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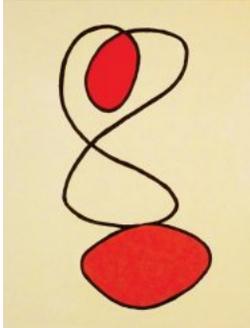
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A Broken Arm, a Mended Heart

by [Gina DeMillo Wagner](#)



From the get-go I thought, "this guy is dangerous." By day, Kris was the web geek at the first magazine I worked for. But in his free time, he was an adrenaline junkie. He climbed 14,000-foot-tall mountains, skateboarded in empty swimming pools and, on a fat-tired bicycle, careened down steep, rocky hillsides. Each Monday, he arrived at work with a new bruise or glistening red wound from the weekend's folly.

One winter, he took a six-week sabbatical from work so that he could bike across Siberia's Lake Baikal, the oldest, deepest lake in the world. Of course, in winter, it's not really a lake at all, but a 400-mile-long swath of ice sandwiched between jagged rocks. On his list of gear to pack were studded bicycle tires, a sleeping bag rated to -40F, and a screwdriver in case the ice broke and he fell into the churning, subfreezing water (he'd use the screwdriver to claw his way out). Another time, he nearly plunged 1,500 vertical feet off the face of Oregon's Mount Hood. By luck -- or divine intervention -- the tip of his mountaineer's axe caught in a fissure of ice and stopped him mid-slide. He went on to summit the mountain, triumphant.

Two Red Eggs

Kris was also dangerous in the sense that he was fiercely attractive. At the office, he fastened his long, wild, curly hair into a ponytail. He wore short-sleeved button-down shirts that complemented his broad shoulders and climber's biceps. Behind his glasses shone ocean blue eyes that could slice through your soul.

Adventure was his lifeblood. He had grown up a free-range kid on 300 acres in central Wisconsin, where he'd learned to hunt, climb and ice fish. He loved the cold, and insisted he'd teach me -- a timid girl from Atlanta -- how to snowboard. One January night, after he hosted a happy hour for several coworkers, I lingered. He set me up with boots that were two sizes too big, strapped me to the waxed fiberglass board, gave me a few pointers, and nudged me down the hill behind his apartment building. I thought snowboarding was easy and fun...until we got to the *real* slope in Vermont a few days later. During my inaugural run on the bunny hill, I tumbled and broke my arm.

That was our first date.

I could have cut my losses and walked away right then. Bones heal, after all. I wasn't so sure about my heart.

Avoiding pain had been my personal mission since I was five. My childhood home was dominated by brokenness and heartache, beginning in the early 1970s with my older brother, who was born severely developmentally disabled. He had seizures and threw violent fits and had to be monitored around the clock. My brother couldn't help who he was, but that didn't stop my parents from grieving. Back then, having a disabled child was a disease, and my parents didn't have a cure. They had me, and later, a "normal" son. But we weren't enough. Dashed hopes had already metastasized into resentment, lies and fury.

Dad eventually moved out.

After that, my mother was on a quest to fill the emptiness in her heart and beat back the depression that was engulfing her (and us). The men she pursued -- some married, others womanizers -- had no interest in the mother-of-three package deal, especially when it included a special needs kid. Even so young, I knew there was no way for these relationships to end well. My role was to keep the peace, to buffer her pain by shouldering some of the parenting load while she disappeared into the night. When she collapsed on the bathroom floor sobbing after yet another breakup, I was also her therapist. I told her what she wanted to hear, that everything would be all right, that her Prince Charming was still out there, somewhere. Meanwhile, I vowed never to follow in her footsteps. I resolved not to treat my heart so recklessly.

When it came time for me to date, I chose buttoned-up, glowing Southern boys who vowed to keep me chaste until our wedding day. What these conservative gents lacked in passion and adventure, they made up for in piety. I was allured by how steadfast they were as much as by their stable, two-parent upbringings. In so many ways, I was still five years old and pining for a whole and happy family.

