

Sebastian Junger was a skeptic of the afterlife. Then he nearly died.

In his latest book, "In My Time of Dying," the author of "The Perfect Storm" takes us on what may be the wildest and most frightening ride of his career.

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Sebastian Junger. (Peter Foley)

For decades now, Sebastian Junger has taken readers to some of the most dangerous, bloody and remote outposts on this planet, including the deep sea ("[The Perfect Storm](#)") and Afghanistan ("[War](#)"). In his latest book, "[In My Time of Dying](#)," Junger takes us on what may be the wildest and most frightening ride of his career — not to the point of no return but to its very precipice.

June 15, 2020, dawned for Junger much like any other not-quite-summer day on Cape Cod. But a silent storm had been brewing in the writer, then 58. That morning he was "wrenched from sleep by a dream of my wife and daughters sobbing and holding each other while I hovered over their heads, unable to communicate with them." He screamed at them; he waved at them. It did not matter. In his dream, he learned that he had died because, as a voice explained to him, "I'd been careless." He did not immediately connect that dream to the intermittent pain he'd had in his abdomen for more than nine months. He'd been ignoring it, since it came and went, but he remembers thinking at one point, "This is the kind of pain where you later find out you're going to die."

The next morning, he was awakened not by a dream but by the pain, which soon ebbed. That afternoon, he uncharacteristically suggested to his wife that they visit a writing studio located deep in their wooded property. In some of the most compelling prose of his career, Junger

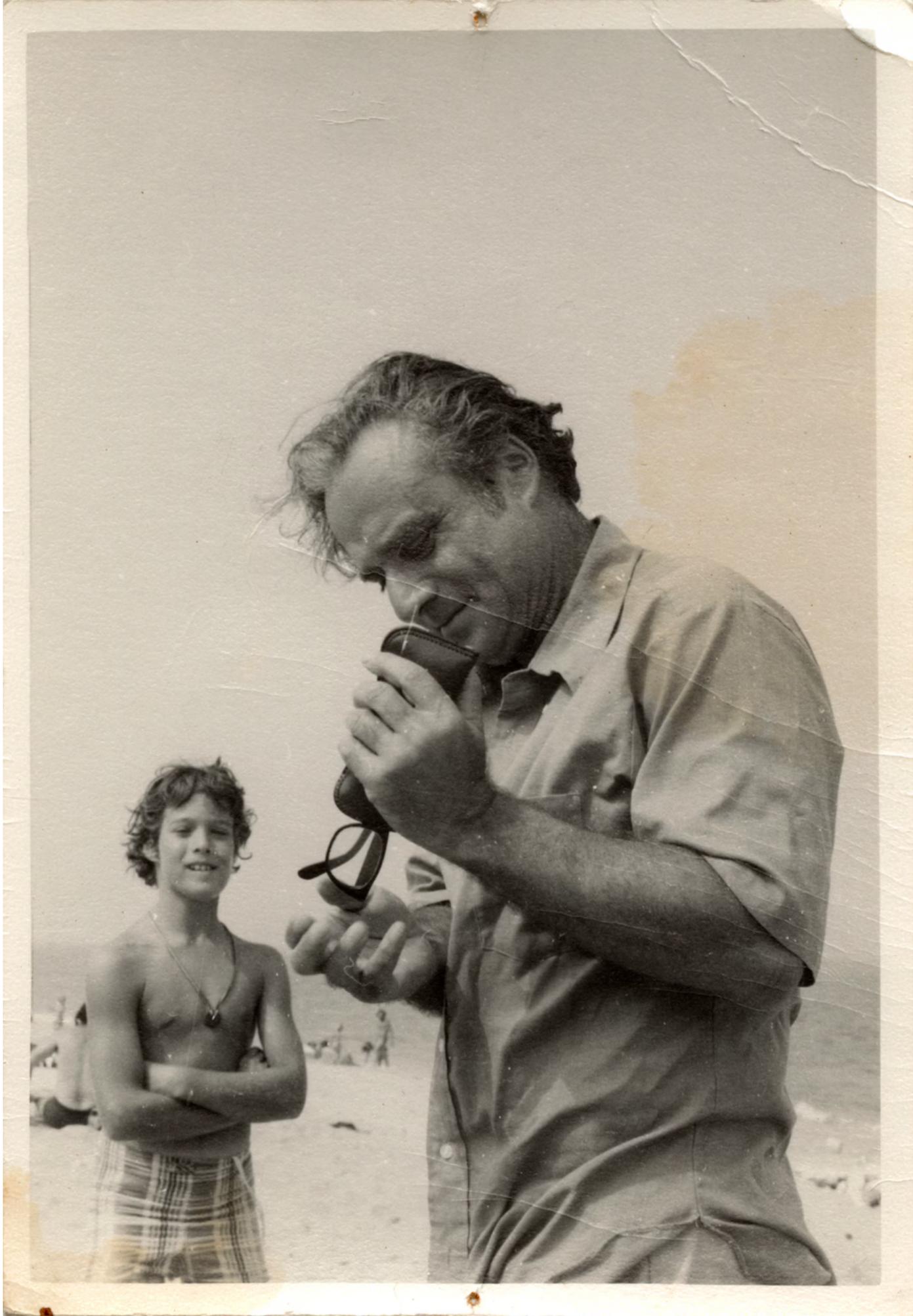
details what happened next: "My abdomen seemed to be simply made of pain and nothing else," and suddenly he was teetering between life and death. "Halfway to the hospital, a spasm shot through me that lifted my body off the stretcher. It felt like hot lava had been injected into me. A few minutes later I lost control of my bowels and a foul-smelling liquid left me, mostly blood."

