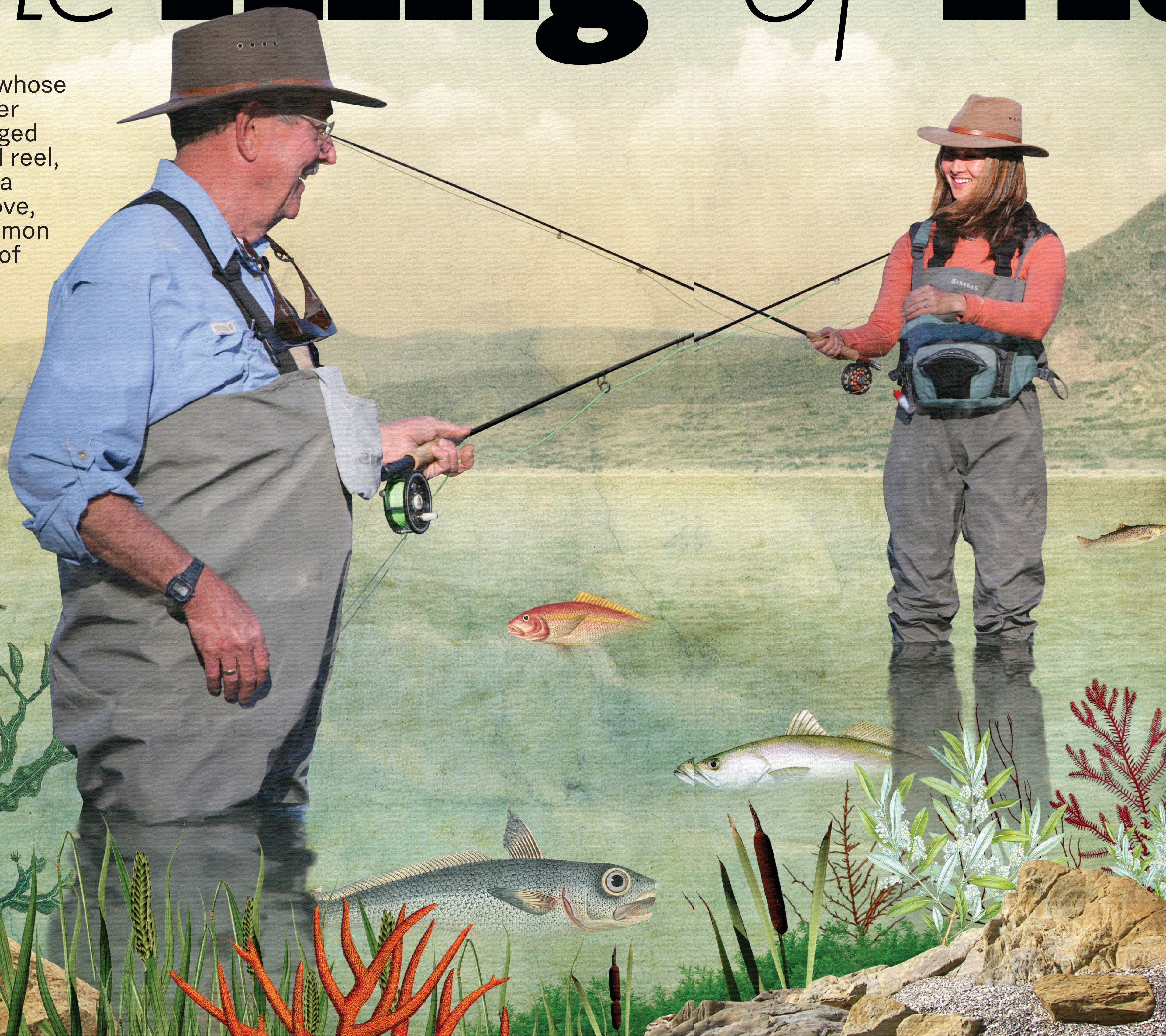
The King *of* Tides



A daughter, whose bond with her father is forged with rod and reel, embarks on a journey of love, loss, and salmon in the wilds of Alaska.

