

Chapter 4

A hangover in Mexico is as common as waiting for an extended period of time at the border when returning home to the United States, which always happens, especially after getting into a bottle of tequila. The tongue stuck to the roof of the mouth and I felt as though I walked through an arid desert for three straight days without water. With a pounding head nothing sounded quenching, not water, not soda, not food, and I wailed like a sick sea lion wishing I could take back the last shot I for some reason felt was necessary to chug down when I was already over-polluted with liquid courage. The only cure that ever seemed to work with any consistency was going for a surf. It seemed impossible as a member of the living dead, but the saltwater, the fresh air, the coolness of the sea would enter my pores and go to war against the hangover as if the elements were T-cells fighting a virus. Cosmo and I were hurting and in need of the oceans healing powers the morning after our visit to Rina's.

Rina had fed Cosmo and I a hearty meal complete with fish tacos, rice, beans, guacamole, homemade salsa which burned my mouth and left a strong taste of cilantro on the tongue as it went down, and fresh albacore ceviche in lime juice. The food tasted as delicious as it had during my last visit two years prior. Cosmo and J.P. introduced me to Rina's restaurant and cantina on my first trip to Baja with them. It became a necessary stop on our way down the coast. The food, the company, the big screen televisions showcasing sporting events and boxing matches, as well as a blaring jukebox and on occasion talented local musicians that played their hearts out on Rina's little makeshift stage, not to mention the overall vibe which allowed us to feel right at home made Rina's all too enticing to pass up when heading into Baja.

She greeted us with her usual firm embrace when we entered the door. Our shoes made light tracks of water and mud on the mocha colored tile from the day's earlier rainstorm. The familiar odors of burnt tortillas and onions mixed with stale liquor and sawdust consumed my nostrils as we took a seat in a red-leather booth nearest to the bar. A barely visible sun nestled into the sea when we arrived and Cosmo immediately made arrangements with Rina about a place to stay for the night in the adjacent, quaint hotel she also operated.

With our food on the way we finished our first beer and went outside to pull the Scout around the corner to unload some of our gear into our room. When we returned to our booth we found a full bottle of tequila and a bowl of sliced limes placed on the table. Rina poured out free shots to her customers all the time and often left a bottle on the table for her regulars. She liked to sit down and sip on a shot or two as patrons told her of their latest adventures in life; like who was getting married, who was getting fat, who passed on to the afterlife, and always, always, she asked for any inside information on the Los Angeles Lakers. She listened intently like a grandmother and laughed with her entire body, limbs shook, breasts were in full motion, head tilted back, and in infectious shrills that reminded me of the high pitched yip of a coyote. Along with framed pictures on the walls in her cantina of bullfighters and early nineteen hundreds photos of how Rosarito used to look before the rise of big hotels one could find posters of Kobe Bryant doing a reverse slam dunk, Magic Johnson kissing the NBA finals trophy in 1988 after a second consecutive championship, and Kareem performing his famous skyhook, along with various banners and pendants pertaining to the purple and gold. We told her that Kobe was holding up fine with his ruptured pinky finger and that the addition of Pao Gasol to the team would hopefully bring the Lakers another championship.

She scolded my absence. I blushed and apologized for my hiatus. She also told me that she would not let me in the door on my next visit if I did not bring Karana along with me. On my last trip down the two women met for the first time and they hit it off instantly. Rina had said Karana was the love of my life and that if I let her get away the possibility for love would elude me forever.

Rina thanked us for the visit and promised that we would be safe in her country. Tourism was down with all of the recent violence that made the news in the states. In our haste to leave I forgot about the mass murders and kidnappings that bombarded our newspapers. She blessed our journey and told us not to worry, because her people were beautiful and peaceful. I promised that Karana would be on the next voyage and I gave her a convincing hug, then we toasted to love, to life, and to a night without rain.

