Shared moments

BY CHARLES MONTGOMERY

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» Before everything went to hell, there was a wave.

It was born in a storm somewhere in the North Pacific, and it was pushed by some miracle of physics towards the cedar coast, towards the cloud-grey beach, towards my brother and me. There were other waves before and after. But this one I remember best. We both saw it coming and we paddled like hell on our rented longboards,

and we got to our feet and broke right, and we both rode that shoulder of marbled foam long enough to look each other in the eye, and in a lightning second, we *knew*.

I can't say exactly what it was we knew at that moment. It didn't have a name. It wasn't something we could dissect back at the pub, even if men talked about that sort of thing, which we generally don't. I suppose it was the same knowledge once shared by men—and sure, women, too—when they ventured together into the tundra to hunt for woolly mammoth. It's why, even though we now hunt for our protein at Safeway, we still return to wilderness. It's a knowledge of something good and strong and unbreakable. We both felt it, and it stayed with us after dusk settled on the coast and we peeled off our wetsuits. As we drove east over the spine of Vancouver Island, my brother to his family and me to my lover, we swore we would return before the memory washed away.

We had no idea we were driving into a night that would last years.

The details of our darkness are none of your damn business, but if you have made it to 40, chances are you have a pretty good idea of how it can crash down without notice on a decent life. Women leave. Kids cry. Your dream falls apart. That's the lesson my brother learned. Men leave, too. That was my lesson.

Over the months my brother was buried under a mountain of soiled diapers and dirty socks, while I drifted deeper and deeper into a fog of despair. When I felt crushed by sadness I would imagine the breaking swell, those bouquets of exploding surf, that last glorious moment before losing my balance and tumbling into the foam.

Sometimes the phone would ring late at night. My brother. Kids fed, bathed and tucked in, laundry folded, dogs walked, the guy would jam the phone between his cheek and shoulder so he could talk while washing dishes. I could hear the splash of soapy water.

Sometimes I would hop the night bus, go to him, try my hand at changing diapers. There I experienced that most Hallmark of epiphanies: that the real heroism of this world does not occur on the ocean swell or the south face of K2. It lives in kitchens and bathrooms and laundry rooms, where single parents push through to the eighteenth-hour summit they'll climb again the next day and the day after that.

One night in the thick of winter we hit the sofa with a couple of beers. "Promise me we'll go out there again," my brother said. I promised, then watched as sleep overtook him, his fingers slipping gradually from his half-full Kokanee. The wilderness is not a challenge or a test, I thought. It is our reprieve, and our sustenance.

This year, in the last days of January, a tempest spun through the Pacific somewhere south of Hawaii. It licked the surface of the ocean until ripples grew into chop, then mounds, then even sets of corduroy, rolling east towards Mexico's Sierra Madre Occidental. One set was refracted by the beak of Punta de Mita, just north of Puerto Vallarta, and its waves drifted in an easy crescent towards the river mouth at Sayulita.

There were two dozen boards in the water, mostly hotshots, young guys who spend their lives in the swell, claiming all the best breaks. Now they were turning their eyes to the horizon and realizing that this time they were all way out of position. Not me. I felt that swell bearing down on me, all fullness and potential energy, building towards a perfect crest.

I paddled like hell, one, two, three, and then I was on my feet, clumsily grinding the tail of that eight-footer, dragging one hand along the steepening face, amazed at the generosity of physics, acutely aware of a shape just to my right, on my wave.

One, two, three strokes and he was up, cruising into the slope and now breaking right, like me.

I yelled, and my brother turned his head to me, mouth pursed shut against the spray. For a second we saw each other like that, wild-eyed and helpless and crazy, and we remembered that light follows darkness, and I knew the moment would be enough to carry us long after the wave folded us back into the whorl of its wash, spat us back into the world of fog and dish suds. I went down knowing, and laughing, and ready.

Charles Montgomery's book The Last Heathen *won the 2005 Charles Taylor Prize for Literary Non-fiction.*

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