

Give that Dog a Bone

by Kristen Ott Hogan

We stood on a bridge in Costa Rica taking in a scene straight out of Jurassic Park. It had taken more than a minute to see them in the trees, their skin camouflaged in the foliage. But like an optical illusion, the dozens of creatures perched in the branches suddenly blazed into view. With mini-stegosaurus scales, their fish-like eyes blinked lazily in the sun.

My husband tilted the camera for another shot. “Wade,” I whined, “don’t use all the film on these guys.”

It was March of 2001, the abeyance before 9/11 changed the world. Wade and I had been married less than two years, no kids, no pets. Our tiny apartment cost \$425 a month, and I wouldn’t have been surprised to see mushrooms sprouting from the carpet. We’d saved, penny-in-a-jar-style, to make this trip.

“You know the pictures won’t do these guys justice,” I said. “I’ll be surprised if we can even see them in the prints.”

Back then, photos were finite. When someone cautioned, “Don’t use up all the film,” they were thinking of their wallet. Each press of the shutter button consumed one of the twenty-four to thirty-six frames of film in a roll and each roll cost money both to buy and to develop. In other words, no shooting fifteen pictures of your daughter perched on the Sinclair dinosaur or the umpteenth buffalo in Yellowstone National Park. You picked your shots wisely, not knowing the quality of a photo until the roll of film was developed at a photo shop. A crisp envelope of glossy prints constituted all your memories of an

event. No Instagram or Facebook to document your life. No hard drive or iCloud to save your memories from fire and misplacement or loss. The only half-baked solution to this scarcity was ordering “double prints,” an extra copy of each photo to hoard or give away.

My fussing did nothing to stop Wade from snapping more pictures even though we’d only purchased a few rolls of film for our entire trip. I envisioned photos of us, hand-in-hand, on a beach or beneath a volcano or kneeling by a wayfaring sloth, not an assortment of iguanas roasting under the sun among tree limbs.



Recently, I spread all the photos from our Costa Rica trip on our kitchen table, soaking in the scenes. The anomalous plants, Wade’s curly hair, my pre-pregnancy hips, tiny crabs on the sandy beach, the feathery sugar cane plants hugging the road. And treetops with lizard-shaped green patches lurking in the branches. This batch of slapdash images is all I have of the trip twenty years ago. When I look at the photos, I want to inject the richness of a twenty-year-old relationship into the scenes and the interactions. But our history was in the making then, our foundation still hardening in the tropical sun.

A month before the trip, I’d given Wade a poem for Valentine’s Day. It featured lines about how I loved his hair in the evenings and something about camping with him in the mountains and passing the extra-terrestrial highway on our way to Yosemite because we both loved *The X-Files*. In the last line, I elevated him above the mushiness of *Reader’s Digest* love poems by proclaiming that “Anything more would be unearned, wasted, lost on you.” What that meant exactly, I still don’t know. I gave up writing poetry.

But I continued to write essays and stories for the next twenty years, and although Wade has made cameo appearances, the sole focus of these pieces has never been

about him, our courtship, or our marriage. Recently, Wade addressed the elephant in the room: “Why don’t you ever write about me?” It was a good question.



In the tourist town of La Fortuna, we rented a room at a roadside inn. According to my Costa Rica pocket guidebook, the landscape changed overnight in July 1968 when a nearby wooded hill exploded into an active volcano. For months, I’d imagined us on a hotel balcony, leaning against the railings as bursts of lava sprayed out the top of the volcano before landing almost at our feet. We would capture the moment with our no-frills Canon camera.

Instead, I collapsed into one of the lawn chairs on the back patio while Wade hunkered down inside the doorway to smash the bugs parading around our room. Despite my husband’s gallant efforts, I felt certain a cockroach or two would be hiding under my pillow or fall from the dusty light fixture. The clouds hugged the volcano all evening, not a glimpse of the conical top or a splash of red lava to be seen. I took a few photos anyway, misty shots of a hill splattered with greenery beneath a bridal veil of clouds. There was no indication of a volcano in the photos, nothing that caught your eye.



A camera records an instant of time through a reaction with the light particles bouncing around in any given moment. Photography is about capturing light, capturing moments, capturing memory. These instances of captured light are called exposures.

If I write about Wade, which image should I develop? What would it expose? How do I capture his light?



On our second morning, we traveled to the Frio Rio for a boat tour into the depths of the Negro Cano Refuge. Our guide led us onto a canopied boat with white plastic chairs and a diesel engine at the back. My husband requested the seat next to the water.

“That way, I can protect you from the crocodiles.”

The murky water ate at the bank, washing away the dirt around the tree roots until they clutched like exposed fingers on the shoreline. Turtles flopped into the water when the boat approached, and a Jesus Christ lizard scurried across the water. The guide pointed out an azure bird, standing straight, with delicate legs like strings of thread. Monkeys howled in the towering trees on the right.

“They howl to protect their territory and their family.” Our guide mimicked a howl in his microphone. A monkey echoed the sound. Wade snapped pictures of the trees, hoping to include a monkey or two in the shot. Later, I searched for their question-mark tails in the printed photos but unearthed only green foliage and a reckless sky. Capturing them in a photo was like trying to capture light.

We wield our cameras during joyful moments but rarely during dark and difficult times. But a photo tethers both light and darkness, the contrast is what creates the image. We develop film in a darkroom to protect the film from damaging rays of light. Without the darkness, the exposures flash empty, a shadow of something undefined.