The shots flowed, Bohemia beers disappeared fast enough to avoid getting warm, and in the morning we paid for our over indulgence with raging headaches. We wanted to get an early start on the road, but in our condition we slept in later than we hoped. After spicy eggs, beans, and tortillas for breakfast, which I nearly regurgitated when I went to the bathroom to wash my hands, we finally got on the highway around nine in the morning. It was really my fault. Even when he felt awful Cosmo could rally and get himself going. He convinced his body that everything was fine and somehow managed to carry on like nothing in the world ailed him at all. He already packed up the Scout and ordered breakfast when I finally dragged myself out of bed to join him at the table. He sat quietly and read his book.

Cosmo read anything he could get his hands on. He dove into every genre. After testing out of high school a year early he continued his education in libraries around the world on his many surf trips. He asked professors for lists of their favorite books when we took classes together in college. His television rarely came on, and when it did it usually aired something from the History Channel, The Discovery Channel, or Animal Planet. He watched movies quite often, but could not tell you what sitcoms were on the air or which reality show belonged to which star. No matter how many books he took with him on a trip he always made sure to bring along a Hemingway novel as well. He did not always read it, but kept one with him just in case he needed to satisfy a feeling that came to him while on his travels. He was into the **Green Hills of Africa** at breakfast.

I had my head out of the passenger window imbibing the coastal air as we headed out of Rosarito en route to a break named Salsipuedes just north of Ensenada for a mid-morning surf when we left Rina's. The hangover brought on strange emotions. I felt regretful, though I did nothing wrong besides drink a little more than I should have. I also felt a longing for things I did not possess. A man that I wanted to be, but was no where near becoming. Then through the breeze J.P. came to mind. His smile, his laugh, his absence on our voyage weighed on my thoughts. After we exited the water a palpable void would encompass the scene. We would not find J.P. sucking down a beer and frothing at the mouth to critique our surfing.

“You do have arms don’t you?” he would ask. “For god’s sake swing those things around a bit. You look like the damn tin man in need of some oil. Don’t you understand that rotating your arms, shoulders, and head leads the rest of your body into a complete turn? Loosen up. Looks like you are surfing with a stick up your ass,” he always commented or said some version of the statement whenever he watched me flounder about in the ocean. The first sound of it often slapped me with a twinge of insult, but more times than not he hit the nail right on the head. He cured a few of my mechanical glitches over the years. I learned to place my front foot at more of an angle and slide it towards the inside of my board while riding with my back to a crashing wall of water. He also loathed my proclivity to race out of the pocket and get too far ahead of a wave. I could always hear him screaming in my head to slow down and stay locked in the meatier sections of moving water to maximize my talent.

The first time we met he called me a pansy-ass. I sat in Angelo’s fast food restaurant at the south end of Oceanside biting into a large cheeseburger when I heard a deep voice shout out my name. “Is there some pansy-ass named Dane in here?” a large man with a thick, black mustache roared out. In the middle of a bite I could not speak right away and the man started towards the door. I swallowed my food and squeaked out that my name was Dane much the way a shy student would speak on the first day of school when a teacher mispronounced their name. He tromped in my direction with a determined look on his face and sat down at my table. He looked angry, but in control, and I could not tell if he wanted to kick my ass or tell me if someone in my family had just died. The six foot and four inch frame took a seat between me and the door. I could not escape him. I could not figure out what I had done. His hair coiled at the ends into slight curls and his tanned, almost red cheeks burned underneath the halogen lights.

“So you ready to go there buddy?”

“Sir?”

“Don’t call me sir smart ass. Damn I love the onion rings here.” He dipped two monster size rings into my pool of ketchup and chomped them down without asking for permission. A bit of red sauce stuck to his mustache. He grabbed a few more rings and I wanted to tell him to leave, but his presence intimidated me. I decided to wait and let him explain why he stole my

food and unsettled my nerves when I did not even know who he was. He belched and looked out the window. “Are you going to finish that burger or not? It’s time to get on the road.”

“Huh?”

“Huh nothing, on the road. Cosmo got tied up and told me to come get you. He will meet up with us down in Rosarito.”

“What?”

“Gee you have a lot of words in that vocabulary. What, huh, sir must be teaching you all kinds of complex theories out at that college of yours.”

“Excuse me?”