BY **KIM CROSS**
ILLUSTRATION BY
SONIA ROY/COLAGENE

MY FATHER AND I leaned into the current, waiting for the salmon. We were up to our hips in the Kasilof River, a milky-blue ribbon of glacial melt that snakes through southern Alaska. It was nearly midnight, and the stars winked faintly through a pewter sky. Beneath the brim of his fishing hat, my father, a month shy of 73, smiled into the sweeping twilight.

We had traveled more than 3,000 miles to catch an Alaskan king salmon. Formally called the Chinook, it is a bucket-list fish, the largest of all salmon and notoriously elusive. Landing one is an angler's version of sinking a hole in one. Our whole family—my husband, parents, uncle, and three boy-cousins—had traveled from Alabama and Florida to pursue this singular goal.

It was the last big family fishing trip before life would change forever. My husband and I had just seen our baby's heartbeat, a flickering light on an ultrasound screen, a glimmer of our future. I wasn't showing yet, so it still felt theoretical that this tiny tadpole swimming inside me would grow into a man. I imagined my father teaching this future person how to fish.

On this Friday night, the river bend was buzzing with locals and a smattering of tourists. Two Texas boys in their 20s wobbled over the rocky shore in skinny jeans and cowboy boots. "We been fishing for three days," one said, "and not a single bite!"

Within minutes, a brawny local hooked a fish and handed him the rod. "Boy, you said you wanted to catch a king," he said. "Here you go."

The skinny Texan tottered down the bank, fighting to keep his rod tip up as it bent with the weight of a keeper. The locals hollered from the sidelines: "Keep some pressure on him!" "Don't let up!"

The Texan wrangled the monster onto shore, where he bent, panting, over the thrashing fish, not knowing what to do. Someone sauntered over with a river rock and bashed it in the head. The fish went still. I felt a twinge of envy. Then I felt my rod tip nod. As we entered the ancient paso doble of angler and fish, I recalled the words of my favorite

DEEP POCKETS
The author's father, his fishing vest stuffed with his grandson's gear.

My uncle first sounded the battle cry: "Jacks!"

A distant relative of the tuna, the fork-tailed jack is a fighter, aggressive and powerful, built like a bullet of muscle. Reeling one in is like breaking a mustang, or so I had heard over tables piled high with boiled shrimp.

Dad and I sprinted, barefoot, to the dock, where we spotted a fountain of baitfish leaping, the sign of predators attacking from below. Dad unmoored the Boston Whaler and put me at the helm, rigging the rods with steady hands while I motored toward the bait spray.

I killed the engine 100 yards away and coasted toward the ripples. Dad sailed his lure hundreds of feet, the silver cigar minnow arcing through the air in an elegant parabola. Flustered, I botched my own first cast, releasing the line with my thumb a little late, and my lure splashed awkwardly close to the boat. Embarrassed, I reeled in for another try. And then the line came alive in my hands.

We fought for an hour, the jack and me, forked tail versus teenage biceps. Dad talked me through from the sidelines. "Let him run," he said. "Keep tension on the line."

I did as I was told, and the jack ran again and again, exhausting the both of us. He dragged the boat 300 feet before he lost his fight. When he surfaced in a flash of silver, I gasped. I had never seen anything so big, or so lovely.

Dad gaffed him in a single swipe and heaved him into the boat. That fish weighed roughly a third of me. My heart still races, remembering.

guide, who taught me how to land a whopper on a pencil-thin rod. *Let him run when he needs to run, then gently bring him back. Not too much pressure, or you'll snap the line. Be patient and tough. You'll tire him out.*

Slowly, deliberately, I let him run and brought him back, the whine of the spinning reel sinking lower each time. When I saw the arc of his back break the water, my king took away what little breath I had left. He was big. He was strong. And then he was gone.

Dad smirked and deadpanned his favorite line: "There's a reason they call it fishing, not catching."

I WAS NOT a natural-born angler. Just an only child who tried too hard to be the son her father never had. He was a man who worked long hours and closed each day by wetting a line on the dock behind our North Florida home. As the bay turned silver in the dying light, he would reel in a trout, a black drum, or a redfish. He would clean it with an ancient blade and toss the scraps to the gathering fish. Mom would cook it, and after dinner we'd scrape our plates off the dock.

