

Derek J. Douglas

## Anchors Aweigh

Thirty feet from shore I felt an incoming wave, drawing me further out into the sea. I was, at that moment, at the will of the ocean. The pull became stronger until my chest was met by the crest of the wave, pushing past and releasing me. I convulsed, and the trance was broken.

I snapped upright, suddenly aware of my body's firm connection to the sand beneath me. My legs still pulsed with the ebb and flow of the crashing surf, and convinced my mind to follow suit. I was afraid the sea had not released me. I looked over at Cody, who was also sitting up, arms stretched out behind him to prop up his long torso. No man's shoulders appreciate being put in this position for long, and so Cody's shoulders vengefully drank in the sun's rays, slowly turning red in response. I scanned the horizon, aimlessly searching for something to fix my sights on, settling for a moment on a small boy in a white tee shirt and black shorts.

"I feel like the ocean is still tugging at my legs," I said.

"Yeah," Cody said, exhaling, "me too."

The uneasiness of the moment was shared between us. I felt detached, I couldn't help not to. My place in the world felt foreign, but I knew I wasn't lost. It is in these times of sensory confusion that we become aware of the autopilot which guides our daily lives: *Was I really just out in those waves for the last two hours? Did I really drive three and*

*a half hours to get here? Do I really have these relationships with other people, my friends? People who are thinking of me, even when I'm not around? Is this really me? I do this? All the time?* The sum of these thoughts and their reasons for being is to be lucid.

I blinked. Nothing. I was certain at this moment that I had contracted some obscure form of motion sickness, brought on by my choosing to take the form of a stubborn piece of driftwood the last two hours, refusing to wash ashore in a storm.

My eyes shut for a moment now. Once again I felt the pull of the sea on my waist as a mountainous, turquoise wave sucked me into its barrel and crashed down on top of me. You wouldn't see a more beautiful wave in a surfing video. If it was real, I wouldn't have had time to be afraid. Unfortunately, it was not. *Shit.*

I thought I felt like I did the first time I rode a rollercoaster, in fourth grade. I was absolutely terrified, but willed on by the thought of my crumbling social status among the class if I wussed out. The line folded upon itself so many times that my ten year old mind was confident we would never be forced to board anyway. When you see the entirety of a journey stretched out before you it is incomprehensible. After step by agonizingly individual step through the line, we were however pushed through the rickety turnstiles and onto the loading platform. I managed to keep a brave face until the shoulder restraints locked in place, sealing my fate and inevitable doom. I was forced to swallow my heart with every breath as we slowly clanked up the first hill, "lucky" enough to have gotten the very first car.

A handful of back-to-back loops and barrel rolls later my body took the form of a recently struck tuning fork: an intense vibration radiated from my core to the very ends of my fingertips, and I was rendered just as rigid. Stepping off the ride, I could shuffle my feet no more than three or four inches out in front of me at time. I learned later that this gave several of my classmates observing from line the impression that the ride was so intense that it had turned me into a zombie.

“What is wrong with you?” Alex said, taking a few steps wide of me. Whether this was to observe my ridiculousness better or out of fear for my Tyrannosaurus-like plodding, I do not know.

“Nothing!” I said, “I just feel a little funny, that’s all.” I looked up at the sky and pleaded to at least appear normal in front of my friends.

“You’re not going to be sick, are you?” he said, flashing his gap-toothed grin at me.

“No, I don’t feel like that,” I said, “I just need to stop for a minute.”

“You’re so weird!”

I braced myself against a chipped, red railing that smelled like metal. It was warm from the sun. Propped up like a lush, I allowed my muscles to relax as I slowly melted in the space between the bars in the railing. *Sweet relief.* My entire body tingled, it almost felt good to embrace it. A warmth ran from my core to the very ends of my toes on my sandal clad feet. *I’m pissing myself, shit.* I couldn’t turn around to face my friend, so I clutched the railing even more snugly. I suppose it was the ankle-deep puddle around my feet that gave me away.

