

**The Wave**

Then my rage, built up on layers of frustration and disappointment, crystallized over time. When the grade point average dropped, the car accident he never disclosed, the scrape on my car he didn't admit until the third questioning. The smell of beer. The furtive texts about something we were pretty sure meant drugs.

That all gets pushed aside when I see him cry. Not apologizing or seeking forgiveness, but tears of anger because we cancelled the one thing he'd been looking forward to. At least that's what we tell ourselves.

He looked so small, low in the front seat of a car he'd been forbidden to drive. Like a child pretending to be a man, instead of the 18 year-old he was, who would be going to college in just a few weeks, leaving home. And while it wasn't for good, it would never be the same and I knew it. Once this door closed he would forever be a guest. Even more distant than he'd been this last year.

It was longer than a year really, the first signs coming the previous summer. Not just the distance of a boy preparing to leave home, but a child losing his way. We didn't know, Tammy and I, if he would come back from wherever he had been. We hoped to find him again, but wondered, as you do with first children, is it just a phase or a permanent place?

Once I returned to the kitchen where my wife sat, the blue tissue crumpled in her hand, I had to explain how I backtracked on the decision to cancel the trip. The one I agreed to and now reneged on. But I do so from a good place. I tell myself that this trip will be the salve that heals the wounds.

Surfing was the first sport I taught him and the one place where we could be together and apart, enjoying and commenting on the other's success without the constant crowding. It was a solitary event where I could cheerlead and perhaps show him the love in my heart without ruining things by asking too many questions.

Few words were uttered on the six-hour flight. The layover was mostly talk of food, length of wait, the next gate, how the surf boards might be faring in a luggage compartment beneath the plane.

Once on land, the roads were cobbled together, unpaved, the ride bumpy and long. We drove slowly, cars packed with locals, overloaded trucks heading somewhere; there were just so many of them.

It wasn't like rush hour back home where it peaked and thinned. Here it was constant, through the night. Past seven that evening the sounds of this foreign land flooded through open car windows, the wind from the water pushing it toward us, burying the quiet.

I would not try too hard this trip. I told myself this. And so I said nothing even as the white head phones shut me out, drowning my son in music that seemed to have few words, mostly rhythm that ran, dipped, peaked and then dropped. The sounds pumping outside of his head, loud enough for me and the taxi driver to hear, muffled against Ricky's long hair.

"Where's the hotel?" were the first words he said of any substance, as we pulled to a stop a couple hundred yards from the beach. He didn't deserve an answer and so I busied myself getting cash as the cabbie untied the boards from the car roof.

We walked in silence to the sand where we started a fire with few words.

"Gather some sticks"

"Get out the gear"

"Watch out for crabs"

After some preparation the only sound was Ricky's fork scraping along the bottom of a metal container we used for camping trips. "Do you want to know the plan?" I asked.

"I assume we surf?" the boy said, not really a question.

I decided not to answer.

As the fire burned itself out, the sky opened and lit with stars. The sand cooled and without speaking, each of us at different times took out our sweatshirts, then sweatpants and socks from our backpacks.

"Where we sleeping?" Ricky asked.

"Right here," I told him

"You're kidding," he said, vaguely pissed off.

"We'd cancelled the hotel when we thought the trip might not happen and I couldn't re-book."

"The beach is probably cleaner than anyplace in this dumpy town anyways," he said.

"We didn't come here for the comforts, did we?" I said, looking around at the collection of pock-marked buildings, faded pink and yellow paint covering long flat walls of other washed-away colors.

"Everything looks booked," I said, pointing to the small hand printed 'No Vacancy' signs.

The look on Ricky's face was enough for me to believe I'd appropriately confused the kid. It was real emotion. "I'm fine here," Ricky said defiantly, his sleeping bag unfurled on the hard sand.

I told him I was going to look for a cup of coffee. "In case you're asleep when I get back let's meet there for breakfast," I said pointing to a café, stacks of plastic chairs visible behind the lighted window.

"I might already be on the waves by then," Ricky said.

"I'd wait for the guide," I said. "These aren't like waves back home."

And with that I walked away and when I reached a safe distance I moved quickly from the street lamps and entered the 'No Vacancy' hotel from the dark side. "I'm Mr. Floyd," I told the man at the front desk.

"You pay for four rooms," the old man with the deep tan and deeper lines on his face, said.

"Four?"

"You tell me put up 'No Vacancy' sign. You pay for empty rooms," the man said. "That was deal."

I kept the curtains drawn and the lights off in my room so I could watch Ricky on the beach. The boy didn't move, lying in his sleeping bag, a smart distance from the fire, from the water, just as he'd been taught.

I slept the final hours of the night and was already through my first cup of coffee when Ricky walked in the door.

"How'd you sleep?" I asked, my son's face trying to smile, a cover I had become accustomed to.

"Can you order me some pancakes, I need to pee," he said, dropping his pack on the floor, sand spraying out in all directions.

