted to sleep in a bag on the rocks, not behind a rock. As he neared camp the exhaustion was so deep, he had to use his hands to pick up his legs and move them forward.

During this arctic adventure, they found a stream, trickling out of the permafrost, that was 34 degrees. They soaked their aching feet

Commented [AH6]: What does this mean?

Commented [kg7R6]: Degrees

Commented [kg8R6]:

in it for minutes that seemed like hours. Paul came home from that trip 20 pounds lighter, without a sheep, with deep respect for Junior and a desire to do it all again.

Since one mountain trip should be followed by another, he and Bill went to Kodiak to fly in for mountain goats. Being a gentleman, Paul suggested Bill take the first flight out. As the pilot came back, the weather moved in, and “stayed as long as it damn well pleased,” says Paul, now. Bill sat, alone, watching the rain from the side of a mountain for six days, when the pilot finally said, “We’ve got to get him before this turns to snow.” For his hunt, before catching a flight home, Paul sat at the local diner for four days, drinking coffee and learned how to cook hash browns.

He came home from that trip six pounds heavier. When Bill got home, he was none the worse for wear, had a story to tell, and Paul had a desire to do the whole thing again, sans the diner.

The trip I hear about most often is hunting with his cousins when he was eighteen, or as they say, young and dumb. Paul’s cousins are a lively bunch of fun-loving people who play hard and laugh well. With this group anything could happen, and everything should be tried.

Walking across the South Dakota prairie, Paul spied a young antelope and took aim.

Full of vigor, Paul decided it would be more entertaining to run down his prey. If you have lived in the area that inspired the song “Home on the Range” (“where the deer and the antelope play”), you know that this is, perhaps, a lame-brained idea, but to an eighteen-year-old in high spirits, living where the West was still pretty darn wild, well . . .

He launched to tackle the antelope, missed, and instead landed in a prickly pear cactus. Undaunted, he tried it again. Handful of hair. More cactus. Undaunted, Paul proceeded to chase down, and on the third try, tackle, and sit on the back of the antelope, a feat that impresses anyone who has watched them bob and weave. (“Them” could be either Paul or the antelope, but here it references the latter.)

With antelope dispatched, and despite—or perhaps because of—the roaring laughter, Paul jumped up, dropped his drawers, and started pulling cactus thorns from his legs, elbows, and points unknown. He would do this in class for months (without the dropping-his-drawers part, that is).

Mother Nature has a way of keeping the score tidy when you play with her animals.

Lest you think these hunts have left our freezer bare, I should tell you they have not. It’s just that the hunts without the meat seem to have the best stories. Except for one bear hunt.

On this hunt he took Liz, who was sixteen and an impressive shot (although she had never shot an animal), out to a favorite lodge, a place that asked hunters to take out only bears that were becoming a problem. At the appointed time, Paul and his friend Brant boated Liz upriver about fifteen minutes. They walked about half a mile upstream, and set down their thermoses of coffee, seat pads, snacks, and most importantly, guns, which they put on a log.

They walked halfway into the shallow stream, looking around and discussing who would go where. Liz looked across the small stream, and said, “Dad, there is a bear. What should I do?” Paul

looked at the standing bear, on the far bank, and by far he means 10–15 yards, which does not seem far to my mom heart.

The bear was about 8 feet tall, and Paul said, “Shoot it!” She did, one shot, center chest.

The bear turned, in hopes of making way, I suppose, and loped off. Paul chased it while Brant yelled, “Don’t do that!” Apparently, Brant does not know the bear swatting stories, and he also missed the famous “enormous balls” bear chase. Much to everyone’s relief, 100 yards in the bear was down and done. Liz had accomplished what the best hunters do—one shot—and had a story to tell.

I won’t put Paul through another razzing about the fact that if you want a job done right, you should send a woman to do it, but I will tell you that when he left for a ten-day bear hunt the next year I asked if he’d like Liz to go along so they could be done in twenty minutes. He did not.

There are more stories every year. Friendships made over the campfire, animals shot and animals spared.

The meals Paul cooks, with the animals he has chosen for our table, are some of our finest meals. And they should be, as I am certain that the meat costs considerably more than that which comes from the store when you factor in the boat, the truck to pull it, the boots, the coats, the guns, and the snacks. Still, when he says, “A Hunting We Will Go,” I ask, “When should I worry?” and he says, “Never.” Which seems to be true since he always comes home, and it was Jesus who took out all his ribs with one fall.

2847 MILES

\$59 hotel rooms

It is 2847 miles from Billings, Montana, to Anchorage, Alaska.

