

New Nonfiction from Erin Carpenter: “Fully Involved: A Trauma-Informed Approach to Date Night”

Part 1: The Healing Shed

In 2016, my husband burned our guesthouse to the ground. He left a t-shirt over a lightbulb while painting the eaves, and the fire inspector said the motion detector probably kept turning the light on in the wind, eventually causing a spark. Kent works meticulously and always cleans up; I think there was some moonshine involved in this oversight. But it was the year of the Gatlinburg wildfires, and by fall we would be seeing the worst inferno the East Coast had experienced in the better part of a century. Even in April, fires burned in the Big Cove, Yellowhill and Birdtown communities of Cherokee, enough to delay school due to smoke. So like so many things in our life together, he probably doesn't deserve all the blame.



photo: Brian Lary

I woke up bathed in orange light feeling so cozy that it was hard to get out of bed. If it weren't for his service dog's persistent whimpering, I don't think I would have budged. I stepped out onto the back porch and opened the screen door. The fire marshal would write a report using the words "fully involved" to describe the blaze—there was no stopping it, the best we could do was contain it. I got Kent out of bed and he stood still for long enough to yell fuck, fuck, fuck until something in his truck exploded and we started moving again. I gathered our dogs and our daughter Katie and drove to the bottom of the mountain to flag down the firefighters. The first volunteer arrived within seven minutes of the 911 call — he told me later he found Kent up on the roof with a garden hose, wetting down the siding and the deck.

For over a month, we let the pile burn, and salvaged what we could. A page from my thesis director's first novel survived. Our neighbor Jim, a Vietnam vet with a steel plate in his head, asked for the metal hand tools, planning to hammer them back into shape somehow, or sell them for scrap metal. But everything Kent had saved from his infantry years with the 10th Mountain Division went up in flames. His BCUs and his dress blues were still back in Idaho at his parents', but he lost the kinds of things that Tim O'Brien might have mentioned.

It took about two years to re-build. We upgraded to a 500 square foot barn-style shed with a deluxe porch package. Half of the space would be used for his workshop and the other half would be shared by me and Katie to host guests, hang out, and have more privacy than the two-bedroom main house could provide. I chose colors from Sherwin Williams' American Heritage collection to appeal to Kent's patriotism—I was still all about pleasing him then. Fireweed red for the exterior, Salty Dog blue in the bathroom. I had him install cedar fence pickets in a shiplap pattern on the walls and he reclaimed wood from the fire to use as a countertop in the breakfast nook. It had rustic charm. I loved it. What I didn't know was that he would soon be living in it.

In February, he was sent home on administrative leave from his position on the road crew of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park because a co-worker blew the whistle on him for carrying a personal firearm in his lunchbox. I had questioned him about this choice over the years, but he had his reasons. The most obvious is he's been shot at, a lot. And although he was not in an urban environment like Mogadishu, he worked in remote locations where people often went to disappear. It can take an hour for law enforcement rangers to respond to a call, and they work alone. In Kent's view, he was protecting himself and his crew. The gun never came out of the lunchbox until it was confiscated, which happened just a few days after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglass High School in Parkland,

Florida.

I don't like to make excuses for Kent, and as a schoolteacher, I am as concerned about gun violence as anyone else, but just a month or so earlier, he had finally approached his supervisor and asked to bring his service dog to work. The request had been denied. His claim for a service-connected disability rating with the VA had been denied numerous times over the years as well. His relationship with his boss was strained, and his irritability was high. This would be true for me as well if I had finally come to terms with the severity of my condition and found the courage to speak out and ask for help, only to be denied accommodations or even acknowledgment that my experience was valid. So although I always disliked the fact that he carried a weapon in his lunchbox, I believe he was resorting to the only coping mechanism he was capable of at the time. But unfortunately, his indiscretion cost him his career in federal service.

When the National Park Service finally asked for his resignation, he turned to a twelve pack of high-octane beer for solace. I found him lying in the loft of the shed surrounded by storage bins and staring at the ceiling, conscious but unwilling to talk. An hour later, I heard yelling and crashing noises. I had just started watching The Greatest Showman with Katie. (The soundtrack would make me cry for a year afterwards.) I went out to find him ripping open and overturning anything that was not nailed down: motorcycles, tool chests that were more like wardrobes, a rack of winter clothes that he had moved out of our bedroom so I could have a closet.

"I'm taking your guns," I said.

"Take them!" he yelled, and I grabbed his Glock off the only upright surface left in the room and left.

I called my therapist who told me to call the police. "He

can't act like that. You have a child." I was afraid for his safety, not mine. I was afraid for my daughter's emotional well-being, though she only complained that I was on the phone too long and wouldn't sit to watch the movie. Having him removed from the property seemed tragic, but so did finding him dead in the shop, so I called the VA-suicide hotline and tried to make him talk to them. He just mumbled about how he was "done." They patched me through to the police.

"Does he have any firearms?" they asked.