My father never taught me how to swing a bat or throw a ball. But he taught me how to throw a cast net, bait a live shrimp, and remove a swallowed hook without turning the fish inside out. And he coached me through landing my first real lunker: a 40-inch jack crevalle.

It was the spring I turned 13. We were staying at my uncle's house on the inland waterway near Destin, Florida, where a billboard welcomes tourists to "The world's greatest fishing village."

OUR FIRST DAY of fishing in Alaska was not what we expected. We stood shoulder to shoulder with hundreds of fishermen lining Ship Creek in the heart of Anchorage. The stream is only 10 or 15 feet wide, yet it holds king salmon that weigh up to 40 pounds. Their shiny backs protrude from the shallows as they slide their bellies over the rocks, through a hallway of anglers casting close enough to

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catch each other (and they do). They call it "combat fishing." The poor fish seem to have no chance, until you consider that spawning salmon do not eat. They have, in this final stage of life, a single-minded mission: Get home, procreate, and die.

Like all salmon, kings spend their lives in a round-trip journey between river and sea. After hatching and feeding on insects, the year-old fish make their way to the ocean, riding the current downstream for hundreds or even thousands of miles. They spend the next few years in salt water as eating machines, packing on fat for the journey home.

> "My dad struggled with small talk but delivered eloquent fatherly lectures on the end of the dock. The Boston Whaler was **our sacred place**."

And then, at some genetically pre-programmed point in time, each one yields to the ancient call of the stream where it was born.

Salmon imprint the smells of all the places they have traveled and remember the Earth's magnetic fields where they entered the sea. The homecoming fish transform from silver "brights," darkening into deep olive and red. They stop eating, fueled by their body fat for the unrelenting fight upstream. Their homing devices bring them remarkably close to the spot where they hatched, sometimes within yards. There, they find a mate, leave a fertilized clutch, and yield to immutable death. Their bodies are absorbed by the stream, adding nutrients to the water, feeding generations of insects that will one day nourish their young.

THE ONLY THING my father loved more than fishing was taking others fishing. No guest was spared a 5 a.m. wake-up call and an eight-hour trip on the Boston Whaler to fish the Gulf of Mexico. He would stay up late the night before, rigging tackle. He never overslept. I wonder if he slept at all.

When I came home from college, he'd shake me gently awake with a weathered hand already cold from the bait well. I would stagger downstairs, rubbing my eyes, and fumble over the coffee. By now Dad would have been up for an hour, readying the boat. My only job was to drag the cooler of snacks—beef jerky, powdered donuts, and potato chips—to the boat, where I'd promptly make myself a pallet of towels and fall back asleep on the bow.

Those fishing trips were a way to connect with my dad, who struggled with small talk but delivered eloquent fatherly lectures on the end of the dock. The Boston Whaler was our sacred place. For boyfriends, it was a test.

In college I brought a boyfriend home, a nice guy, but not much of a fisherman. My father took him out and treated him kindly, but had to bait his hook. The guy stuck around for six years, but he wasn't a keeper.

One year after college, I came home from California with an Eagle Scout who caught trout on dry flies in mountain streams and cooked them on a one-match fire. This one knew a blood knot from an improved clinch and actually owned a rod. The day before Thanksgiving, we motored into the predawn. I was allowed, by now, to drive the boat, but no matter how many times I had navigated the shallow pass through the bay, Dad made me use the GPS.

The swells were fairly big that day, and as we trolled the Gulf for king mackerel, the boat rolled, pitched, and yawed. The Eagle Scout had good sea legs, but he had worn running shoes, which gave little purchase on the sea-slick deck.

FOUR POINTS
BY SHERATON

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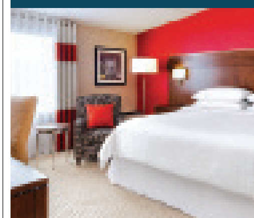
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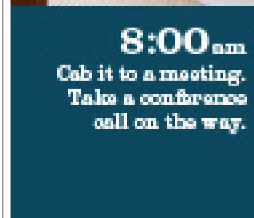
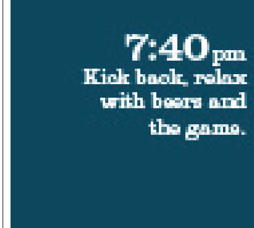
Post-workout breakfast in the room.