That is approximately 50 hours of driving and I decided, when

I was a young bride who made the trip in the dead of winter, with old vehicles, a child with a cold, and not enough money, that everyone should make the trip at least once.

On that first trip we left from Rapid City, South Dakota, the day after Liz turned two. We would be tooling along, bored, maybe wondering why the heck (I didn't cuss back then) we were on this trip, and at that moment we would go around a corner, or top a hill, and God's splendor would appear.

Gasp and awe.

Mountains, valleys, wildlife, glaciers, and, about every 300 miles, a gas station.

You have never seen anything more fantastic than a rundown gas station motel café house after several hours of driving in the dark of late November, on snowy roads. It's like heaven would open its

gates. We'd get out and revel in the beauty (or take a bathroom break that didn't involve frozen pee hitting the ground) and know why we were on the trip.

To experience life. To know the Great Land. To embrace opportunity and never look back. To make a buck, truth be told.

As I said, everyone should make this trip once.

Nowadays, it is a breeze, with more services, fewer curves, and still, all the glory that a road through the wilderness can provide. I've made the trip seven times. One of my favorites was with Liz, then six years old, and Paul, in a pickup. The only time I thought Liz talked a lot was during teacher conferences when inevitably her teacher would say, "Liz talks a lot." Well, let me tell you, in between Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, and Fort Nelson, British Columbia, there is no radio, few stops, and fewer sites that engender gasps of awe. This was also in a time before downloading music and our tape selection stopped being interesting three days before.

Liz, indeed, talked a lot. She filled this time and space for us by telling knock-knock jokes, nonstop, for 400 miles.

We laughed until we didn't and then we started laughing again. A child is a precious thing. Our pride, our joy, and sometimes, like mile 280, a torment.

Paul: "Please, for the love of rolling tires, don't tell another knock-knock joke."

Liz: "Knock-knock"

Paul: "I said no more knock-knocks."

Liz: "Okay."

Liz: "Knock-knock."

Paul and Karen: "Hahahahahaha."

I think the best joke was:

“Knock knock.”

“Who’s there?”

“A tree?”

“A tree who?”

“A tree who looks just like me, said the tree.” but I might be wrong because in 400 miles you hear about 1200 jokes, many of them time and again, which, by the way is what some of the miles feel like, like you are reliving the same scenery, seeing the exact same trees, time and again, which inspired that knock-knock joke.

Yet those miles are a song in our hearts.

We have driven this road in brand new pickups, in a Blazer with a cat named Pickles, who proceeded, at mile 125 (which is too far out to turn around) to shed so badly that it appeared to be snowing inside our vehicle as badly as it was outside. (The cat, for the record, did not make the return trip, instead living to the ripe old age of 22, with Paul’s mom.) We have lain on the hood of the pick-up, at 1 am, in the Yukon Territory, at 30 below zero, to watch the Northern Lights, which are absolutely mesmerizing in a situation like that.

Gasps and awe aside, if you decide to make this trip, it should take at least a week to do it. Winter, spring, summer, or fall, there will be mishaps, traffic, wildlife, or a long night at Laird Hot Spring, to absorb time.

However, as is often the case, what I think is not what a man named Seasoned thinks.

His record is 2.5 days of driving. He has driven the road 29 times now, mostly between Billings, our current home, and Anchorage. Seasoned will make trip number 30 in a matter of weeks, to bring

home his pickup that was left there after the fall with Jesus. When he sleeps on those fast trips, it is in the cab of his pickup, or fleabag hotels, and he eats meals of freeze-dried food and coffee cooked by the side of the road, not the finest Poutine Canada can offer.

To say that we like to travel a bit differently is to understate the situation.

I like to stop. He likes to go. I like room service in suites, he likes, well, \$59 rooms.

I like to ask how people ended up living in, and running, a hotel gas station bar café house, and he thinks some things are best left undiscovered. He laughs if we skid on ice, I cringe when the semi-truck tracks straddle the yellow line, because I assume that if professional drivers are that scared of the ditches, I should be too.

He drives to Alaska because it is the home of his soul. Frontier. Wild. Fish, friends, and some of his finest memories. Then he drives to Montana, and I think we have been married long enough that I can say this, because it is the home of his heart. When he is in Alaska, for work or play, we talk many times a day and I hear in his voice the price of the miles between us. When he is home, well, I see the wistful longing for the Great Land, and know in my heart that he will stay with me for as long as he can.

2847 miles. It might seem a long way to go, but it is not, if you are going home.

SEASONING?

*Thank you for being part of the
spice*

As I've been listening to the stories, hearing the names, I've been thinking about all of the bits of life Paul has learned from the men he has worked and played with. Each one of them has been a spice that completes the recipe, a bit of flavor to enhance the dish.