When the relationships ended (never dramatically, but more with a cartoonish *wah wah wah* of unreturned phone calls or *it's not you, it's me*), I was sad, but not heartbroken. A heart can't break when it's shuttered away. I was so determined to live in opposition to my mother that I discounted the most important element of romance: attraction.

Now here was Kris. I couldn't get enough of him, and it terrified me. His voice was infused with passion and kindness and a yearning for life, and I just wanted to be around him and hear him speak more. In the beginning, that's all we did. We talked, sometimes until three in the morning, sitting in the passenger seat of his Jeep with the heat cranked and my legs sweating. Or sprawled on the futon in my apartment after cooking elaborate, messy dinners together -- me with my one good arm. We discussed books and travel and movies and music and all that we dreamed of doing, of being.

For all his risk taking, it was weeks before Kris ventured to kiss me. He waited until my arm had healed and we could properly embrace. The

moment was like throwing gasoline on a smoldering coal.

It wasn't long before I started joining him on adventures. We flew to London on a whim one weekend because an airline was selling round-trip tickets for \$199. He'd seen the advertisement and said, "I've never been. Wanna go?" His optimism and spontaneity were infectious. We went camping in three feet of snow just for the hell of it, and stayed up all night, cocooned in our down sleeping bags. The stars were so thick against the black winter sky, like nothing I'd ever seen before. I gazed up and saw for the first time a future that didn't have to be defined by my past.

Eventually, we moved into a 150-year-old farmhouse in eastern Pennsylvania. The house sat on eight acres and was bordered by an organic farm on one side, a tree farm on another, and a Mennonite family farm across the road. Kris continued to chase his next adrenaline fix – scaling mountains, adventure racing, backpacking -- but now he had a home base, with me. We loved to bicycle, and from our front door we could piece together 50-mile undulating loops that toured the patchwork quilt of Dutch Country and never once crossed a busy street. On Sunday mornings, we awoke to the clip-clop of horse-drawn carriages, our neighbors heading off to church. We bought eggs, bread, and organic produce from the neighboring farms and cultivated our own salsa garden full of tomatoes, peppers, onions and cilantro.

Kris loved it because it reminded him of where he'd grown up. I loved it because it was the exact opposite of how I'd grown up. He begged me to sleep with the windows open. His body craved the smell of grass, trees, dirt. But I resisted. My childhood home had been burglarized several times, once in the middle of the night while we were home, cowering under our beds.

"Don't you know I'll protect you, city girl?" he asked me with a warm smile as he slid open the rickety old windows and let the cool breeze pour in. I looked into his face, so genuine and loving, and knew he'd do anything to keep me safe. It took a while, but I leaned into this man, and I began to see that risk does not equal recklessness. He took chances in life, but not with my heart.

Kris likened our relationship to a tandem mountain bike ride on a sinuous trail. A journey not without steep climbs and rocky patches. But the smooth parts? The white-knuckle downhill stretches of trail that make you giddy, that take your breath away? Pure bliss.

So it seemed fitting that one day just as I was descending the rockiest trail I'd ever dared to ride, feeling the panic-thrill that comes from suspending caution and reaping the reward, I found Kris at the bottom of the hill by a mountain stream, down on one knee. He was caked in dirt and grinning ear-to-ear. My knight on a silver bicycle.

"You've been my adventure partner, my best friend, my anchor," he said. "I want you to be my wife."

My heart pounded from exertion and the realization that he was sincere, that I could have it all – safety, adventure, and passion – for the rest of my life. I peeled the sweaty leather glove off my left hand and let him slip a ring onto my finger.

We rode away and never looked back.

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About The Author

Gina DeMillo Wagner began her career as an editor for Rodale Inc. in Emmaus, Penn. She now writes for magazines including Forbes Travel Guide, Backpacker, Outside, Wired, and Experience Life. Her personal essays have appeared in Role/Reboot, Elephant Journal, Mama Moderne, and more. She is at work on a memoir and lives with her husband Kris and their two children in Arizona.

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