

Illuminating the Hidden Forest

Chapter 7: Gear

[Carolyn Newberger](#) Tuesday, Aug 6, 2019



'Oyster Mushrooms on a Log.' Watercolor by Carolyn Newberger

[Life In the Berkshires](#)

This is the seventh installment in a series. To read the previous installments, [click here](#).

July 28, 2018

A mushroomer needs a good knife—not the paring knife I've wrapped in a paper towel, carried in my vest pocket and have lost somewhere in the woods, but a real knife, a woodsperson's knife, with a no-nonsense blade that folds into its no-nonsense handle.

You see, it's all about gear: Skin-tight shorts on a sleek bike and a shirt with a pocket on the back to hold the water bottle; or a form-fitting parka and Carrera goggles as one slaloms down the slope. If three-quarters of sport's performance is mental, then three-quarters of mental is having the right gear.



Carolyn with her gear and Lily in her coyote vest (more about that in later chapters). Photo: Eli Newberger

Whatever performance is in the woods, gear has got to be a part of it. I have my bug-off pants, my bug-off shirt, socks, hat, jacket and even bug-off gaiters. I have my fishing vest with snapped and zippered pockets, my pole, my bear bell, my drawing kit, Lily's 15-foot leash and collecting bags for whatever needs collecting from (ahem) Lily, and beyond. What I haven't had is a suitable knife.

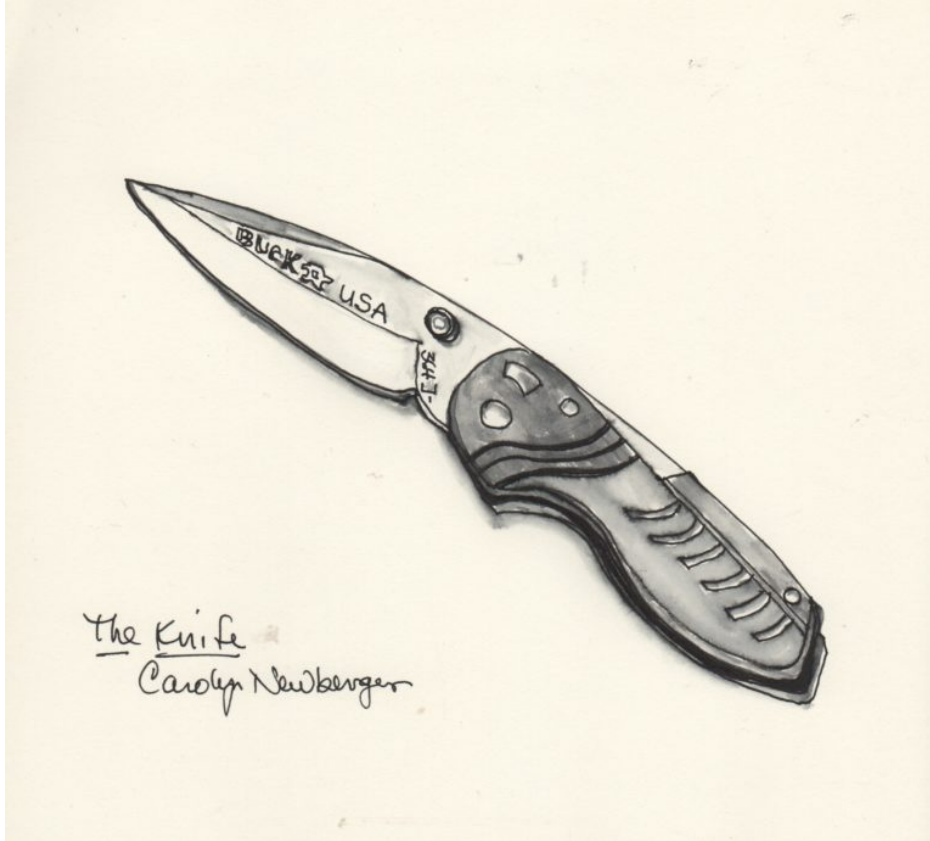
Now, Eli and I are blessed with many knives. Of course we have a full complement of kitchen knives, blended from two households and my late mother's kitchen. We also have three Swiss Army knives, one attached to a key ring, a present one year from the chief psychologist at the Judge Baker

Children's Center to the psychology staff, inscribed with "JBCC" and the Harvard seal. Another nestles in a tooled leather holster and sports every manner of can and bottle opener, tooth picker, nail filer, a small blade and another blade only slightly bigger—no match for a chicken of the woods or even an oyster mushroom. The third Swiss Army knife is a version of Number Two. No wonder the Swiss stay neutral in war.

The search for a suitable knife also yielded a lovely specimen from Eli's center desk drawer. This is a folding beauty, metal and wood with a 5-inch blade and a children's hospital medallion on the handle. A thank-you for 20 years of service, perhaps? From a children's hospital?

The blade opened beautifully, but not for love or money could I get it to close again. I could depress the button on the back of the handle, but hard as I tried, I couldn't budge the blade. Eli could do it. Our neighbor, Mike, could do it. But I couldn't do it.

So off to the Arcadian Shop I went. Larry, the owner, unlocked the knife cabinet in the back of the store containing shelves of serious-looking knives: buck knives, the kind of knives you can't carry in your car even when it's OK to carry a concealed gun in your glove compartment—knives worthy of a woman in the woods.



The perfect knife: serious but understated. Drawing by Carolyn Newberger

But, oh my goodness, expensive knives: \$70 knives, \$90 knives, considerably north-of-\$100 knives. I told Larry, somewhat apologetically, that I didn't feel worthy of those knives, duffer that I am. Then a lovely, gray-handled carbon-steel knife with about a 3-inch blade caught my eye. It was a serious but understated knife, a knife that didn't scream, "I think I'm Davy Crockett," but that would get the job modestly and quietly done—a \$25 knife, a knife to which I felt worthy.

This morning I revisited the oyster mushrooms in the jumble of tree pieces. I remembered where to find them. They had grown puffy and sweet, like forest marshmallows. I felt a bit regretful severing them from their niche in the mother stump, but it's all a guessing game, to me, anyway.

Will they grow bigger and bigger if I wait, or will they yellow and calcify like their old brethren that I see else elsewhere in the forest? How will I feel if I come back tomorrow and beetles have nibbled at their edges? I see a fly on them right now!

So I pulled out my knife, released the blade, remembering for a moment and dismissing that I have never washed it, and sliced through one and then

another and then another of the stems, compacted and huddling at the stump's edge. My new knife sliced through sturdily, competently and humbly. I wiped the blade on my pants, pressed the bar on the handle, folded the blade into its safe slot and rested it quietly in my vest pocket: a job well-done.

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