

Stumbling Upon Mowgli

Chapter 3

The cab ride from San Juan Capistrano to Oceanside cost a flat rate of fifty bucks to go roughly twenty-two miles and I arrived home soaking wet and out of cash. While I packed, the job I walked out on never came to mind. Instead, as I fumbled through camping gear, layers of clothing, and which surfboards to bring along the only thought that penetrated the thick layer of clouds surrounding my head came in the form of Karana. I took the last of the peanut butter from the pantry and could smell her in the empty house. I watched her silhouette gallivant upon the walls moving in offbeat, elated convulsions to a country song I would never catch the name of, I caught sight of the knife that sliced her index finger nearly to the bone when she was cutting tomatoes from our garden, and at once I missed her. I threw the plastic jar and a handful of Emergen-C's into a Rubbermaid container and closed it shut burdened with thoughts about what a horrible time it was to disappear.

I called Cosmo from the cab and it took all I could manage to hold him off until 2:30 which only allowed a moment to say a quick good-bye to Karana on her early day off work. I told her so much in a return text message. When we talked at the harbor he mentioned that he wanted to leave by three, but after telling him the train story he welled with excitement and could not wait to get going. She walked in at ten after two with the hood of her jacket over her sandy-blond curls. I tried to speak, but words cluttered on the tongue like a backup on the freeway, stalled and nowhere to go, and for what seemed like an entire minute we just stared at one another. Finally she broke the silence.

“What time is Cosmo coming to get you again?” she asked removing her saturated hood. Karana often asked questions she already knew the answers to.

“I was able to get him to wait until 2:30.”

“So about twenty minutes then?”

“Yeah, give or take.” I looked at the floor. “You knew this was coming, how come you didn't tell me?”

“Because I knew you would have talked your way out of it if you had more time.”

“Am I that predictable now?”

“No, but on this one you would have definitely rationalized, but don’t do it. Be content with your decision.” I wanted to say something clever, something lasting and absolving that she could hang onto in my absence, something that might lighten the air and let us part on a good note after days of not resolving our conflict, but she read my thoughts and stopped me before I could get a word out.

“Let’s leave everything as it is o.k.,” she continued. “We don’t have the time and I do not want to pressure you to spit out a fabricated answer.” She took off her light-blue coat and draped it over the couch. Her eyes returned from the furniture and found mine, which I am sure looked lost and confused, then instantly she moved her hazel lenses to the wall and proceeded to talk. She often used the tactic of casting off her gazes when trying to placate my concerns and I could never tell if she was being completely honest with her diverted eyes. I pondered her validity as she continued. “Hopefully this trip will bring you to a place where you feel comfortable enough to give me an honest answer, either way, no matter what the outcome. Take this time. Cosmo wants you to make this voyage. Though sending you off alone with him might not be the most intelligent thing in the world to do, for who knows what will happen while you spend that much time with Cosmo, but I know this is what you are supposed to be doing. And as I wanted to extend in my text message this morning, go and enjoy this time. You have been working non-stop. Your patterns are too repetitive as of late and I know that is killing you. Go and breathe the open air. Explore and say hello to the man you are, the man I love, the man I will be patiently waiting for when you return.”

Still at a loss for words I pulled her into my chest and squeezed our bodies together. She smelled of fresh rain and sunk into my bones like a warm fire. I could not let go. Many days had passed since we held each other with such vigor and even with the lingering agitation between us she returned the embrace with equal strength. Perhaps it was the situation, perhaps her tone, perhaps I finally let myself feel vulnerable enough to release emotions that festered inside of me, but no matter what force orchestrated the moment my tear ducts opened up and liquid poured from my cheeks and mingled with her already damp hair. The sobs were

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uncontrollable and not related to any one particular thought. I loved her, I knew it, but could not understand in that perfect moment of complete exposure and comfort in her arms why I could not answer her directly. Why I side-stepped serious questions. Why could I not come to terms with the reality that there was not a better partner on the planet to share my life with? The questions seared my skin and brought streaming tears to a halt as I could no longer stand the ambivalent ogre that held onto such a precious creature.