“Oh,” Alex said, kicking empty air to dry his foot. “Let’s go to the waterpark for a little bit, it’s just over there,” he said, pointing.

I looked down. This time was different: I hadn’t pissed myself.

My anxiety to end this situation only fueled my relentless sub consciousness’ hold on me. In an attempt at logic I decided that I was exhausted and dehydrated, caught only just beyond waking consciousness and immediately before sleep. Unwilling to commit to sleep in a public setting (I had a negative experience with that, too), the meditative purgatory I found myself caught in was haunting. A tune floated across the salt breeze, just as the kites above the beach did:

*When I turned the page  
The corner bent into a perfect dog ear*

*As if the words knew I'd need them again  
But at that time I couldn't see it  
I would read that page every day for the next year*

*She sang a short tune  
And I came from her soft touch and slept*

*We sat on a shoreline watching wind scalp the white off the waves  
Sitting on a shoreline, and if I could do it, I'd dog ear this page  
We spoke about growing old and filling the future's empty stage*

*She sang a short tune  
And I came from her soft touch and slept*

The lyrics bounced around inside of me until they broke the chains that held my eyes shut. I rose! Like a younger Frankenstein I rose up, escaping from my anxiety built prison cell. I looked over to my right, and was not surprised to see Cody standing as well. A chill washed over me: this was not normal.

“I’m going back out there,” Cody said. His face gave away his reluctance, but he grabbed his bodyboard from the sand regardless. We had already been at the beach for eight hours, but he didn’t want to waste a second of it. I decided that I was tired of being wet, I knew he had too, *stubborn*.

“You have three dollar bills?” I asked.

“Three dollars?”

“Yes, three bills.”

“Yeah,” Cody said, “I think so.”

“Fork them over then, I’m getting us water.”

He was already digging through his sandy, dirt colored wallet, peeling apart crusty tens and twenties. God, did this make me feel cheap. I did buy the first round of waters, but I was already indebted to Cody for some of the

trip expenses we agreed to share. I only had plastic money at this time however, and in America convenience is a commodity stronger than debt. I promised myself I would make it up to him later.

Paper in hand, I folded the bills on themselves once, hamburger style, and then again before slipping them into the pocket of my board shorts. I gave Cody a nod and we set off in opposite directions. With the exception of talking to a middle-aged woman with two broken arms from a “moonshine night,” I had been keeping to myself. Conversation eventually found me on the diagonal planks of the seemingly endless boardwalk.

*“ZZZZZZZ.”*

“What? No way!” I said.

*ZZZZZZ...ZZZZZZ...ZZZZZZ.”*

“Ah?! Take my dollar, you little fucker!”

*“...ZZZZZZ!”*

I inspected my dollar. It was slightly damp, but otherwise, a fine specimen. “Only slightly,” I mumbled, eyes narrowing. I engaged myself in the delicate primping of the two corners destined to travel face up into the maw of this cold-hearted beast. I began to cackle to myself with delight.

*“ZZZZzt...”*

“Yes!” I said, raising my arms in triumph.

*“...ZZZZZZ.”*

“No!” I said, “Curse you karma, curse you wet pockets!” startled, a young mother withdrew her tribe of children from my immediate vicinity.

“Worse things happen at sea,” an old man said. He was dressed in yellow rubber rain gear, from mildewed bucket hat down to his reinforced-knee pants, neatly folded just before resting on the tops of gouged, weathered

boots. A full gray beard and crows feet worn deep underneath his temples accentuated the caricature of his person. I smiled at him as he continued plodding down the dry boardwalk.

“That seemed dramatic,” I said in the young mother’s direction. I shuddered at the thought of worse things at sea.

“Zzzzzt.”

