

*the only life
I could save*

a memoir

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sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

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introduction

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The place is deserted when we arrive. Log cabins set in a frozen landscape, not a human being in sight. I begin to panic. Where is everyone?

Ben stands with his long arms hanging loose at his sides, shoulders slumped forward. He shifts his weight, and the frozen ground crunches under his size thirteen Adidas sneakers. The look on his face speaks of fear. Dread. Despair.

I don't like this place. Where is everyone? I look around at the log cabins and imagine we're on a movie set. The actors and directors, cameras and production crew haven't arrived yet, maybe because it's a Sunday. Their day off.

Somewhere, out there, are the barns, outbuildings, and miles upon miles of split-rail fences. I remember these facts from the Internet description and photographs. A four-thousand-acre working cattle ranch with a stream running through it, surrounded by rolling hills; farther out, beyond sight, are the waterfalls, sheer rock walls, glaciers, forests, and tens of thousands of acres stretching up to the Canadian border.

Months later, Ben tells me that Saturday and Sunday are work days at the treatment center. The boys are probably in the barns, spearing frozen cow droppings with rebar poles ("that sucked") or riding on open-back trucks and tossing hay out to the chasing cattle ("that was fun"). But as we stand at the end of the driveway, shaking with the cold, I wonder if other parents decided to keep their boys home for Christmas. Why didn't we do that? What kind of people drive their child to the middle of nowhere and drop him off in a desolate place with the wind howling and the temperature dropping and not a soul in sight?

A door slams. A short, stocky man improbably dressed in a T-shirt walks toward us. He barely manages a smile. I wonder what we look like to him—this mother, father, and son standing in a ragged semicircle, waiting. Perhaps we are a familiar tableau: the boy standing apart, hands in his jean pockets, eyes on the ground; the mom fighting back tears; dad stepping forward with hand outstretched. I think about the faces we show to the world, the hiding we do behind those masks. The outside is holding together, just barely, but the inside is crumbling.

The stocky man says the boys will be back soon. He says they were expecting us earlier. I don't think he means to make me feel guilty, but I do. I mumble something about the long drive and the ice and the broken windshield wipers, but he doesn't care; he shrugs his shoulders. He's a mountain man standing there in a T-shirt, strongly muscled, tough, ruddy, preoccupied. He says his wife just fell off a horse and broke her pelvis. I look at Ben, and his face registers my thoughts. *Who cares about your wife? We're standing here in the cold in a barren empty godforsaken place, and it's taking everything we have not to bolt, jump in the car, and drive away, all of us. Why would we give a damn about your wife?*

He shakes Ben's hand. It feels as if the wind is blowing right through me. I am an empty shell. I plant my feet wide apart and dig in, willing myself to stand straight and tall, to be strong. I don't like this man. I don't like this place. I want the whole thing to blow away. There's no softness here, no friendly faces. It's hard. Bitter. I think about camping and waking up to the acidic taste of percolated coffee on a Coleman stove, chilled inside and out, the coffee grounds thick and chewy on my tongue.

I want hot chocolate with marshmallows. I want soft, cozy blankets. I want smiles, sunshine, warmth. I want my son to come home to me. I want to reach out to Ben, hold him close, turn back time, and carry him away in my arms, to start all over again. I want, I want, I want.

"Okay," the man says, ready to move on. "Don't worry. We'll take good care of him."

We give Ben a hug—me first, then Pat, then me again. We walk to the car. As we drive away, I turn around in my seat to look back at Ben.

He lifts his head and attempts a half-hearted wave. My heart feels as brittle and broken as the ice cracking beneath the tires of the car as we turn onto the highway for the long ride home.

I start to cry. I can't stop. I'm sobbing. Pat reaches over, takes my hand and squeezes it, but the roads are too slick, and he needs both hands on the wheel. Tears are running down his cheeks, and he wipes them off with the arm of his jacket. I look at his fingers gripping the steering wheel and think, *Hold on, honey, hold on*. I'm talking to myself. *Hold on, honey, hold on*. I feel the pieces of myself breaking apart.

It's three weeks before Christmas, and Ben will be in treatment for two months.