Paul loves to talk about his Grandpa George, the grandpa who took him fishing. He was calm and quiet, full of respect for fish, women, and life. Then there was Grandpa Paul. His cabin in Novak, where he was considered mayor, was a place of freedom and exploration for Paul. It is also where he learned to work by digging a half-acre potato patch, by hand, at nine years old.

His uncle Sam, who owned Designs in Wood, and John, who owns Hagemier Homes, built houses that showcased the best of Paul's work. Curved handrails, enormous built-ins, and oaken libraries, this is where his saw sang.

Dennis, and then Mike, own the fly shop that has the best gear, best stories, and the people who pepper Paul's life with fishing wisdom.

There are Steve and Steve, Ray and Dave, Bill, Paul, Al, and many others who only have to say the word and Seasoned is flying out the door, towards adventure, with them. I liked these men, but I appreciated them even more when they showed up at the hospital and entertained my broken husband.

There are unnamed friends who have annoyed me, who, admittedly, are some of the best people in the world when it comes to having fun.

There are doctors, Shawn and Greg, who challenge Paul with big thoughts and fun projects.

And then there is Rex, who Paul is hanging with today, who is a sage and a fix-it guy, just like Paul. Rex had open heart surgery the day Paul fell, so being able to recuperate together, to outfox their wives and do more work than we think they should, is proving to be the best medicine a man could ask for.

Paul is a self-made man. He figured out how to be a farmer, and then a carpenter. He figured out how to be a successful businessman and he, thank goodness, decided to be a husband and a father who did the job well.

But this self-made man is a mix of every man he has hung with, worked beside, and watched from afar, every story he has heard, and lived, and told.

While Paul is seasoned, I thank these people for being part of the spice, unless they are currently on my shit list, which a few of them are.

GO WITH THE FLOE

*Everyone deserves a nice ride
downstream*

Whenever Paul leaves for an outdoor adventure I worry, just a bit. I ask when he will return, when I should worry, and when to plan the party with the insurance money if he does not come home. He always returns, so don't book your trip for the party, just yet.

Until the fall with Jesus I thought the dumbest—I mean riskiest—thing he had done was on the Kenai river. It was breakup, the fish were hungry, and the banks of the river still had snow on them. Paul and his buddies, who shall go unnamed to protect their spouses' innocence, spent the day fishing but not catching. Their spirits were full of springtime determination when they decided the hole they were working was done and it was time to find their way back downstream to their truck.

Paul, always efficient, and you know, able to bob and weave with the antelope, decided that slogging down the bank was not for him. Instead—and this is why I worry about his reasoning skills—he

looked at the shelf ice attached to the bank and decided it was time it headed, as luck would have it, downstream. Without needing to discuss the idea, the three of them used logs and pried chunks of ice off the bank. Paul's chunk of ice was about 20 feet long. He tells me that when he saw that particular piece of ice break off the bank and become a floe, he knew it was too big to flip from his weight and it would be like boarding a cruise liner.

"Smooth sailing."

I think (and again, I don't know for sure, but I am pretty certain) it was simply easier to ride that chunk of ice than walk, and size be damned, he wouldn't let reason stand in the way of opportunity.

Our son-in-law, Nick, has a saying that fits this story a bit too well: "One boy has one brain, two boys have half a brain, three boys equals no brain." Rick and Mark (oops) stepped onto a floe together and proceeded to ride their dinghy to the promised land of a warm truck.

If you are going with the floe, you might as well enjoy the ride, and that is what Paul did. He says it was one of the calmest experiences of his life as he figured out how to maneuver the floe to the left, right, slow down or speed up by stepping from side to side. When his truck was in sight, he stepped off his makeshift barge, into the shallow river, with never a worry.

Paul is certain he coined the phrase "It is what it is."

He said it long before it was a tag line, because that is how he lives.

It is what it is.

Stuck on a corner with a trailer house? (Which is where we met) "It is what it is," figure out how to go with the flow and fix it. Burnt

dinner? It is what it is, add ketchup, say, "It'll make a turd," get kicked by the cook, and ingest a bit of charcoal.

Are you almost 60 with ribs that flailed, unable to lay in one position for more than seven minutes, unable to lift like you used to, or walk like you could a few months ago? "It is what it is," says Paul, "I'm fine." Even when tears fill my eyes, because I miss my preinjury husband, he is strong and willing. Good Lord, I admire that attitude.

I have not wanted to make this book about "lessons" or "parables" but if I were going to this would be a big one.

It is what it is.

This saying has served us well in life. From highs to lows and back again, life has a way of flowing along and getting too caught up in reason, too fixated on perfection, causing more trouble than it cures.

