



Life Actually

By Kari Kampakis

Me, my man & 15 years

It all started with a pair of blue swim trunks. The fact that he was driving a ski boat didn't hurt.

I knew Harry in college, but not until a year after graduation did I really *see* him. He was at the beach with his friends; I was there with mine. We were all hanging out and reveling in the freedom of being young, carefree and financially independent.

I turned to my friend sitting by me in the boat. "Harry's hot," I whispered.

"I know," she whispered back. "I've always had a thing for him."

And thus began my story with my husband, on a remarkable day 18 years ago, when the Gulf water was sparkling and perfect, and the catch of the day was standing right in front of me.

Less than a month later, I'd realize my new love interest wasn't just the catch of the day – he was the catch of a lifetime.

Harry and I celebrate 15 years of marriage this month. He is my soul mate, my rock and my best friend. He's also an incredible father, better than I ever imagined. Our daughters adore him, and although they're too young to fully comprehend how blessed they are to have him, one day they'll know.

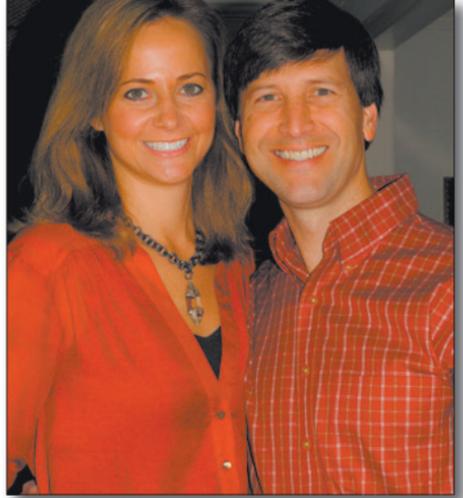
Our marriage isn't perfect. We bicker and push each other's buttons. Harry tells me when I'm unreasonable; I tell him when he's insensitive. But even in chaos and rough patches, he has my back, and I have his. He loves me like I want to be loved.

Harry has so many great qualities, but what I love most are his patience and willingness to listen. Harry is never too busy to listen, even when I'm tired of listening to myself. And because he listens, he knows my heart. He can counsel me through any decision or issue, helping me see the forest through the trees.

Did I mention we have fun together? That we both love country music, from Willie Nelson and George Jones to Toby Keith and Zac Brown? Although we didn't date in college, I feel like I was at the KA house with him because I've heard him rehash stories with his fraternity brothers a million times. Their stories are hilarious, the kind that make you bust a gut laughing. Seeing Harry with his buddies makes me happy because *he's* so happy. Reminiscing puts him in his element.

At home, Harry is met by four squealing girls each weeknight when he walks in from work. Our daughters race to hug him and divulge details of their day. They talk at once, competing for attention and elbowing each other aside as if he's a star. I keep thinking they'll outgrow this red-carpet treatment, but not yet. Again, it is Harry's patience and listening ears that make them eager to share. His smiling face is all the invitation they need.

Someone once told me, "Marry the guy who'll be up with you in the middle of the night with a sick baby." When I fell for Harry, I wasn't thinking about babies, sleep deprivation or midnight meltdowns. I wasn't looking for a best friend or long-term companion. I just liked what I saw, and I was curious to know more.



Kari Kampakis with her husband Harry Kampakis

But lucky for me, Harry *has* proved to be the guy who sticks by me in bewitching hours; who never left my side after our first child was born because I was petrified; who does more than his fair share with the kids so I can write and pursue my dreams. While no one's perfect, I can say he's perfect for me. When I'm with him, I like myself better. I feel safe, accepted and understood.

And if I've learned anything in 15 years, it's the power of one kind act. Because when Harry makes a kind gesture – fixing me a grilled cheese sandwich after church, bringing me a cup of coffee on Saturday morning – I want to reciprocate. And when I do, he reciprocates back. Our marriage works best with this dynamic in motion, when we both leave pride at the door and serve each other. It doesn't take anything grand or dramatic - just little reminders that we care.

I've also learned to keep our best memories alive and to stay strong as a twosome because one day it'll be just us again. We'll be back to living for each other's company, and I don't want to be twiddling my thumbs thinking, "I'm lost without the kids. What next?" I want to be high-fiving Harry and saying, "Alleluia, honey, we did it! That was exhausting but fun! Now, onto our golden years. What first?"

My dream is for us to enjoy another honeymoon period, to catch the bliss of a second wind.

I still have Harry's blue swim trunks from that day. They're old and faded but vibrant in memory. I love to remember my first impressions, and how I felt like I knew him before I did. I think that's what a soul mate is, someone your heart recognizes inexplicably and who feels like they've been there all along, living in the wings of your life and waiting for the right moment to make the entrance that changes everything.

Kari Kubiszyn Kampakis is a Mountain Brook mom of four with a background in PR, writing and photography. For weekly inspiration, you can "like" her new Facebook page at "Kari Kampakis, Writer" or visit her blog at karikampakis.com. Email Kari at kari@karikampakis.com.