I wiped my cheeks and separated from her. “You are amazing,” I managed to say. “Not sure that I even deserve you.”

“Don’t say that,” she said and took the sleeve of her sweatshirt to dry off the remaining moisture on my face. “That is an awful thing to say. That’s like saying I’m a moron for wasting my time on a complete waste of time, which you know you are not. Just give me a kiss and promise you will be safe, and that you will come back to me.”

I took my time and stared into her eyes; deep, understanding eyes which gave me their undivided attention. Classified as hazel on her driver’s license her eye color always tricked me. Their chameleon act made me nervous when we first started dating, because I was afraid she would catch me off guard with the question of detailing her exact shade. With a bit of luck she mollified my fears at breakfast one morning three weeks after our first date. She picked up a slightly charred piece of bacon and took a bite while studying my face. “Your eyes can almost be called hazel like mine,” she said. I almost choked on my orange juice while trying to respond. Most days I called them brown, other times gray, but staring into the depths of her irises before saying goodbye they seemed to emit a strong trace of green. The green flashed like the surface of the sea in dense coves off of Highway One in Big Sur and radiated a sense of invitation and warmth. A near jade set of alluring gems exuded serenity, a peace similar to one of those sublime coves, yet so much could hide beneath such dreamy beauty. From the exterior all appeared calm, but currents surged, predators roamed, cold impaled with white shark fangs, all elements churned under a soothing carapace. Whatever sea of emotions stabbed her guts in that embrace she left them tacit and reached for my lips concealing any internal commotion. The kiss was brief and lacked passion, but our wrapped bodies made up for its lack of zeal.

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“I love you,” was all I could get out. No promises of my safety, no oaths of returning cleansed and refreshed, just three hackneyed words re-used throughout modern history escaped into the stillness of our rented home and transformed the sea beneath her ribcage into a raging tempest.

I left Oceanside in a fog. I climbed into the Scout numb and unreflective about my charge off of the train. We crossed the Mexican border at 3:38 in the afternoon. Sporadic showers played hide and seek all the way from Oceanside to the crossing point at San Ysidro, with each downpour less brusque than the one before. Our gear remained dry underneath the protection of the hard top covering J.P.’s old International Scout while a fourteen foot Boston Whaler attached by trailer hitch and harness paddled along behind us open to the elements. The small, aluminum boat would slow our progress and limit the number of roads we could travel down along the way, but its purpose and accompaniment on the journey was set in stone as its destiny stood firm on the blue waters of the Pacific a few hundred miles south of the border.

The wait to get into Baja could take no time at all depending on what hour we crossed through it. Passing through before three P.M. on a Wednesday our lane piled up with only five cars in front of us, which made our total wait time about one minute and thirty seconds. The procedure for getting across was fairly simple. We pulled our vehicle over large, steel alligator teeth that came up from the ground and could probably rip the tracks off a D-9 tractor if we tried to reverse over them. Not that we could back up anyhow with the volume and speed of a parade of cars that lined up behind us. After crossing the jagged fangs a stop light with one red and one green light stood in front and to the left as a guard with his back to the vehicle and perched about six feet off the ground monitored the incoming swarms. If the light rang and shined green it would say “Pase” and on with our journey, but if the light rang and blared red we would have to pull over to the right hand side where teenagers and young men armed with M-16’s checked through our belongings and asked questions about what items we brought into the country. Over many years of making the trek across the border I was only pulled over one time entering Mexico. The questions were brief, spoken solely in Spanish, and responses of “acampar” and “surfear” so near to the English versions registered with the young soldiers who waved me on

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with open grins and shoulder-strapped weapons. No such ordeal replayed itself as Cosmo and I received the green light and our caravan of truck and boat trailer jumped over the alligator teeth and welcomed the adventure of a new country.