I hope, for your spouse, that going with the flow is the riskiest thing you do, and that, if the opportunity presents itself, and the river is shallow, the insurance paid up, and spring is in your lungs, you do like Paul, and jump off the bank and onto the next floe.

Everyone deserves a nice ride downstream.

FAMILY MAN

It's a dad's job

I think it is time for you to know this, that Paul was born on Christmas day, adopted by a family of Germans, and recently discovered that he has a sizeable amount of Jewish lineage. I think that is kind of a remarkable heritage and is probably what makes him so accepting of everyone. He practices live and let live, and even though he says he is not, he is quite a people person. He also has a faith that gives him calm strength.

I also know it makes him a man who does not simply say that family is all that matters—he practices it daily.

When I met Paul, it was a cold October night. We were also on a street corner, which sounds a bit shady, but isn't. You see, Paul's dad left the insurance business because he was away from home for too many days, was missing the best of life. When Paul was a little boy he would sit at the desk, beside his dad, on Sundays while he did his reports, just to be with his dad. No dad wants that, so Don purchased a mobile home business.

Now, mobile homes in South Dakota are pretty fine living. They are often parked by beautiful streams, with mountain views, and

come fully furnished. When Paul and I are hauling beds to people with foster children, people who have never had a bed of their own, I think mobile homes sound like a pretty good choice; you might not have a basement, but you have a couch and a dresser. It turned out that buying a mobile home business was not economically wise, in the late '70s and those are lessons I wish his dad had never learned.

This is how this is all going to tie together, if you are starting to wonder. My parents bought a mobile home from Paul's dad and parked it by a beautiful stream in a quiet valley. This is where Paul comes in, a college boy from "the big city" who was driving the toter. To get the trailer into that valley he had to maneuver around a sharp corner, one the salesman said would be no problem at all.

Turns out it was a bit of a problem.

For eight hours Paul and his friend Steve jacked up the back of house, pushed it one inch to the side, jacked it up, pushed it again, because it was between a rock wall and a pump house. *Yep, no problem at all*, just a proverbial rock and a hard place.

Snow was falling when I arrived on the scene and Paul was laughing, telling jokes, flirting with my mom's friend Marsha, and was just about the greatest thing I'd ever laid eyes on.

So I flirted with Steve.

That must have worked, because we received great warranty service and before long I was dashing down the road with Paul and our life had begun. I knew, on that October night, that Paul had the kind of attitude a girl could make a life out of, that he was laughing when my dad would have been throwing things, that he was making work fun. I knew that he would not quit until the job was done, and

that the job would always be done. It wasn't love at first sight, but it was something like it, something bigger.

It was like I had found my home.

And I was right. He has never let me down, he has always finished the job, and he has never once yelled when a laugh would do the trick. He says now, "That corner didn't faze me. Like most things, I just looked at it, and figured it out." He continues that he assumes this is why he doesn't like ineptitude, "There is always a right way to do things. It is your job to figure it out."

My Paul.

Since the day our daughter was born, he has not slept through the night. He did the 2 am feedings and I am convinced he still hears her roll over way across town. I judged the value of the toys I bought our daughter by the amount of time he would play with them. When she was a teen, and clothes shopping was our thing, he would say, "A girl has to have clothes" when I blew the budget. When she moved in with her boyfriend I was in Montana, starting our life there. Liz called, crying, "Mom, dad just asked which bedroom is Nick's. Will you talk to him?" I called him, said, "Paul, Liz and Nick [who were engaged] will be sharing a room." He said, "I know, I just had to give her shit. It's a dad's job."

It was also a dad's job to scare off the wrong boys, to work the hours that bought the house and the food and made it possible for me to, more than not, be a stay-at-home mom. "Kids need their parents," Paul says.

It is not always easy to be a kid, and sometimes we make our best decisions because of those moments. When Liz was born Paul cried. When we debated her name, he held her, looked into her eyes and

said, “She looks like an Elizabeth Ann,” and so she was, and so she is, in every strong and regal sense of the word. After naming her, he carried her from room to room, showing off his pride and joy, until the nurses said he had to stop, that there were germs she didn’t need to have.

He has never stopped being proud of her.

And then he became a grandfather. When he first saw that precious boy, he put his finger by his foot, to measure this perfect child. Liz said, “We want you to meet Ezra Linden Enslow.” The middle name was a surprise, a nod towards tradition by using Paul’s middle name. We broke into tears. The first name—well, Ezra is much better than Fast, which is what Paul wanted, because then he would be—say it with me—Fast En Slow. I know.