“There we go two words at a time not bad. I’m uncle J.P. And don’t take anything I say personal; I’m just messing with you.” Cosmo and I became friends only a few months before that first meeting with J.P. It took days of rationalizing to finally agree to head into Mexico with him, but he never said anything about a crazy uncle. Common sense told me to bolt for the door while I took another bite of my burger and thought about what kind of lunacy I let myself fall into. J.P. sensed the tension and bellowed out a full laugh. His dimples sucked into his cheeks and the gruffness disappeared.

“Don’t worry I’m not going to eat you. I’m going to hang with you guys for a few days on your trip and when you turn around for home I’m going to go a bit further down to my favorite place in the world. Ever hear of La Escondida?”

I took a breath and felt relieved. “Cosmo mentioned it once, but I’ve never been there.”

“Well maybe on the next trip you can sneak away for a few extra days to come check it out.”

“Yeah, that sounds cool.”

“Good. Grab the rest of that burger and let’s go.” I threw my trash away and took two large bites to finish off my burger. J.P. grabbed my bag off of the ground and I watched him limp towards my surfboard. I did not notice the uneven walk on his way in, I was too nervous, but in a relaxed state I caught sight of his debilitated movement and rushed to get my board before he tried to carry them both. It was hard to tell which leg he favored more, but it appeared as though

the right leg received a bit more coddling. I offered to take the bag, but he glared at me. The message came out very clear; he despised pity and unnecessary help.

We loaded my board into the Scout and started down the road. “This here is my Baja-mobile. It will go anywhere. I got that little boat attached which might give us some trouble, but not too much. What do you think?”

“I like it.”

“I act like a hard ass sometimes, just my personality. Got to make sure you are alright though. But what the hell do I know. Cosmo thinks highly of you and that’s good enough in my book. He has a great judge of character, way the hell better than I do. You should have seen some of the outright bastards and straight bitches of women I have hung around with in my day. Don’t know what I’m thinking sometimes.” He paused and shifted into fifth gear as we gained speed on the freeway. “Anyway I would have thought you were a lame-ass, weenie from the looks of you.”

“Well, umm.”

“Just screwing with you again, gees. Loosen up Dane. You can’t be a worried, mister stick up your ass in my car.” I laughed. It was a true laugh; the guy struck me as hilarious once I got over being intimidated by him. “Can you do me a favor there Dane?”

“Yeah sure.”

“Climb back there and get into the cooler for me would you.” I made my way to the back seat and peered into the rear hatch area. Underneath the cooler lid rested a full bed of ice filled to the top rim.

“What am I looking for in here?”

“Should be a few quarts of beer in there. Pull one of them out.”

I dug through the ice and found a thirty-two ounce bottle of Coors beer. The lid slammed down and I navigated my way back to the front seat. J.P. opened the center console and pulled out two plastic cups and a bottle opener as we glided down highway 5. “Shouldn’t we wait until after the border to open this up,” I asked.

“Nah, don’t worry about it. No one is going to fuck with me. Open it up and pour it out.”

“Will the whole thing fit your cup?”

“What do you think I got two cups out for? So you could stare at an empty cup while I indulged myself?”

“Well I didn’t want to assume.”

“Look this is the way to roll into Baja. Besides that much beer would get warm way too fast drinking it on my own. Split that bottle up. Stop being such a pansy-ass,” he said and we both laughed. I did as I was told and stuck the empty bottle underneath my seat after handing J.P. his cup. We sipped the icy beverage and charged into the dark. I felt invincible with J.P. at the helm and believed his bold statement that nothing would meddle with us on our adventure. He sounded convincing in the way a super-hero would claim to be on the way to save the day, only he was more of anti-hero figure than the likes of Superman or Spiderman. We made it to Rina’s in good spirits after we finished off a second bottle and steered our way over to the bar. His limp made him tough and approachable at the same time. Rina ran up to him and they started to dance. The bartender yelled his name and carried out the P like a soccer announcer would scream the word goal after a score. He was a rock star without the posse. The locals smiled and visitors snuck in and struck up conversations with him while we waited for Cosmo to arrive. That was my very first impression of him. A lion, yet a teddy bear, respected, and well-liked.