"Yes. He has a Glock pistol and a semi-automatic rifle. But I locked them in my trunk and hid the keys and cartridges."

"That's all?"

"Yes." His other Glock, the one in the lunchbox, was supposed to have been destroyed by the authorities after he was found guilty of the misdemeanor of carrying without a permit, but it would be returned a couple weeks later at the federal courthouse in Asheville after the judge decided he had no legal basis for keeping his weapon from him. "Good luck to you, sir," the man had said to Kent. I thought he should be talking to me.

"How does he feel about law enforcement?" asked the police officer.

"He doesn't like them, to be honest."

"And why is that?"

"I guess it's because they're always around when he gets in trouble."

"What about dogs?"

"A rottweiler, a doberman mix, and a mountain cur."

"Are you sure he doesn't have any other weapons? Like a secret

stash?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"My wife doesn't know about half of my guns," he said.

The officer's confession felt much too casual, too conversational for the crisis I was facing in my mind. More than anything, I was afraid for what this incident meant for my life and Katie's, and I knew at that moment that the men on the phone wouldn't be fixing my dilemma. I had never wanted to leave Kent, but had often wondered whether I should, and I was already negotiating with myself on how I could justify staying with a violent man. He would have to stop drinking. He would have to go back to therapy. Maybe he could move into the guesthouse until he was stable.

The officers arrived and strolled over to the outbuilding, but by that time, Kent had apparently climbed out the window (since all of the doors were blocked by the demolition) and wandered off into the woods. I directed them to our neighbor Jim's house, where they found Kent and brought him to the hospital. Knowing he was under someone else's care that night brought a profound sense of relief. I heard myself saying, "I need help. I can't do this alone anymore."

He passed their test. He was not a threat to himself or others, so he was free to leave the next morning. I asked Jim to take him down to the VA in Asheville and let them do a full psychiatric evaluation. I set up the appointment. But Kent was hungry and didn't have his wallet, and so Jim brought him home. I presented my demands. I told him I'd be giving his guns to a friend in law enforcement for safekeeping.

"Fine, but you have to stop drinking too," he said.

I knew I couldn't continue drinking. For thirteen years of marriage, and for many years before, the wine had guaranteed that I could find happiness and some form of companionship at

the end of the day. Kent has never been much of a talker, but a beer or two, or sometimes three or four, would always help open him up. Now the stakes had gotten too high for even my moderate dependency. My husband was going downhill fast. I had watched him destroy things he needed, even loved, out of anger, and thought he might take the rage out on himself. Was I okay being married to someone who could do that? How would this affect my daughter? I didn't know the answer, but I knew drinking made me complacent. I have been sober since that day.

He moved into the shed. Two weeks later, he said he was stable and wanted his guns back. "If you don't give them back, next time I might not be so trusting," he said. He had been sober and attending his mental health appointments. He was either comatose, or irritable, but the bulk of his anger seemed to have turned inward, so mustering all the trust I could find, I met my friend on the side of the freeway, and she loaded his guns into my trunk. I turned them over and invited him to move back to the house.

"I'm good," he said.

Over the next several months, Kent took Katie to school and picked her up from dance. Beyond that, he was a ghost. I'd go out to ask him to eat with us, to come watch a movie, to give me a hug. On a good day, he would turn his face from the TV to say no. Most of the time, he wouldn't even look at me.

"What can I do to help?" I asked.

"Leave me alone," he replied.

"Really? That's really all you want?"

"I'm just trying to stay alive," he said.

So I went back to my living room, where I binge watched Parks and Recreation with Katie, and let her sleep in our King sized bed for the first time in her life. From time to time, I'd try

to talk to him, and fail, or try to seduce him, and succeed. Either way, such a lack of affection was evident that before long the effort became more painful than the loneliness. I thought there was another woman. I knew he wasn't the type, but I couldn't understand it any other way. If it were me, and I was treating him this way, it could only be that someone else was providing some of that lost connection.

"This has nothing to do with you," was how he saw it, and in a way he was right. But I was being told "no" all the time. I would give him his space for as long as I could stand it, and then I would go out again to check on him, to let him know I was still there. I knew he was suicidal, and there was not a damn thing I could do about it except stand by. One day, he went out with his rifle into the woods. I hoped he was with Jim, but of course he hadn't told me anything. I prayed he would come home alive.

He was drinking again—I found bottles in a wheelbarrow under the shed and soon saw him drinking when I popped in to visit. But by then I was going to 12 step meetings. I had a sponsor and a group where I could come undone and re-focus my attention onto myself. I didn't get to decide whether or not he drank. I got to decide whether or not I stayed. That decision alone required all my strength. I had spent six months trying to help heal him with words, but words mean little to those who have lost trust in people, and for a man whose only need or want is to be left alone, my choices dwindled down to one. I finally had the strength to accept that our marriage was over.