We began the ascent up a steep, extended grade which lead to the Tijuana beaches and the toll road south through Rosarita and Ensenada and a sudden pang almost stopped my heart. I made a mistake. I never should have left. Karana told me to go, but I suddenly felt like it was only an act she was playing. She was not telling me just to go on the trip, but telling me to go for good in her own subtle way. Thoughts pestered me. I was my own ruin. Passing small houses littered with graffiti, iron bars, and stacked cinder-block I could hardly breathe. Rain ceased to fall for the time being and underneath my breath incantations flowed out requesting Cosmo to turn the truck around. He could not hear the muttering over “Against the Grain” by **Bad Religion**, but somehow he sensed the unease radiating from my rattled frame. He extended his right hand to the volume knob and lowered the music. Cosmo sang out as the volume decreased.

“What’s up buddy, you all right?”

“Huh.”

“You look a little peaked and that you might be mumbling to yourself over there or something.”

“What are we doing Cosmo? What am I doing?”

“Driving into Baja and staying out of the rain.”

“No I mean why am I in this vehicle with you. I have this sudden slap across a sunburn of guilt nearly suffocating me right now. Karana’s face haunts the roadways as we travel along and I keep seeing her hidden displeasure as we said goodbye.” I paused for a moment and licked my lips. They were not dry or in need of any attention, I was just stalling for what I really wanted to ask him. I could no longer hold it in. “Honestly Cosmo, no profound analogies or theories please, do you really need me to be here?”

No response followed while the Scout hummed around a large swooping curve towards the first toll booth. I could not tell, but the silence seemed to expel anger. The volume remained low on the stereo with only faint words decipherable on the continuing MP3 player. A white

sign with blue lettering came into focus as we pulled into a toll booth lane behind a mid-nineties red Nissan Sentra. It was spotted with black flakes where paint peeled from its body and blew into the wind. Autos were 23.00 pesos or \$2.30 U.S. according to the sign. Cosmo pulled some loose cash and a few coins out of his ashtray and wadded it up in his hand. The Nissan sputtered on and we pulled up to the window.

“Buenos tardes señor,” Cosmo said forking over the money.

“Buenos tardes,” the man replied. He wore a navy blue jacket and a matching San Diego Padres hat. “Mucha lluvia hoy, no?” the man asked as he handed over a receipt.

“Si, mucha lluvia,” Cosmo responded. He was right; there was a lot of rain that day. We drove through the toll and Cosmo veered over to the right next to the public restrooms. Adjoined to the restrooms sat a small store no bigger than a normal bedroom. Two young girls stood behind the register. I did not need to go to the bathroom, but I was getting hungry. I picked at some leftover pasta before Cosmo picked me up, but I had yet to eat a solid meal for the day. Sabritas potato chips sounded good, but since we were across the border and nearing dinnertime I felt like I could wait for some real food. Cosmo did not move or motion to unstrap his seatbelt and the Scout engine hummed along as the only noise to fill the void of silence besides the faint trace of music.

“I’m not going to beg you,” Cosmo finally got out. “If you are going with me you are going on your own volition, but make a choice here and now. I’ll go back to TJ and drop you off at a taxi station if you want out, but tell me now.” He looked into the store as a plump, Mexican man entered. I thought for a second he might follow the gentleman and pick up something to munch on, but instead he waited for my response. I could not quite tell if he was upset or just being direct and honest. Whatever his emotion I suddenly felt like a frightened child on his first night sleeping over at a friend’s house. How pathetic he must have thought I was.

“Look, man, I know it took a lot for you to get this far Dano. I mean your job, Karana, I know it was not easy and I appreciate the effort, but you have done the hard part. I want you on this journey, you know that or I would never have asked in the first place, but if it is just too much then let me know. I will think none the less of you.”