August 2016

On a family vacation at one of our favorite places in the world, Black Butte Ranch near Sisters, Oregon, Ben and I talk about this book. He just turned thirty and, in two months, will celebrate his ninth year of recovery.

The early morning sunshine filters through the Ponderosa pines, creating patterns of light and shadow on the patio table. We listen for a moment to the laughter inside the rental house where Pat is starting a new jigsaw puzzle with Ben's older sisters, Robyn and Alison. Ben and I are not fans of jigsaw puzzles; they're too abstract and time consuming, and they make our heads hurt. Sometimes Pat saves the last piece for me—if Ben hasn't hidden it somewhere, which he's been known to do—and I have to turn the thing right, left, and upside down before I can figure out where it fits. Sort of the way I look at life, it seems.

"I wouldn't change my life," Ben says, in a quiet, reflective tone. "I have a really good recovery and an amazing perspective on the past. It was just a crazy kind of vortex based on the combination of you being an expert in addiction and me struggling for all those years."

He smiles in a thoughtful way, and as he tilts his head, the sun lights up his auburn hair to a golden copper. I was always so afraid his red hair would fade away, a fluke of his childhood. But his Scottish genes held fast.

“Do you remember ‘the Promises’ in the Big Book of AA, Mom? ‘We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it.’ I don’t regret the past, and I don’t wish it had been something different. I am who I am because of what happened. In the end, it’s a positive thing.”

Ben and I have talked before, often, about destiny and fate and coming to terms with the fact that there is no one goal, no one future, no one pathway. I look at him, and for the thousandth time, I am so grateful he is here with me. Alive, strong (all those CrossFit muscles), scarred—the forehead scar from running into a play structure at preschool, the scar on his left hand when he broke several bones in a rugby game, the knee scar from a lacrosse injury. A deep thinker, a soul searcher, a good human being.

He takes a deep breath. “I have just one request for the book,” he says. Sensing the hesitation in his voice, I feel a little hitch inside my heart. It feels like a cramp, like someone is squeezing my heart lightly, willing me to pay attention. I’m afraid of what he will say next. We’ve talked about the book dozens of times, and he tells me he is one hundred percent behind it; he believes it will help people. But maybe he has changed his mind. Maybe now that I am so close to finishing it, he doesn’t want the exposure. Now that his life is so together, he doesn’t want to go backward and experience all the bad stuff again. I gear myself up with the thought that I can handle it; if he does not want the book to be published, I will let it go. I’m surprised how easily that thought comes to me, after all the work of the past few years. I realize it might be because revisiting the past has been difficult for me, too. Writing this book may be the most god-awful, painful thing I have ever done.

“Over the years you’ve talked a lot about addiction as a demon that walked into your house and threatened to destroy your family.” Ben pauses for a moment to collect his thoughts. “I need to ask you this one thing—don’t demonize addiction. Addiction is not a demon. For me, at least, it’s a spiritual malady, and understanding it at its depth requires asking questions and coming into a conversation. *What was I missing? What was I seeking?*”

“Drugs were a means to an end for me. I was extremely unhappy in my own skin. I was coping with the death of my best friend. I was dealing

with my spiritual deficiencies and my grief, my guilt and my shame, trying to heal myself. It was only when I came to the realization that I was using drugs as a means to fill up this hole inside, to find some meaning in life, that I was able to figure things out. Philosophy, bigger ideals, the truth, and the good—that’s what allowed me to get and stay sober.”

“The truth and the good,” I repeat. “Can you tell me more about that?”

“Doing something right, however small it is,” he explains. “Forgiving myself for the mistakes I’ve made and continue to make. Realizing that imperfection is okay. Struggling to create a new self, to believe in myself again, to trust that I’m worth the effort.”

The long, hard work of recovery. But the other side of recovery is addiction. Ben has his perspective on “the demon,” and I have mine. I can’t let go of that image of a monstrous force that changed him from the inside out and took him away from us for seven long, torturous years. By personifying addiction as a hideous, loathsome entity that captured and imprisoned my son, I was able to figure out how to fight it. Seeing addiction as a demon helped me understand that it wasn’t Ben I was battling; it was his disease. Hating, loathing, detesting, hoping to destroy the addiction kept me sane, allowing me to love my child even when he seemed to hate everything in the world, including his family, including himself.