By today’s standards, twenty years is a long time to spend with one person. In a few years, I will have spent more of my life with Wade Hogan than without him. The years

melt together, fused by so many conversations and emotions, disappointments and joys. Darkness and light. Memories blaze in my mind like sepia snapshots in a scrapbook. Wade holding baby Drew in the hospital recliner. A dollar-store straw hat protecting his red nose while planting a tree. Guiding his mom through the hallways of the memory care facility. His plaid shirt screaming against his red reindeer flannel pants. A glass of juice resting on his tummy while watching a low budget film. His race to spread the grass seed over our acre before the sun sunk into the Great Salt Lake for the day. Darkness and light shaping the image of our life together.



My parents and sister joined us for a few days of sightseeing on the Costa Rica Pacific coast. Wade captained the six-seater rental van as we travelled down a narrow highway peppered with potholes the size of firetrucks and bridges hemmed with crocodiles. At the Manuel Antonio National Park, we trudged through the tropical rainforest toward the beach, vulnerable under the sun. As the others dillydallied in the forest, but my husband and I beelined for the ocean. Wade ran ahead, the back of his T-shirt drenched with



sweat. He dove into the waves. I followed, pushing through the flow with my thighs. The water cooled my skin like lemonade. My mom took a picture of us walking back up the beach, hand in hand. When she handed me a copy a few weeks later, I gaped at the picture-perfect scene. Our heads bent toward each other, our feet

emerging from the frothy water, the enameled blue of both sea and sky stretching behind us like a parachute guiding a safe landing.

“I knew you would like it,” she said.

It’s true. I have shied away from writing about Wade. I worry some might find our steadfast marriage boring or even worse, lacking in some way. I cannot risk overexposure. And although abiding love makes a good marriage, it rarely translates into interesting narrative. We do share a rich, packed history but it’s disorganized and jumbled like the shoeboxes of photos in the closet. The task of sorting through the hoarded memories feels irreverent somehow. It also feels impossible.



At an alfresco restaurant near the beach, we sipped tall glasses of lemonade. I ordered pollo and arroz for the umpteenth time, but Wade ordered a T-bone steak.

“It’s only three dollars!” He grinned.

Our sunburns raw, we stuck to the vinyl chairs. My mom and sister ordered ice cream bars while Wade ate his grisly, gaunt steak.

“I guess I understand why it was only three dollars,” he grimaced. “I’m going to keep the bone for some lucky dog.”

He wrapped the bone in a napkin and slipped it into the pocket of his cargo shorts.

Writing about the love of your life is dangerous. You must walk the tightrope between saccharine on one side and disloyalty on the other. No one wants to read cheesy lines laced with hyperbole nor a housewife carping session over the back fence. Both

extremes skirt the truth. Even in good marriages, pain and disappointment burrow in with the love like a rat in the rabbit hole. The panorama of marriage exposes the muddy middle *and* the magenta sunset. To communicate this conundrum is like explaining the art of subtlety to Lady Gaga. It's just easier to write about childhood shenanigans or the Federal Reserve.

But there's another reason I balk at writing about Wade. A singer once said she always performed certain songs, really poignant and personal songs, from a distance as if she was a different character than herself onstage. It was too difficult, she explained, to visit that emotional space every time she held the microphone to her lips. As they say, it hit too close to home. After Priscilla left him, Elvis Presley reportedly fudged the bridge to "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" every single time he performed it.

Likewise, the words escape me when I try to write about Wade. Always a blurred photo. Always underdeveloped with bad lighting. Always the printed image failing to do the scene justice.

On our drive back to San Jose, Wade suddenly steered the van into a dirt parking lot.

"There is the dog that wants this bone."

I looked out the window and saw an anemic collie-mutt sniveling by a sign that read Vivero Fruta De Orod. A banner of multi-colored flags stretched from a tire to the front door of a shop. As Wade swung open the door, the dog leapt up, eyeing him with distrust. My husband crouched down in his white socks and Doc Martens and stretched out the bone to the motionless dog five feet away. I fumbled with the camera, snapping a picture of the scene. Time stalled, as if the click of my camera rendered the subjects frozen in their poses. Finally, the dog inched forward, then stopped again. Wade coaxed and cajoled the dog forward. When the mutt finally reached the bone, he nabbed it with his teeth and scurried to his spot by an abandoned tire. Driving off, we watched the dog settle down to his feast.

If I had to pick an image to capture Wade, I would choose this picture. The one of him offering a T-bone to a miserable dog in Costa Rica. The image exposes his simple kindness, his unfeigned belief that the bone would be like manna from heaven for the dog. He acted without the cynicism that ruins such moments. Without the suspicion his effort might be



pointless because tomorrow the dog would still be starving, still hungry for the bone now buried like lost treasure.

He just wanted to give a dog a bone.



Kristen Ott Hogan lives in Syracuse, Utah with her husband, Wade, and their four children. Her work has appeared in *Segullah*, *The Raven Perch*, *Aji Magazine*, *Literary Traveler*, and on her website: kristenotthogan.com. She co-authored, *Phoenix Flame*, a memoir chronicling her nephew's battle with mental illness. She loves to read more than Netflix—her favorite novel remains *Jane Eyre*. Her husband is waiting (patiently) for her to write a bestseller so he can quit his job.