We had been surfing together since Ricky could stand on a board which was early. He was a prodigy, I thought, his ability to balance far beyond his years. Any type of board really, skate, surf, snow, you name it, he had a knack for it and we did it together, even when the rest of the family couldn't. I knew I'd mistaken this bond, this commonality of interest, as friendship. It was hard to distinguish what was normal and what was not. My own relationship with my father so frayed from this same high school age that it never recovered.

Now I waited for my son to come out of the bathroom so we could talk. I wouldn't try to repair it all at once. Small steps. Each meal, every break would be building blocks, helping us both cross this age and get to the other side.

But there was no talking at breakfast. Ricky stuffed the pancakes into his mouth, the orange juice chasing it down, every answer a grunt, a wordless letter: K, mm, uh.

Every time I asked a question it felt like asking too much. I needed to stop. But I couldn't.

"Did I ever tell you about the time I tried to take grandpa surfing?"

"There aren't many stories you haven't told me," Ricky said.

"I'm sure there must be some."

"Well I can't remember the last time you told me a story I couldn't finish," Ricky countered.

"I'm glad you've listened."

"All the stories have a lesson, right, because that's what you're trying to do? Make a memory? Stuff all your vast knowledge into my head so that when I go off to college and finally leave the house you will feel you have given me something."

I wouldn't take the bait, even if I did acknowledge, to myself at least, that it was true. I felt the clock ticking and whenever I thought of something, I'd repeat it to Ricky in the form of a question. "Do you know what this does?" I asked the previous week as I walked him downstairs and pointed out the circuit breaker.

Does he know CPR? I don't think I ever taught him how to change a tire. Does he have a tool box?

The beach filled with surfers, even before we met for breakfast. I listened to Gaucho, the man behind the café counter, as he spoke with each patron, sending them on their way, warning of the shallow parts, the new rocks that had surfaced overnight, the ones that damaged boards or sliced surfers the day before.

"We're gonna head out," I said to no one in particular, as Ricky gathered the last of the syrup around the rim of his plate with a pinky.

"You are here for the waves," Gaucho said with an unfamiliar accent. "You need to know the secrets of the Madragone."

"The secrets?" I asked with a smile, hoping to entice Ricky in the conversation.

"Oh Jesus," I heard my son say under my breath, walking past us and toward the door.

Gaucho had either not heard the comment or ignored it. "The question is not whether the best waves of your life will arrive. They will. The question is whether you will recognize them."

"We have a guide," I started in.

"There are treacheries out there," Gaucho warned. "Do not be greedy. Wait for the right wave. But if you miss it, do not chase it. Let it run itself out. If you take it too late you will come too close to shore and you will suffer."

Ricky was waiting impatiently at the door, reading a bulletin board of used equipment. "They will destroy you," Gaucho continued. "I put up that buoy every morning, stay beyond it," he said pointing to a red, white and blue object bobbing in the water just offshore. "Young man," he said loudly in Ricky's direction, "These waves are like pretty girls. Chase only what you can catch."

As with anything outdoors, there is only so much you can plan. The hotels, the flights and guides yes, but the weather and the waves were beyond my control. The sun will set and the moon will rise, but waves and the wind have their own cosmic schedule. I knew that nothing good would come from this weekend without waves. And on that first day, they were not coming.



Paddling out I felt the water rise and drop, the board still, the waves made only muted sounds then padded up against the shore. Ricky and I were out there together, alone, each in our own universe, the waves lifting and then dropping us, together, in silence. The only break coming from the sounds of nature and the voices of the other surfers yelling in foreign languages. But as the day progressed and the waves flattened, the others peeled off, now shouting from shore, filling the tables of the café, beers in their hands, instead of surf boards.

By 2:00 I was tired and signaled to our guide Paco, a young man who spoke no English, that it may be time to go in. Ricky ignored our first attempts at getting him to the beach, remaining on his board as I dried myself in the shiftless late day sun. Ricky waited it out, just one good wave, like a good putt on the golf course, can erase hours of nothingness.

“No waves,” I said to Paco, “The enemy of the surfer.”

“No sir,” Gaucho said, now standing with us. “Do not blame the waves. The wave that is up was also down. A small wave becomes a big one. And a big one small. It is the man who decides the difference.”

“Between a big and small wave?” I asked.

“Man does not know the difference between the wave that is coming and the one that is past him,” he said. “You must always keep your eyes open, the moments don’t tell you when they are coming, they just arrive.”

“But there are the perfect waves,” I said.

“Waves don’t come perfect,” he said. “Perfect comes when man meets water.”

I was proud of my son's determination. His patience, waiting on the board, the same slow waves that didn't show their teeth. But then we saw it, a huge hump off in the distance ready to overtake the smattering of surfers that remained.