A blanket of clouds enveloped the previously blue sky, bringing with it a haze that shrouded the furthest hotels down the boardwalk from view. The air stayed warm, but the lost sun turned the ocean cold, at least for our goose-pimpled bodies. I tried to rejoin Cody in the surf with my board, but I couldn’t force my body above my knees to commit. The repeated rubbing from the sand and my board had completely rubbed off two of the moles on my stomach. I didn’t know this was possible, but I hoped that it meant I had two less to be scanned for cancer someday. I sat in the wet sand and drew the names of people I loved with my finger. Eventually a wave would come and fade them away. After two or three swept in, they existed only in my memory. I planted my hand where the names had been, and returned to our towels.

I watched beach goers turn into beach goners as the more privileged vacationers quietly formed a queue at the foot-wash station beside the bathroom shack. They have dinners to go out to, hotels to freshen up in and lounge, and beach cruisers for their children to occupy themselves on, excited for their first opportunity of freedom and exploration away from home. A raindrop collided with my cheekbone, prompting me to think that one of the sea vultures circling overhead shit on me. I wiped the droplet off with two fingers, and returned it close to my face for inspection. Everything checked out, so I returned it to the world with a flick of my hand.

I found myself back in a trance, thankfully focused on something beautiful. My stare was set on a Mexican family of either six or thirty, huddled underneath a series of umbrellas, or a circus tent. The rain continued to fall

with increasing frequency as the family huddled around a small city of coolers. Madre smiled, cradling a small cardboard box. I couldn't be certain if she was twenty or forty-five as she laughed and handed out chip bags to each member of the family. Abuela placed a mottled-brown cast iron pot on top of the lowest lying cooler and removed the lid. Everyone was already holding a tortilla occupied paper plate and lifted their butts off of their chairs in anticipation. It was hot, I know that it was. I know that grandmothers possess a magic the rest of us do not. They make every meal the perfect temperature, every game of dominoes the perfect way to end the night, and every quilt the perfect pattern of fabrics to push you off into a pleasant dream when you stay over for a weekend. For these reasons and for many more, a grandmother always appears to be the age she has earned. The warm carnitas continued to captivate me. The scene was so vivid that I felt involved, I was either the seventh or the thirty-first participant in their surreal dinner picnic.

My eyes were drawn to a child, the smallest of the children, who stood in black and white while the world around him was glowing with color. Mejo was painted with layer upon layer of sunscreen, which were in contrast to the single depth in his burning, brown eyes. I couldn't help but feel that his true identity had been literally ripped off of his person, the dried epoxy left on his skin the only proof of its prior existence. I realized then that I was not the only one staring. He was looking back at me with matched intensity and a look as dark as the midnight sea. I couldn't tell then if he was six or six hundred. What felt like a bead of ice water trickled down my spine, and I became aware of the illusion that was holding me captive. "If I can't belong than neither can you," his stare said. His face became immersed in a pool of insidious shadow.

"Why?" I asked. The hope I hadn't found that day still eluded me.

"All who choose to wade deep into the sea inevitably become lost," he said, slowly rising above the horizon.

“But I respected the water! The power of breaking waves, the currents that rip you away from shore, the depths you can’t live to see. I knew about it all! I was *careful*. I didn’t want this to happen, not to me.”

I could see Cody swimming in the water behind him.

His laugh crashed down like thunder. “Some give themselves in carelessness, this is true. And some are destined to be swallowed in the rising tide. *Now drown.*”

“No.”

“Yes.”

Thirty feet from shore the ocean floor is littered with small rises and depressions. I took a step from the sandy hump that characterized the thirty-first foot, my outstretched heel catching nothing but water on its descent. Panicked, I floated in place for a moment and prayed the ocean floor would rush up to meet the bottom of my foot and keep my head above water. Long, cold fingers wrapped around my ankles, the sharpness of their ridges biting into my skin, ripping flesh away as they twisted tight. The top of my head submerged beneath the waves. Water poured into my lungs as I tried to yell for help. Arms extended towards the retreating ceiling of light above my head, I was sunk to the depths unknown.

*The sea rises up, up as mountains form over the course of a million years*

*The powers both hold push hidden from within*

*But where mountains erode grain by grain into the sands of time*

*The sea protests and takes the grain of others*