8:00 am
Cab it to a meeting. Take a conference call on the way.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"Fish on!" I yelled. Dad brought the boat to an idle. Mom danced around the console, trying to stay out of the way. The Eagle Scout, not one to be outdone, soon had a fish on too. Mine came in first, a good-size king, about 20 pounds. Dad gaffed it and hauled him in, still flapping. As he knelt over my fish, removing the hook, a rogue swell pitched the boat. The Eagle Scout lost his balance. His foot flew up behind him.

And kicked my father squarely in the face.

My father looked up, more in shock than pain, with a look I had never seen. His glasses were askew. One eye was bruised. Blood gushed from a cut beneath it. My mother and I rushed to his side and fussed.

The Eagle Scout kept fishing. He knew that if he lost that fish, his first trip on the boat might also be his last. He landed the mackerel and then apologized. My father accepted with a smirk. He stashed this away as material for a wedding toast.

On the fishing trips that followed, the Eagle Scout knew he had been forgiven when Dad let him drive the boat. One day he made the trip to Florida alone, to ask for my father's blessing. On the boat, he chickened out. That night, on the dock, he mustered the courage. "Fish on!" my father said. He made the Eagle Scout wait until the fish was in his hands.

Five years later, on that dock, we handed my parents a picture of an ultrasound.

ON OUR THIRD DAY in Alaska, we stood on the edge of a manmade fishing hole called, inventively, The Fishing Hole. Stocked for tourists and boatless anglers, it was a gravel pit circled with lawn chairs. It required a new rig: two piggybacked hooks with hunks of herring dangling from a red-and-white bobber. I scowled at that sad plastic bobber.

"Just think of it as a strike indicator," the Eagle Scout said.

He was right. It was no better or worse than the sprig of yarn that served the same purpose on fly-fishing trips. But the aesthete in me took umbrage. "Why don't we just throw out a trotline?" I snarled.

I INTRODUCED my father to fly-fishing on a private stream in Georgia. I had learned how to lay a midge on top of a pool, dimpling the surface. I loved the dance of sunlight on water, the music of the stream, the sigh of the line monogramming the air with elegant cursive loops. *If you are going to fish and not-catch*, I thought, *this is the way to do it*.

But we caught. Big fish. Fish-tale fish, the kind you recount to eye-rolling grandkids. I wanted my father to catch one and fall in love with fly-fishing, too.

Gear helps, so I gave him a fishing hat with a handsome, sweeping brim. He loved that hat. But he did not love fly-fishing. With failing eyesight, he struggled to thread the microscopic eyes of dry-fly hooks that vanished in his saltwater hands. His sea legs were useless on slick river rocks, and once I saw him hand the guide his tangled line, too fine to unravel by feel. He would never do that on his boat. I should have realized, then, that my father belongs to the sea.

Instead, I took him on a float trip. I rented a charming riverside fish camp and hired a guide with a boat. It was a perfect spring day, with golden light and trees shooting out their first buds. The river was freckled with rising fish, and our guide knew their favorite shoals. We caught a few rainbows and threw them back. My father smiled a lot and thanked me.

Later, Mom and I ran out for a bit. We returned to a sink filled with trout. Dad smiled and held up a spinning reel. "I'm a member of the catch-and-fillet club," he said.

DAY FOUR in Alaska, and still no salmon. Desperate to avoid getting skunked, we chartered a deep-sea boat. The vessel could not hold all of us, so the men motored out to sea. Some say a woman on a boat brings

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bad luck. Mom and I didn't want to chance it.

They came back with sunburned smiles in a boat riding low in the water, fish wells brimming with 50-pound halibut. "It's like pulling a car hood up off the bottom," my father said. But it wasn't king salmon.