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Just as I faced the same words a few hours earlier in a rainy parking lot, he again would not think any less of me, but again how would I ever be able to live with myself after the fact. The confusion swelled. Was I going to lose Karana? What would I do for work if they did not take me back? I became faced with such an uncertain future that only one day before felt solid and definite. A rash decision, an escape from a stalled train and there I sat just south of Tijuana with everything I had been building for possibly lost forever. And to top it off he wanted a decision right then. The road back was so close. All it took was another escape from a Brown International Scout and I could go back and try to rectify my careless behavior.

“How long, seriously man, do you think this will take?”

“I know what you want, but I can’t give it to you. I wish I could but I can’t.” He decreased the volume on the MP3 player to nothing and continued. “I need this to be a journey with no absolutes except for eventually reaching the ultimate destination. I know you would feel more comfortable with a timeline, but that’s not what this trip is about. And like I said if that doesn’t suffice, then I have no problem getting you somewhere where you can get a ride back home. But let me ask you this, how long have you been pent up in that office? How close are you and Karana to setting a date for your wedding? How are you feeling about your place in the world now that you are thirty? Sometimes we need walkabouts, my man, to cleanse our souls and give us a better perspective about this planet we live on. On the cusp of so many things in your life this might be a perfect opportunity for some of that perspective before you make so many life changing decisions.”

I knew he was more right than I would let myself admit, but I wondered if he was trying to influence me. Cosmo could convince a mouse that it was a ferocious predator capable of slaying giant beasts when he set his mind to it. I felt I was the mouse and he was trying to convince me to jump into a battle that I was ill prepared for. I thought for a second and tried to pick out any over manipulations, but then it hit me. If Cosmo really wanted to persuade me to continue on he could have brought up J.P. The whole trip revolved around his memory after all. He could have used the obvious fact and inundated me with an overflow of guilt, but he did not. He never even mentioned J.P and I admired him so much for that.

The words mutated and formed in the stomach, but encountered trouble making it to the voice box. For some reason I felt selfish at the thought of agreeing, for seeking out my own pleasures while the life I left behind carried on and dealt with reality. Yet I made it that far, he was accurate about that being the most difficult part. Already across the border, leaving then would have meant that I quit after we already started. If that was the case I should have never got in the Scout in the first place. I silently prayed that I was just over thinking and Karana meant every word she said. Then I swallowed the useless uncertainty and apprehension buzzing in the air and turned to my friend.

“I could sure use a beer and some tacos about now,” I said. He laughed and unbuckled his seatbelt.

“I got to take a leak first and then we’ll grab some grinds.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Come on, you’re disappointing me. You think we’d pass through without visiting Rina’s.”

I gently slapped my forehead. “Not sure how I let it slip my mind. I guess it has been too long. God I have not seen her in forever. She has to be getting up there in age by now.”

“She never reveals her real age. You know that. I’ll tell you what though; it does not look like that woman ages a bit.”

“Does she still stock Bohemia’s?”

“I’m sure she would run to the market and pick some up for you if they are out. You know she will take care of us. Maybe about twelve tequila shots for you as well stress boy.”

“How about you go piss on your shoes smart ass.”

“How about I just piss on you.” Cosmo pretended to unzip his pants and then hit me in the shoulder. His play taps hurt because he left his middle knuckle slightly higher than the other knuckles so that on impact the blow furnished a textbook Charlie horse. He perfected the technique from years of his uncle J.P. practicing on him and while I rubbed the point of impact it struck me that J.P. would take the journey as charred ashes at the bottom of an urn instead of at the wheel cursing like a sailor. As Cosmo headed towards the bathroom I could not help but

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think of how much he missed his uncle. With a dad missing since the age of fourteen, the only person close to a father figure in his life no longer existed in physical form. A chill rumbled through my body, but I quickly warmed up to the fact that I made a decision to remain on the trip and that Rina's food already tasted hot and magnificent on my tongue.

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