The water, spraying up as Ricky's arms splashed forward, trying to get ahead of it, the wave positioning itself. But the water came faster and by this time of day Ricky's arms must have been tired. He couldn't have realized how slow he was going. He reached the wave too late, but still he tried to ride it. It broke, I could see it from the beach, but there was no way Ricky could, already engulfed by the sound and size of the swell. He was on it and in it. It took him, up, up and then too far, too close to the edge, the place where Gaucho had said not to go. And then the water crashed down on him, washing him away, erasing him from sight.

I was running toward the water, my nervous system sprung from a place deep inside my most basic human instinct. But then Ricky's surf board shot up from the belly of the water, the tether torn from his leg. Paco, now ankle deep in the water, looked for a bobbing head. But it was his feet we saw first bouncing up, his arms outstretched holding onto the buoy. Paco was there first, with Ricky over his shoulder, the boy coughing up seawater.

Paco laid him on his back and then I saw the wide smile of my son. A smile I hadn't seen in more than a year.

"Rad, dad," was the first thing he said. "That was rad, wasn't it?"

"It was so rad," I said.

That night we shared the hotel room. The bed big enough for both even if we hadn't been exhausted by the day's events. Ricky was asleep first. Gaucho had treated his scrapes and bruises with a local remedy of Tylenol and a shot of tequila.

The next morning Paco was there when we sat down to eat. Ricky rolled his neck round and round trying to stretch the soreness and stiffness from his body. But the grin increased as each passerby asked if he was the one who rode the day's "Las Grande."

"How's it feel being a rock star?" I asked, pleasure in my son's accomplishment, but also pleasure in his pleasure. Ricky's smile faded. I should have said nothing. But it was one of those moments, like the ones after a disagreement, where I believed we were again on safe ground, I thought everything was back to normal, but it wasn't. But I wanted it to be. To move on from the acrimony at a pace that human interaction can't.

He hadn't smiled that much in my presence, in forever. I wanted to call home and tell Tammy that Ricky was happy. Even if it wasn't with me or because of me, but just to be happy in my presence was gift enough.

I asked if he was ready to head out, even though I knew the boy was hurting. Ricky nodded, a wince came across his face as he twisted out of his chair.

"You may want to take it slow," I said.

I reached into my bag and placed a bottle of aspirin on the table, regretting my last comment. "You can be the rock star, I'll try to be just the star's father." He nudged the bottle back toward me.

"So you want to be God?" Ricky said.

"What do you mean?"

"No one knows where stars come from," he said. "And you want to be known as the creator of the star."

"I'm just admiring the star," I said and headed for the door.

Paddling out I cared less if the waves were big or small, the excitement of the previous day was enough to carry us. I actually hoped for a batch of little waves as not to tempt Ricky into another heroic effort. But soon after the first ripples, the wind picked up and the waves followed. I gave Ricky a thumbs up, my son looking into his phone.

I could see the buoy, the one that saved Ricky the day before and the place Gaucho called the warning track. The place where you bailed out if the wave outran you.

The sound was all I needed, my arms fresh I pounded at the water, pushing it aside as I chased it. Faster, faster, the crest was coming as I kept one eye looking toward the wave and the other at the buoy. The wave came and the buoy too, both of them racing at the same speed. I looked past the buoy to the beach where Ricky was standing now, clapping his hands.

"Hit it, hit it," were the last words I heard as my feet landed on the board. Standing now all focus on the wave behind me and the board beneath. I rode as it rolled and rolled, riding the bumps, my knees like rubber, bouncing each one away. I saw Ricky again, fist pumped in the air. Paco running out from café.

Spitting away the spray that shot up at my face I headed down the back side, looking where to pop my landing, the buoy now well past me. I would learn later, but couldn't have known then, that Gaucho had slept in, sick from too much tequila. He hadn't moved the striped warning signal, the one I headed toward. The one that was now out of position.

They assumed it was the board that crashed down on my head and knocked me unconscious. That's why I didn't feel the edges of the jagged rocks that grated the skin on my chest or the cut on my forehead that might, or might not, need stitches.

We did not surf the next day. Both of us too sore, but we made it to the café to collect the remaining accolades before our flight.

“You come back next year,” Gaucho said to us as we paid our bill. “We expect you come back.”

For me it was not pride in our accomplishments on the water, as much as those moments that just presented themselves, better than the ones I tried to create.

In the car to the airport we chased painkillers with bottles of water, texting Tammy that we both needed doctor appointments when we got back, trying to make each injury sound more dire, just for fun.

“I knew you slept in a hotel that first night,” Ricky said as we checked our bags. “I just knew it.”

“You deserved that,” I said, mussing his hair.

And that was it.

Those were the last words he spoke to me, except a complaint about no Wi-Fi on the plane. He said nothing between take-off and landing. The drive home was silent and when we arrived at the house he dropped his bag in the front hall and marched to his room.

“What happened?” Tammy asked.

“I guess nothing,” I said.