On day five, the Anchor River opened at midnight. We arrived at 11:30 p.m. to find the best spots on the river occupied. At precisely midnight, the rods began ticking like metronomes. Cloud cover blocked the northern lights, but even in the dark I could feel the salmon darting all around me. The water thrashed as they leaped upstream, fighting the current, finding their way.

I snagged the bottom again and again, snapping my line and tying on lure after lure, until my jaw grew sore from biting off line. I caught bushes behind me, logs in the river, and trees on the opposite bank, where countless lures dangled like ornaments.

Just before we left, a king salmon swam right into me, colliding with my wading boot with such downstream force that it nearly knocked my feet out from under me. Dad laughed at me—fishing, not catching. We flew home without a king.

TWO MONTHS after the trip, on our four-year anniversary, my husband and I learned our baby's sex. My father would have a grandson.

That same evening, we learned the news about Dad: small-cell carcinoma. Stage 4. Inoperable. Prognosis: one to two years.

A month later, in September, he took one final fishing trip to Alaska with his buddies. This time, he got a king salmon. He did not catch it in a stream. He caught it in the sea.

Two days after Christmas, he was there when his grandson found his way into the world, and he held the boy—7 pounds, 7 ounces—a keeper. On Dad's good days, we stuffed his fishing vest pockets with diapers and toys. On the bad days, he fought an upstream battle with a single-minded goal: live to see his grandson's first birthday.

He died 17 days too soon. But those 348 days their lives overlapped were a journey I would not change. He got to stare at his sleeping grandson's face, feel tiny fingers paw his nose. I like to believe there is healing in that.

We held his service on the dock, a wake in a no-wake zone. The pastor wore a fishing shirt. The Eagle Scout rigged the boat for a trip but left it in the slip. We set Dad's rod on the end of the dock so friends could wet a line and say goodbye.

Six months later, on what would have been his 75th birthday, we drove his boat into the Gulf. Crying quietly, eyes stinging with sunscreen and salt, we gave him back to the sea. I watched my father's ashes disappear into the endless blue. Then we rigged a solitary rod and trolled the lonely waters without him.

MY SON was 5 years old when I dug out the last Alaskan fillets. They were freezer-burned beyond edible, but I had never been able to bring myself to throw them away. I decided it was time. I held them in my hands, then let them slip from my fingers into the trash, exhaling as I turned away, pretending it did not matter.

Within seconds, I came apart. I dug through the garbage, heaped our sad catch on the counter, and sobbed over it, tasting the salt of tears before they froze on the icy fillets. I gathered the fish in my arms and gently placed them back in the freezer.

When it came time to sell the Florida house, I took my son and the freezer-burned fish to the dock where my father had raised me. I unwrapped each piece, and with Dad's old knife I cut each one into chunks small enough for my son to hold in his hand. And there, beneath seagulls wheeling above, we fed the gathering fish.

Kim Cross is the author of What Stands in a Storm, *about the biggest tornado outbreak in recorded history. Find her at* KimHCross.com.

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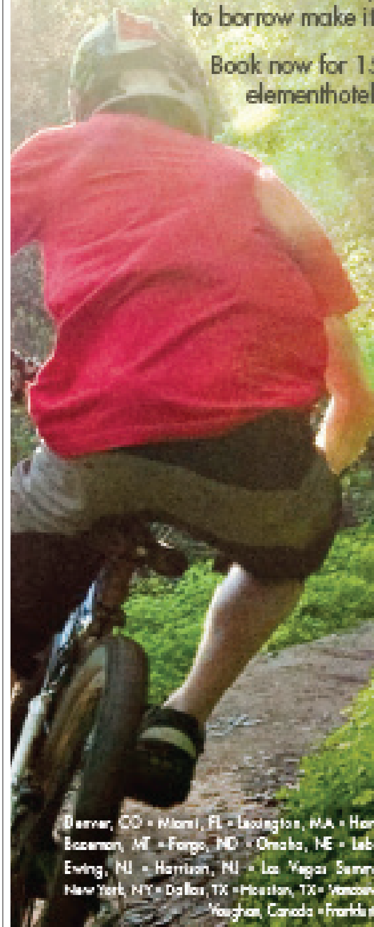

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