When the moments are quiet, we often talk about family. The sisters he adores. The parents he honors. The cousins he misses. We made the choice to live in Alaska, which for us was the best choice, but it came at a cost, one we understand now, time that wasn’t spent with the people he loves most. But the time that was spent together is the time that made this man one of the finest.

There are moments in every marriage where it would be easier to say goodbye than to stick it out.

There are moments when people wonder who they could be alone, or what they have done by saying I do. I have never really worried about that. We are married. We are Paul and Karen, whether we are in the same room, the same state, happy or mad. Paul and Karen. I may be discovering a million things I did not know about this husband, but there are a million more that I do know, and the first is this:

When you choose a spouse you choose their family, too. You choose who you will be when you are between a rock and hard place and you choose who you will sit on a cabin porch with as you heal your broken ribs.

I am glad he chose me, glad I chose him, and today, like every day, I am excited to see what we will experience together.

Paul asked me to write this book while he was in the hospital, under the influence of powerful drugs. I jumped at the opportunity to put words to paper, to honor the man who has been nothing but good to me. I asked him last night why he wanted me to tell his story, and he said, "So they will know how important they are to me. So they will know I am just a simple man, but one who is proud of them. I am not a man to toot my own horn, but I have done everything I've done on my own, and for them."

I don't know about you, but that made me cry.

Don't we all want that from those we love? To know that they worked the hours they worked, made the decisions they made, to support us? It is an honor to tell his story, and a gift to know that his words will be in a place they can read them, whenever they need. This carpenter has been a gift from God, to us.

PAPA PAUL SAYS

*Wisdom for the apple of his eye,
Ezra, and the campers and Porch
People of RYLA*

Several years ago, a man hit his knee. If you think I am going to tell you how Paul proposed, you are sadly mistaken. He hasn't done that yet; he says you should never ask a question you don't know the answer to. The man who hit his knee was Carl, a respected Rotarian, and he was asking me to help them with a Rotary project, RYLA, which stands for Rotary Youth Leadership Award.

I said yes.

I always say yes, Paul should know that by now, and maybe hit his knee. Anyway, I agreed to work with them on a new agenda, to offer team building, and if they would have us, and it turns out they would, Paul and I would help with camp for a week that summer.

And I fell in love.

The space, Luccock Park, is the home of my soul. The campers and Rotarians, people who believe as I do, in Service Above Self and

the Rotarian Four-Way Test, are my people. They also believe there is a reason for introducing, but not pushing, God and patriotism in every young life.

I thought, while we were at camp, that Paul would relax, that he would fish, and read, and maybe start the fires. Instead he has become the camp patriarch. That first year he spent the entire week refinishing the flag pole. In years since he has done hundreds of hours of work on the camp and spent just as many hours talking to the people who make it to our cabin porch.

I, the team builder, never expected this. I never knew Paul would be some sort of font of wisdom and that he would have more followers than I, shed more tears at their weddings and have more things to say that really meant something in their lives.

If you are one of his people, these are things this man, who is called Pampa by Ezra and Papa Paul at RYLA, thinks you should know. He also, I should be clear, told me that what he tells the young men who sit on the porch at RYLA, is between him and them.



- Measure twice, cut once and don't waste materials.
- It is what it is.
- Be true to yourself.
- Never, ever, ever, hit a woman; instead hold the door, get their coat, and treat them with the respect they deserve. If

you do ever hit a woman, I will find you, and I will make it hurt.

- Let the gentleman get the door, or hold the door for him, just be nice; equality was not meant to demean kindness.
- Never buy more house than you can pay for with one salary. Living below your means will give you freedom.
- You can make it on your own, but you don't have to refuse help.
- Catch and release your fish, and don't, for the love of God, take them out of the water for longer than 30 seconds.
- Dogs are pets, not people.
- Always pay your debts.
- Chevy is the best truck, until you buy a Dodge; Ford is fine too. Buy the truck you like.
- Every game is worth winning, but no game is worth fighting over.
- Vote for the best person.
- You can always make another fortune, but you can't uncross the line.

OTTOMAN

10 to 2

It's funny the things you learn when you are helping your husband heal. Often, lying in bed at night, I will feel him reach for me, or hear him sigh in his slumber when I lay my hand on his shoulder. It's not the kind of thing we did when we were honeymooners, or even comfortable married folk. It's somehow deeper, this gentle touch. We aren't looking for comfort, or companionship, but instead, we seem to be connecting with the unspoken reason for love. To know, support, and need the other person on a soul level.

It's often during these times, when sleep is near but unreachable, that the stories flow, the memories get fondled, picked apart and put back together with his version and my (correct) version coming together to be one solid memory.