Silence joins the slanting of sunlight on the table, and I stretch out my hand to the warmth. *Arthritis*, I think. *I must be getting arthritis*. And at that moment, a sudden insight hits me hard: Maybe the demon was never inside Ben. Maybe it is inside me, and all those years, I was fighting myself. For seven long years, I struggled to take control, to reach in and pull Ben out of the addiction’s clutches, believing that it was within my power to save him and alter the trajectory of his life. If I just do this or that. If I say the right words. If I say nothing at all. If I hold on. If I let go. If I could go back in time and relive some of the events of our lives . . . maybe things would be different. For how long did I live in those “what if” scenarios? For how long did I torture myself with wishing I could go back to revise the past?

The demon, I realize, is not something outside me. It is the illusion of control; the belief that I can change the world for someone else;

the fantasy that hope and faith, even love, are strong enough to battle fate. All those books I wrote about addiction led me to think I knew what to do—the words created a pathway before me, and all I had to do was follow them. But the words were just words, after all, and real life doesn't follow a straight line; instead, it leads to detours, dead ends, and sheer drop-offs.

So now, as Ben begins his fourth decade on this earth and as I approach seventy (how did *that* happen, I wonder), it is long past time to admit that I don't have the ability to alter the direction of my son's life. Only he has that power. And from there, it is not too big a leap to the understanding that this book I am writing is not about Ben and his addiction journey, nor is it about "the demon" that I lived with in my mind for all those years. This book is about the Big Know-It-All Who Realizes She Doesn't Know a Damn Thing.

Except this one daunting truth—the only life I can save is my own.

something happened

1976–1999

Addiction was handed to me, like a gift.

Not so very long ago, those words came to me unbidden in the dark of night, startling me out of a deep sleep. It has taken decades to open my eyes to the nature of that gift, but here is the story of where it all began.



It's 1976, and I'm twenty-seven years old, a freelance writer with ambition that outstrips experience, and even perhaps, talent. I still can't believe my luck at finding a part-time job at the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* newspaper, which pays enough to cover my food and rent, thus supporting my writing ambitions. I'm the secretary to the executive editor of the *P-I*, and from the moment I meet Bill Asbury, I fall in love with him. It's not a heart-thumping crush. He's cute but not all that attractive from the perspective of someone half his age; it is more along the lines of a heart-and-soul connection to his unbridled passion for life. He reminds me of my father, especially the way he cracks up at his own silly jokes.

The *P-I* is one of the largest morning dailies (number thirty-three) in the country. Bill is the quintessential old-time journalist—fiercely protective of his writers, fearless in the face of controversy, and stubbornly committed to reporting the truth no matter what the cost. What I love most about him is his irreverent wit and his goofy smile, all wrinkles, loose joints, and twinkling eyes. When Bill laughs, his whole body laughs with him.

On slow news days, Bill walks into my office, arms swinging, a big grin on his deeply lined face. If he's in a particularly exuberant mood, he'll do a little tap dance ("my five kids call it my soft-shoe shuffle," he says with a wink), his body tilting to one side and then the other, arms splayed out to the side for balance, heels clicking on the floor, hands spread at the end with a "ta-da." Although he has his moments of grace, Bill also has a sailor's mouth on him and a turn-your-head-around way with stories that paints words with colors, smells, and the snap of the wind in the sails.

He pulls up a chair, puts his feet on my desk, and tells me stories about his drinking days. I don't know why he trusts me with these dark tales. Maybe he senses that I have no real knowledge or experience of alcoholism and therefore no scores to settle and few judgments to make. Maybe he's simply spreading the word, hoping to enlighten me about a common but unmentionable disease that came close to destroying his marriage, his reputation, and his life.

Bill's stories take place in a small farming town in eastern Washington, a community so far removed from Seattle (over the mountains and through the woods, deep into the farms and irrigated deserts) that just saying the name makes sophisticated urbanites laugh out loud—Walla Walla. I'd never heard of Walla Walla, and Bill and I shared some good laughs at the expense of what would one day, ironically, become my home.