My head out the window ten years later and I felt as though I had lost my own uncle. Cosmo had not revealed the entire details of his passing. I restrained from asking, but I did want to know. I also knew that it might be too painful, too soon for Cosmo to discuss the whole ordeal. He found him. Found him cold and dead. He called 911. He took care of all of the paperwork. He called family members and friends. It was all so close, all so much. I knew J.P. suffered from heart problems and arthritis. I also knew he drank heavily and occasionally dabbled in hallucinogenic drugs. The whispers passed through the funeral. “It was a heart attack. It was an overdose,” but nobody knew for sure. Cosmo kept the facts to himself. He told

everyone that J.P., which stood for John Paul, needed to rest and that his tired body could go on no longer. I let it stay a mystery and did not prod him any further even though I knew there was much more to tell.

We exited the toll road at the Salsipuedes turnoff and pulled onto a windy dirt road. The bumps did not sit well with my hangover. We paid five dollars to surf for the day and parked on the bluff. The high cliffs surrounding the bay kept the wind from affecting the waves and we took in a view of near sheet glass. My skin embraced the sun and appreciated its presence after the last few days of rain and cloudy skies. The dissipated storm left behind a decent swell in the water. Cosmo tracked the swell before we left and said we might get lucky and follow it down the coast, because it emanated from the northwest. I sensed that I would be challenged by the surf, by Cosmo, by my own demons, but a peace came with that sense. I would face those challenges. I had to; I was left with no other choice.

Cosmo brought an urn out of the Scout and set it on the hood. It stood about fourteen inches tall and bulged out in the center like a Buddha belly. The urn looked blue in the car, but when exposed to the sun it took on more of a grayish hue. J.P. kept a kiln in the basement of his apartment. Every so often when the urge overcame him he spent hours throwing clay and creating various pieces of ceramic art. He displayed a raw talent for the craft. He never refined his visions, his creative trinkets, and let them stay in primal form straight out of a moment of inspiration complete with defects and minute flaws. He gave most of his artwork away as gifts for birthday's, wedding's, or during Christmastime. The particular urn Cosmo chose to serve as the vessel to carry J.P.'s ashes was a favorite of Cosmo's. J.P. made it the day Cosmo was born. He wanted to give it to Cosmo's mother and father as a gift for bringing a child into the world, but decided against it because he was not satisfied with his work, but it was not a bad piece for the fourteen year old J.P. that created it. The urn came out slightly oblong with a tiny crater caved in it near the base and so he decided to keep it for himself. After Cosmo heard the tale of its creation he asked J.P. if he could have the urn one day. In typical J.P. fashion he told him, "Maybe when I'm dead." The urn, the aluminum boat, and an old cowboy hat were the only

things Cosmo wanted out of J.P.'s belongings. He took them without asking, but no one argued against the deed, everyone knew J.P. would have wanted it that way.

After he changed into his wetsuit Cosmo grabbed his board under his left arm and a small bit of ashes in his right hand. He headed down the cliff and I followed closely behind him. Cosmo waded up to his chest and dropped his head. The tide was high and rose close to the base of the cliff. The rocky beach rumbled as water drained back into the sea. Cosmo did not say anything out loud and let the ashes fall. They floated on the surface for a few seconds until encroaching white wash dunked them below the surface. He looked back at the cliff, down its contours and jagged shapes, and then caught sight of me. He gave a smile that looked half happy and half relieved then jumped on his board and headed towards the surf. It was not much of a ceremony, but the grand finale would not commence until we reached La Escondida, a place dear to J.P.'s heart. Cosmo just wanted J.P. to surf with us the whole way down.

The waves were a bit lumpy and took some effort on our part to make it through the soft sections, but they crested in the chest high range and we surfed with only one other guy in the water. He sat well outside of the lineup and I only remember him catching two waves during the session. Cosmo was in his usual, incredible form. It never mattered if it was his first wave after a raging hangover or his fiftieth wave in a marathon session, Cosmo always made surfing look almost too smooth, too soulful, and that it was as easy as getting out of bed in the morning. His first two turns neared the ridiculous as water exploded off the back of a shoulder high right while he flew down the line. I shook my head in appreciation and turned around for a wave of my own. J.P. was there, I felt it. Felt him laughing at me as I fell on my first wave while trying to emulate Cosmo with a gouging turn. "Get that stick out of your ass," I heard echoing in my ears as clear as the glassy water that sparkled before me.