I am happy to admit that I am not always paying attention. I can be told something and swear I wasn't. I can respond to a story, ask a question, interject a thought, and not recall the conversation at all.

I am pretty sure it is the fact that wisdom like mine means things come and go based on need. I need to know hotel room numbers only while staying at the hotel, and there are maps to get me from here to there, even if I have gone from here to there a dozen times. Paul is wise enough not to suggest a reason I don't recall the story as he does, but rather is happy to tell me the story again.

That is what happened last week. Someone, who shall remain nameless, had all the covers, someone needed to roll over, just a bit, to release the stiffness in their back, and the moment became a conversation about fishing. I would swear that Paul was taught to fly fish by a loving grandparent. I recall stories of a curly haired boy standing beside an old man who whispered the secrets men need to know about fly fishing.

"Cast into the shadow, right below the rock." "Keep your wrist strong and your elbow controlled as you move from 10 to 2." "Not so fast, like a slow song that makes you bob your head, 10 to 2, do it again, 10 to 2 do it again, and this time let the fly land ever so lightly on the water, the way you would touch a woman's cheek." If that was the story I heard, it was not Paul's story.

Paul's story is this.

"I decided to become a fly fisherman because I decided to become a fly fisherman, plain and simple. My friend Steve was working at JCPenney, and could get me a *great* deal on a fly rod, so money exchanged hands, in the shoe department, and I went on to learn to cast. No YouTube videos, no Brad Pitt tempting death for a fish in A

River Runs Through It, just a teenager on a creek casting until I figured out what worked and what didn't work. 10 to 2. Hold your wrist just so. Present the fly to the fish as if it were a gift. Let the fish see the fly, take the fly, and fight the fish."

And that is what I like about this man. That he decides to learn and then he figures it out. That he *can* figure it out. When I wanted to learn to knit, I was trying so hard that I wore bandages on my pain-filled fingertips. Paul picked up the instructions, gave them a once through, and said, "It goes like this" and knitted three perfect rows. I've never seen him knit again, but that impressed me enough that he doesn't need to reprove his talent.

What I didn't realize, before I stopped to listen, is that for Paul fly fishing is not about fishing. It is about listening. It is about being one with the river, one with the fish, and knowing, at the end of the day, the stories that are important are not the fish that got away, but the fish that honored you by taking your fly, one you tied yourself if you are doing it right, and fish that swam away to eat bugs, lay eggs, and whatever fishy things they content themselves with doing on a daily basis.

Holding his hand, which is unusually callus free, I asked about his second fly rod, but not how many he has, because there are some things we don't need to count, like my shoes, or his rods. He won his second at a meeting of the Alaska Fly Fishers, the first meeting he attended, before he'd even fly fished in Alaska. I kind of remember how excited he was when he came home that night, but I also kind of remember he didn't take the garbage out before he left, so why rehash that evening?

That rod begets another, one trip led to another and soon he was regularly fishing with friends, out catching them, or so he says, but never in a boastful way. Canoe trips down a secret stream. Float tubes, trips to lodges, another rod or ten, and all of a sudden, this boy, who taught himself to fish, was the kind of fisherman others looked up to. He had stories to tell, respected the streams, the fish, and other fishermen, and eventually had a nickname, coined by his friend Vance, Ottman.

Ottman was bestowed because once you have caught a fish on a nine-weight you might as well catch one on a zero-weight too, or so he tells me. To catch a seven-pound fish on a zero weight, well, that is nickname worthy (or so I have been told.)

The reason I am telling you this story is because it is the fly-fishing friends who tell me the best stories. They are the ones who call during recovery, and visit, just because they can.

Paul's first expedition into normal life, after the accident, was to visit his friends at Mossy's fly Shop. This group of men gather almost daily, in what I thought must be an annoying conclave for the shop owner but turns out to be a community full of respect, wisdom, and the coffee Mossy's supplies. I am not sure how you become part of the club, but Paul seems to be on the board.

When Paul walked in that first day, they hushed just a bit, only long enough to think of the words.

"Did you bring his sippy cup?" one man asked me.

"We'll need extra Depends for nap time." said another.

As the razzing continued, Paul clutched his ribs in laughter. That laughter expanded his breathing chambers and put a light on his face I hadn't seen in a while.

They talked about fish, about rods, and flies, and nothing at all, but that nothing at all seemed to sum up all that is right in the world.

I wonder now if part of the plan, if there is a grand plan for our lives—and I believe there is—was for that first rod, from JCPenney (a place that would never get so much as a nod when it's time for a new rod now, or new shoes for that matter), to help this man who has become Seasoned standing in a river, to laugh, and to heal.

