

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

TO *Heaven* AND BACK

*A Doctor's Extraordinary Account
of Her Death, Heaven, Angels, and Life Again*

A True Story

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CHAPTER 9
AN ADVENTURE
IN CHILE

“Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come.”

—Ecclesiastes 9:12 (NIV)



In January 1999, Bill and I left our children in the capable hands of our nanny and flew from our wonderful Wyoming winter to the delightful Chilean summer. This was our first trip “alone” since Peter’s birth and we were looking forward to a terrific adventure. We flew into Temuco, which is about seven hours south of Santiago and about one hour north of our destination of Pucón.

Pucón is a resort-destination town on the shores of the deep and beautiful Lake Villarica, thriving in the shadow of the 9,315-foot Villarica volcano. It is in the heart of Chile’s IX Region, the Lake District. This region is populated by multiple

glacier-topped volcanos, providing clear, cool water to the many rivers that form these beautiful lakes.

We stayed in a rental house with the Longs who, at that time, consisted of; Tom and Debbi, Kenneth, their twenty-year-old son, and his wife, Anne, Chad, their eighteen-year-old son, and Tren, their sixteen-year-old youngest son.

We spent a delightful week with Tom, kayaking on the rivers and playing in the whitewater of southern Chile. Bill and I were already proficient kayakers, but we continued to work on our Eskimo rolls, our boating skills in pushy and steep water, and we paddled a number of both scenic and challenging rapids. We also practiced our Spanish, absorbed the wonderful culture, and enjoyed the lake, the town, and the exquisite scenery. Evenings were spent chatting around a blazing fire after first walking into town for ice cream. The time was thoroughly relaxing and we were sad to realize that the end of our trip was quickly approaching.

We began to make plans for our final day of boating, which was to be on the Fuy River with Tom, Kenneth, Chad, Anne, several Americans with whom we had never boated, and a young Chilean man who was working for the Longs that summer.

The Fuy is a river in the Southern Chilean Los Ríos Region that drains from the northern end of Lake Pihueico and winds along the northern foothills of the Choshuenco volcano before joining

the Neltume River to form the Llanquihue River, which then empties into the glacial Panguipulli Lake. Bill and I are experienced kayakers and have paddled many challenging rivers in the United States, so we were looking forward to our run down the upper section of the Fuy, which is known for its tropical beauty and array of challenging waterfalls – drops of ten to twenty feet, making them exciting but well within our paddling skills.

We first drove to the small village of Choshuenco (population 625) near the shores of Panguipulli, then further to the river put-in. This was a remote area of very sparse population, thick forest, and no development. Once on the river, there really wouldn't be the option to stop paddling or get off the river, so when Bill quite unexpectedly awoke that morning with significant back pain, he decided not to boat.

Although it was a typical sunny, warm Chilean day, I didn't have a good feeling about the trip. I am not a socially graceful person, so assumed it was just my underlying awkwardness and unease of being in a group of new people. Retrospectively, Anne also had a sense of great unease. She wasn't sure why she felt this way. At the time, she thought she was uncomfortable because she was not totally familiar with this river and we were putting on the river later than we had planned, or maybe because it was a group of people who had not previously boated together. Regardless of the reason, she felt a generalized sense of stress.

Bill dropped us off at the put-in, where we met up with the other Americans, and there were joking comments made about being able to see me easily because I was wearing my husband's bright red drytop instead of a more subdued color of paddling shirt. There was some expected anxiety about the anticipated waterfalls and the possibility of boaters making flat landings, as this can cause a broken back. So there were also comments made to the effect that we would be in good company since I am a spine surgeon. As we put on the river, Chad called out to my husband, "We will bring back your wife, and she won't be an inch shorter" (humorously implying that I wouldn't compress my spine with any flat landings). Bill drove off in the truck, intending to find a sunny spot in which to spend the day reading. He planned to meet us at the take-out later in the day.

As our group started down the river, there didn't seem to be any clear boating order, but I tried to stay away far from one particular boater who seemed to have limited skills, no sense of boundaries, and made me feel very apprehensive. I disregarded my apprehension, as it was a beautiful afternoon and I was excited about the upcoming waterfalls.

We approached the first significant drop not long after putting on the river and stopped in an eddy (an area of slow water that is usually downstream of a rock or next to the shore) to discuss how we should run it. There was a narrower chan-

nel to the right side of the river and a larger main channel to the left. We decided to run the smaller channel, as it was more predictable and straight forward. The main drop had a tremendous amount of flow, with a steep drop and large hydraulics at its bottom.

Boater number one paddled toward the channel on the river right, but approached with too much angle and her boat became lodged sideways between the two large boulders flanking the drop. Although her boat was stuck, she was able to exit her boat and flush into the pool of calm water below the drop. I had already exited the eddy and was unable to stop my forward progress when I saw her boat blocking our chosen route, so paddled further to the left.

As I paddled forward, the boater who I had been trying to avoid and who had been behind me, washed out of the upper eddy and then bounced ahead of me. She bobbed a bit before going over the main drop backward. Unknown to me, her boat became lodged in the rocks below the turbulence of the main drop. She was able to exit her boat and swim to a rock in the middle of the pool below. I was unaware of her predicament and had few options, so I continued paddling.

As soon as I crested the top of the waterfall, I saw nothing but trouble and knew I was going to have a problem. A big problem. There was a tremendous volume of water flowing through this

channel, causing the water at the bottom to be chaotic and violent. I saw a large hydraulic formed by the churning waves and saw no exit. I took a very deep breath and dropped down the waterfall and into what would become a great adventure.

Despite the volume and power of the falling water, her boat prevented any hope of making a clean exit. As my boat rocketed down, the front dove under the other boat and became pinned between it and the submerged rocks of the waterfall. The water immediately engulfed me, my boat, and the previously pinned boat. I was upright in my boat, but the water was flowing over the top of me. My boat and I were essentially buried under both falling water and the other boat. The force of the water was so great that I felt like a rag doll. My body was forced onto the front deck of my boat, with my arms helplessly being pulled downriver.

Anne paddled into the channel on the right, knocked the broached boat loose, and continued into the pool below. Chad went down the main channel. The water was so deep in this drop that he didn't see or feel anything as he paddled down the drop and right over the two boats (and me) that were submerged at the bottom.

As Chad and Anne entered the pool below, they noted boater number one swimming in the water, and easily located her boat which had been dislodged from the right channel. They were then surprised to see a second swimmer (this was the

boater whose boat was on top of mine), but could not immediately locate her boat. Chad quickly paddled into an eddy to further evaluate the situation. He could see boater one. Her boat had been dislodged by Anne, and he easily located it on the river bank. He also could see the second boater sitting on a rock in the middle of the river, but he could not immediately locate her boat. At last, he finally caught a glimpse of her red boat at the bottom of the main channel.

It was difficult for Anne and Chad to account for everyone as, at this point in time, our group of paddlers was split: some of the boaters were below the drop and some were still above the drop. It took several minutes and several head counts before Anne was firmly convinced that both my boat and I were missing. Familiar with emergency situations, she started her watch.

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