Chapter 8

We made good time on the single-lane highway after filling up at the gas station. Mid-morning on a Friday far from a major town posed no threat of traffic to the Scout as we hummed along the road. Occasionally we got stuck behind a large semi-truck hauling vegetables, fuel, or lumber, but we blasted right on by the massive trucks during the straight-aways or on the rare passing lanes that sprang up intermittently. My body remained jittery from the encounter with the hawk. I tried to sit still, but could not cease engaging in perpetual, nervous actions. I turned up the music on the MP3 player, and then turned it down. I played with the locks, the windows, my fingernails, the sandals on my feet. I wanted to flush the whole experience from my mind at that moment, not to discard it completely, but rather lock it in a dark cavern somewhere until I could let some time pass from the incident to try and comprehend what actually happened. Maybe a ghost, a vision, a distortion, a misconception, perhaps nothing at all, but the moment needed profound contemplation and the mood in the car did not seem fitting.

Cosmo spotted the known landmark, a boulder which stood about seven feet high and painted completely white. Young lovers marked the rock in spray paint and created hearts with initials inside of them or went to the full name approach and wrote statements such as, "Mario amo Isabel." Below the rock rested three wooden crosses adorned with pinned dates and hordes of decayed flowers. They acted as sacred monuments to loved ones who died in a tragic car accident. The landmark sat on the west shoulder in the middle of a blind curve in both directions. Many scenarios could have played out. Maybe a car tried to pass around the curve and smashed into an oncoming vehicle, or perhaps one vehicle pulled out of the turnoff and thought the road looked clear and another speeding car whipped around the curve to collide with it. It was hard to tell, but at one point in time the curve ended three lives and most definitely altered the lives of many others.

Similar monuments appeared up and down the winding, narrow, reaches of Highway 1. Sometimes the crosses blended in with the scenery, sometimes they caught my eye, and when I did notice I always felt a stab of sorrow, a sense of frolicking spirits, in knowing we passed right over the exact spot where an unfortunate soul took their last breath on the planet. I wondered what they would think of the monuments back home. People would most likely complain. We

were a culture afraid of death. We did not want to be reminded of it any more than necessary. Tuck it neatly into the confines of a somber but lush cemetery and forget about it. One day death reigned as the ultimate tragedy. The next day it would be forgotten, swept under the rug of denial. The Mexican culture on the other hand kept death among them. They accepted its existence and marked its lightning strike right out in the open for all to remember, for all to mourn. I said a silent prayer to the altar as we turned right onto the dirt road.

After about twenty-five minutes of bouncing up and down and every which way, the Scout and the poor little Boston Whaler skipping behind us plowed through the potholes, rocks, stretches of sand, remnant puddles, and brought us to the ocean. Cosmo called the spot Pop Rocks for the sudden emergence of large sea rocks in the line up during shifting tides, but the map named the area Punta Azul, or Blue Point. Pop Rocks produced better waves during the south swells of the summertime season, but could still get really good if the swell approached with a strong push from the west. We knew the current swell possessed a hint of west in it so we thought we would give Pop Rocks a try, but to our dismay the waves did not concur with our theory. We exited the Scout and watched the surf for twenty minutes. A north wind stirred the texture of the sea and the waves broke all at once, offering no more than a second or two of ride time upon them.

“Bummer,” I said, “It’s all walled out.”

“Yeah it sucks. The wind is not helping either.”

“Do you think when the tide starts to go out it will get a little better?”

Cosmo studied the surf. He wore light brown shorts, black sandals, and a black hooded sweatshirt pulled over his ears. Born in Washington State, Karana always made fun of Californian’s like Cosmo and I who at any sign of cold would bundle up with sweatshirts and beanies, and yet would still wear a pair of shorts and possibly a pair of sandals with the abundance of warm gear. Cosmo looked perfectly normal to me, I wore a very similar outfit, but I knew Karana would make a sarcastic comment about the two California kids if she saw us standing on the shore at Pop Rocks. “Nah, the tide going low won’t do anything. This place breaks better on a high tide anyway.”