I suppose we will never know, but fly fishing is what he craves right now. Standing in the river and letting the water tell him what is right with the world. Helping him to decide why he is still here and honoring him with a fish that got away and a fish that stayed to fight.

I won't tell him this, but from today until the real end, he can fish whenever he wants because he was the one who decided to stay and fight, and that is what gets me through the night.

IDKY

It was the thing then

When I met Paul, his Chevy pick-up was already what Paul is today—Seasoned. It was orange, or bronze, I suppose, and had strange rust pock marks on the side panels, a bit of fading, plenty of miles, and a driver who could see no blemishes in it. That truck took us to Alaska, back to the lower 48 and housed stories you don't want to know, and some that you do.

To say we fell in love in that truck is to give away part of the story, to tell you that, to this day, whenever Paul says, "Taco Johns," I get a bit of a chill, is more of the story. You see, it was our norm when dating that Paul would drive his spotty orange steed to Custer, pick me up for dinner and a movie, and more dinner, in Rapid City.

Dinner was at his mom's house, and I should tell you that woman could cook!

She always laid out a spread of salads, soups, side dishes, and various breads as she never knew exactly how many were coming to dinner. It was that kind of house, a gathering place. I finally figured out that she had cooked one big meal, back when she and Don were newlyweds, and had just been adding to it, reheating, and

repurposing foods from one meal to the next. Her meals were a conversation-filled wonder.

We would stop at her house for dinner, then go to a movie, then, always, stop at Taco Johns. Paul would leave me in the truck while he went in and ordered. Their taco salad (old recipe, not current) is the only fast food I ever considered being addicted to. After we'd been married for several years, and he was driving a new truck, we stopped again. Dawn still worked there. Who is Dawn? Well, it turns out that Dawn was a fling, a girl he flirted with, wished he was old enough to date, and talked to . . . while I waited in the truck.

I also realized, on that quick stop, that the idea of Taco Johns gave me a chill because we dated in the winter and he always took the keys with him when he went inside to order. He says he didn't do that, but I am sure he was afraid I would steal that damn truck.

Three trucks later Liz and I went to Seward, Alaska, camping with one of her friends over the Fourth of July holiday.

Seward on the Fourth is a madhouse of people who will be running the Mount Marathon race, an endurance spectacle that involves topping out to an incredible view and an often-uncontrolled tumble back to the bottom. It also involved people drinking. Lots of drinking. The sun did not set until 1 am, and the Alaska summer was in full tilt, and did I mention, there was drinking?

We chose a camping spot right beside the ocean. The girls went for a bike ride, only to return minutes later because Liz required stitches in her chin. Jumping a curb took its toll.

Returning from the emergency room, we discovered we had neighbors. Lots of them, three of whom had pitched tents right next

to the pick-up. I was a bit unnerved, as we seemed to be the only ones without beer at two in the afternoon.

It started to rain.

We huddled in the camper.

Bang. Bang. Bang. Someone pounded on the window.

He demanded, "Who are you and what are you doing with Paul's truck?"

This was in the early days of cellphones, and before he would leave us to our huddle, he called Paul to confirm that I actually was his wife and not a middle-aged female car thief, escaping with the help of teenage accomplices.

Satisfied, he watched over us all weekend, because if we had Paul's truck we deserved to be protected.

I tell you these stories because as we near the end of healing, (which will never really be over it sounds like; pain will be part of Paul's story, forever) we also near the deadline for this book. When I ask if there are other stories, there sometimes are, but usually there is just a laugh and "I don't know yet."

Yesterday, when we were taking the cover portrait Paul said, "I haven't even mentioned the streaking or the skinny dipping."

Uh.

"The streaking?"

"It was the thing then." End of story, I could get no more.

So, have I told the right stories, told them in the right way, done justice to this man who has bravely said, "I am fine," as he clutches his ribs?

I don't know yet.

And that is the story of another truck. A green 1996 Dodge. For those of you who don't know these things, that was the year of the radical body change. From a box to a show piece. Paul saw it as he drove by the lot, fell in love with the color, the fenders, and decided it was his before he pulled onto the lot. He went inside and purchased it. As he reminds me of this story, Paul's face fills with a smile as he talks about his dad telling that story to his breakfast friends. "He just pulled into the lot and bought the truck, right then and there."

To see your parent be proud of you never gets old.

Driving that Dodge back to Alaska was an example of his pragmatism. Windshield dings and road scratches were not a big deal. "It's just a work truck" he would say.

But it was not just a work truck. For some reason, 22 years later, this was and is his truck.