I thanked God that I had taken a full-time teaching job to help us pay for the fire, and I would have my permanent license by the end of the upcoming school year. I began to prepare for a different future. I separated our bank accounts. I took him off the credit cards. I told him I wanted to be married to him, but I wouldn't look back on 25 years with someone who didn't want to be with me.

I remember telling Katie on the way home from school that his recliner had shown back up in the living room. She seemed interested if not particularly impressed. I remember him standing in the doorway of my bedroom saying, "Don't give up on me," and coming over to kiss me while I was reading in bed. I remember resisting the urge to get close to him in bed those first few nights, trying to let him settle in, just happy to listen to him breathe.

*

Part 2: The Date Dilemma

About a year and a half later, I rolled over one Sunday morning and asked Kent what he wanted to do that day. To my delight, he wanted to take us on a full moon paddle that evening. But while we were eating the croissants I had bought for my French class, a text arrived inviting Katie to the haunted corn maze in Asheville.

"What does everyone want to do?" I asked. No one spoke.

"I want us *all* to go. That was the plan," Kent said, as if this had been on the calendar for days and not just an hour. Katie stared down at her plate, and I fought the urge to cover up the silence. Maybe I should make her come. But some time alone with him would be wonderful.

"I win either way," I said. "I'll get a date with my husband or a family kayak trip."

Kent waited through another long pause and left the table. I let the fear of losing him to the TV subside and then turned to Katie.

"It seems like you don't want to disappoint your dad," I said.

"Yeah, because he'll yell at me."

I'm sure mother guilt is one of the strongest emotions at work

in America. If believing we can't be enough for our children weren't insidious enough, infecting ourselves with baby daddy guilt—the sense that you should have done better in choosing a mate—that she deserves better, that you deserve better—is one of the biggest threats to my serenity. It does nothing to clarify my vision and only makes me feel like an idiot.

“Talk to him. It's okay. Nobody's going to get hurt.”

Her scowl turned the volume up on the voices in my head. *Are you sure?* I am aware of how his anger can be frightening, and I want to protect her from it, but after years of walking on eggshells, which only ever fuels anger and resentment on both sides, I have learned to trust them to their own devices. I explained how my fear likes to tell me stories; stories I've learned to ignore. “What stories are you telling yourself?” I asked her.

I was expecting all of them but one.

“I don't want to make dad go kayaking without me. He doesn't seem that into going with just you. I'm not trying to be mean, but he seems really awkward.”

Her words confirmed my fear that my husband didn't want to date me, but I ignored myself. I had heard it time and time again; this was not about me.

“It's okay. Go tell your dad what *you* want to do today.” And she went off to the corn maze with her friends.

*

Part Three: Power to Win

Kent pulled our kayaks off the truck while there was still some muted color behind the mountains. Our three-legged Rottweiler climbed into my boat, while the mountain cur tucked in with Kent and his pole, whimpering that she didn't get to go with me. The Doberman had died in August.

"Don't cut in too close," he said as we left the shore. "I've got a line out." He moved into the dark shadows created by stacked ledges of slate rock, trying to hook a fish without the effort of casting. They call it trolling. I had to smile, thinking what a great metaphor for my marriage. But then I paddled out into the moonlight and watched it improvise on the water, happy to sit alone with my thoughts.

"Erin, where ya at?" he called out from the edge. "Come to the left."

He knew where I was, and he wanted me closer. He was keeping an eye on me and it felt like love.

"It's too dark to fish," he called.

"How come? You can't see what you caught?"

"I think I hit something."

"Like a log?" I asked.

"Like Jaws." He laughed. It sounded like those seagulls that pass through here on migration. Perfectly natural and totally out of place.

We moved out into the center of the lake. The occasional campfire flared, and drunken shouts and laughter could be heard. We rounded a piece of shoreline with a pine tree clinging to a ragged slope like it was the last bit of land the Earth had to offer. I felt something undermining my rhythm, forcing my body to struggle a bit more with each stroke. I looked back to the trusting eyes of my tired old dog for encouragement.

"Is it me or has it gotten very hard to paddle?" I asked Kent.

"Upstream," he said.

We had come to that part of Fontana Lake that is also a river.

By travelling for over a hundred miles to be impounded by a 480-foot wall, the Little Tennessee river held enough energy to produce the atomic bomb. What power there is in purpose. I wish I knew with such certainty where I was headed.

When Kent was at his worst, his father came from Idaho to visit and we took him to the dam's release. It would be the only day we spent together during that whole difficult time. The spillway was open, and the spray was so massive that it appeared to form two cumulus clouds. I have a picture of Katie and I leaning against a railing looking like off-duty angels posing before the gates.

I'm not an angel—not that I haven't tried. But commitment to my veteran has taught me this: love is a powerful force, but it does not flow unimpeded, it does not exist to carry me along to my next destination, and its fluctuations are often outside my control. At times we are forced to sit in its backwater, looking closely at how we contain ourselves and where else we can find sources of hope, until enough energy has built up to push us forward.