From January 1972 to August 1975, Bill was the editor of the *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin*. He was also, during those years, a high-functioning alcoholic who never had a drink before quitting time and never missed a day of work due to boozing. But alcohol was causing considerable havoc in his life, including a painful case of gout and an enlarged liver ("You might consider cutting down on your drinking," his doctor advised), chronic depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and heated arguments with his wife, Janet. Despite these alcohol-related problems, only Janet and a few close friends knew that Bill had a serious alcohol problem.

One of Bill's stories says a lot about his character, even when he was under the influence. It was an early summer evening, and Bill

was driving home from a dinner meeting in Pendleton, Oregon. A state trooper stopped him on the Milton-Freewater Highway and gave him a Breathalyzer test. He blew a 0.17, plenty high enough to earn him a ride to the county jail, where he drunkenly put his arms around his police buddies and asked them to pose with him for a picture, which he offered to publish in the next day's paper. ("They were not amused," Bill recalls.) The next morning, he showed up early for work, hungover and filled with shame. He summoned Jo Moreland, the *U-B's* police reporter; after relating the details of his arrest, Bill told her to pursue the story, holding nothing back from the truth. In the evening paper, his name appeared in the arrest column along with other drunk drivers and lawbreakers.

"I had to put my own name in my own newspaper as a drunk driver," Bill remembers with a self-deprecating smile and a sad shake of his head. "That brought some interesting letters to the editor."

In one of the worst episodes "in those dark days," Bill drove up to Spokane, Washington, for a job interview. "I interviewed for a lot of jobs back then," he said with a sad, sideways smile. "I figured if I could only find the right job, I wouldn't drink so much." After his interview, he decided to celebrate at a fancy restaurant.

"Guess what?" he says, eyebrows raised, his smile somewhat subdued. "I lucked out and arrived at the beginning of the happy hour. The house specialty was martinis served in one of those wine goblets they call tulip glasses." He chuckles but without his usual mirth. "More like a goldfish bowl than anything else. I had three 'bowls' of martinis (because the price was so good, I told myself), and then I had a full bottle of wine and an unremembered amount of after-dinner brandy."

I think my eyes must be huge because Bill laughs. "Alcoholics can really put it away," he says. "But what may seem like a blessing is actually a curse."

After the brandy, he remembered only two things—looking at the speedometer, which read one hundred miles per hour, and stopping for gas in George, Washington. From George to Walla Walla, a distance of one hundred miles, Bill drove in a blackout.

Two months later, Bill was offered the job at the *P-I*. He asked for a month off and voluntarily entered Alcenas, a twenty-eight-day alcoholism treatment program in Kirkland, Washington. Three days after completing treatment, Bill started his new job and his new life.

I will never know why Bill told me his stories, except that maybe it was one of those “God things.” I’m not a religious person. I don’t believe there is a mythical figure sitting up in the clouds dispensing favors and hobnobbing with angels. But I do believe there is a force in this world that throws color, light, and goodness all around, a hidden power that is greater, stronger, more enduring than the dark energies of ignorance and prejudice. I am willing to call it “God” for want of a better word. Whatever this force is, however it happens to work its large and small miracles in the world, I do not doubt it is there, fighting the good fight, pushing us along when we hesitate, lending us grit and gumption when we are most in need, and helping us put up with our imperfections and the flaws and limitations of others.

God thing or not, some bizarre quirk of happenstance places me in that office with Bill Asbury, who gives me his stories, trusting (I believe) that they might spark something inside me. Somewhere along the way, my life switches tracks, and whatever I had planned or hoped for in terms of a career or a future was suddenly not mine to design or control. Bill’s stories grab hold of me and don’t let go. *Something had happened*. Some “thing” had come into Bill’s life—it shook him empty of reason, right thinking, and good living and came perilously close to destroying him and all that he loved. Then some “God thing” did battle with this “some thing” and brought him back to the life he was meant to live, the person he was meant to be.

What happened? The question haunts me. Once planted, Bill’s stories take root and grow to the point at which alcoholism is just about all I can think of. If my goal is to be a writer, then wow, here is a subject worth writing about. Now I’m the one walking into Bill’s office (not quite comfortable enough to put my feet up on his desk), asking him questions; trying to figure out what he means when he says alcoholism is a disease, what causes it, why some people get it and others are spared,