Two years ago, when he went to the store for milk, he called me from the Ford dealer, saying, "I found my new truck." A few days later he handed Liz the keys to the '96, and they both cried. She drives it every day; she loves it as much as he does.

And every few days Paul stops by and pets the damn thing.

He says to Liz, "Did you change the oil?" and "How are the tires?" Which is really, as all women know, dad speak for "I love you" and "I want to make sure you are safe."

This truck, which turned heads for several years, needed special plates, back when vanity plates were new and cool.

When I was a child, my grandparents would say, "I remember when we got electricity," or indoor plumbing, or a car with a heater. What would they think of our heated steering wheels? Our

memories will be cell phones and vanity plates, I guess. Anyway, I stood at the top of the stairs, in the first real house we ever owned, and said, "What will your plates say?"

As Paul turned the door handle, he said, "I don't know yet." And we both stopped. That was it.

IDKY.

Until we moved to Montana, and got a fish on a generic plate, people would see that plate and say, "What's your plate mean?"

"I don't know yet."

Inevitably they would say, "What do you mean you don't know yet?"

Paul would repeat the answer, and they would look blankly. Then he would say it slowly.

"I. Don't. Know. Yet."

Laughter.

Eventually he tired of the game and would pretend to be deaf, which is also what he does when I ask him about the honey-do list.

And that is what I am thinking about today. Is this every story I should tell? How many more will he tell me next week?

Do we need to tell Kerry, Barbie, and Mary Kay how very much they mean to Paul? Do you want to know that when we were dating Paul would play Billy goat with my sisters, wrestle with my dad and brothers, and more than once threw my dad over his shoulder and dumped him in a snow bank? What about supporting my family through tragic death?

Do I need to put in more drama, take out things a younger generation might not understand or approve of?

I don't know yet.

What I do know is that we are six months into a healing process we prayed would take 12 weeks. We are stressed like never before, and we are blessed in ways we never imagined. This morning, Paul took my hand, across the breakfast table, and said, "This has been the easiest healing I have ever done."

I asked how that could be, and he said, "Because you have been by my side, every moment. Because I know I am here for a reason."

This man bought me a house I didn't want but have grown to love. He lives in Montana, so I don't have to live under gray skies. Tomorrow, he will take an underprivileged child shopping, so they have new Christmas clothes and a little gift. He would do anything, ANYTHING for his family, and probably worse for his friends.

Is he handsome? I don't know yet.

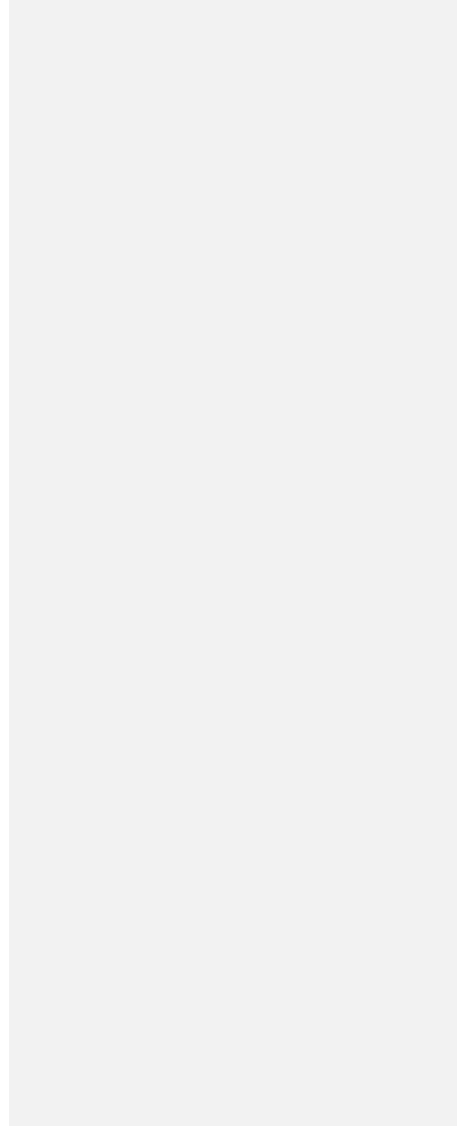
Is he going to die by bear, crucifix, or old age? I don't know yet.

Is this enough stories?

I. Don't. Know. Yet.

What I do know is that I went to breakfast in a nice Ford truck, and the man dubbed Seasoned is hanging Christmas lights, playing Christmas music, and still, 38 years later, holds my heart in his calloused hands.

I still wish he'd trim those damn eyebrows.



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This book is a work of love. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's husband or pretty darn close with a splash of drama, just for fun. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is not intended to get a spouse in trouble.

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