The eventual diagnosis: a ruptured aneurysm in a pancreatic artery that had caused a massive abdominal hemorrhage, with enough blood loss to bring Junger perilously close to death. As surgeons worked to save him, Junger experienced the presence of his late father, who invited his son to join him. "There's nothing to be scared of," he seemed to say. "Don't fight it."

Junger, a confirmed atheist and an adherent of the scientific method, had been raised by a physicist (his father) and a painter (his mother). His upbringing had left little room for a spiritual experience like this one, which turns out to be the central conundrum of this book and, I'd venture, his life. The meeting with his father was understandably unnerving. "He was dead, I was alive, and I wanted nothing to do with him." But it's hard to unsee what you've seen: His father had not only visited him but opened the door to the idea that an afterlife might actually exist.

Really? Show me the proof. Oh, you can't. Well, how can

something be true if you can't prove it? Ted Kaptchuk, a well-regarded Harvard physician, once told a [New Yorker writer](#) that he'd always "believed there is an important component of medicine that involves suggestion, ritual and belief," adding: "All ideas that make scientists scream."



Sebastian Junger with his father in a childhood family photo. (Courtesy of Sebastian Junger)

Junger's experience, and the vast amount of reporting he brings to near-death experiences (NDEs), could easily set off a cacophony of screams in academic medicine.

I might have been one of those skeptics myself, had I not had a life-changing near-death experience while in recovery after an all-day cancer surgery. As I once described it: "I was sliding down a tunnel toward a light. I kept resisting but the light overpowered me until I finally agreed to let go. I experienced a sense of peace, even destiny, in those moments before I heard the ruckus around me, the medical staff desperately (and successfully) pulling me back."

Medicine might write it off as a result of [oxygen deprivation](#) to the brain. But it was as real to me as when, a decade later, my grandmother — who had been barely sentient — sat up in her hospital bed, reached up to the ceiling and, as though recognizing someone, called out, "Mother." She died soon after.

Mere hallucinations? Maybe, maybe not. Junger cites the 1926 book "Death-Bed Visions," by British physicist William F. Barrett, which became a classic compendium of a phenomenon many recognized but few understood. What stood out — then as well as now, he writes — is that "the accounts are startlingly consistent not only with each other

but with many accounts from today."

Ever the reporter, Junger is unwilling to write off these experiences as hallucinations (or any of the other medical explanations). He admits he was hoping for evidence of an afterlife, finding hints of it in the universality of NDEs that feature seeing the dead. After all, he writes, "there are neurochemical explanations for why people hallucinate, but not for why they keep hallucinating the same thing."

Much earlier in the book, Junger writes: "[My mother] would ask why [my father] couldn't just believe in something he didn't understand, and I would watch my father frown and ponder that question as if it, too, might prove useful in some hyper-rational way."

Can we prove an afterlife exists? No. Might one exist? Junger gives us reason to believe in that possibility. In any case, how lucky we are that Junger survived and that we're able to join him on another mind-blowing adventure — this time to a place all of us will one day visit.

In My Time of Dying

How I Came Face to Face With the Idea of an Afterlife

Simon & Schuster. 176 pp. \$27.99