

THAT
GOLDEN
SHORE

A NOVEL BY J.D. KLEINKE



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FICTION

Catching Babies

Dudeville

NON-FICTION

Oxymorons

Bleeding Edge

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for Sam,

for showing me how to play the guitar

for Reb Aryeh,

for showing me how to pray with the guitar

and for Tasha,

for showing me how to sing without fear

*Like an angel,
Standing in a shaft of light,
Rising up to paradise,
I know I'm gonna shine!*

"ESTIMATED PROPHET"

JOHN BARLOW & ROBERT WEIR

SIDE **ONE**

1 | MYSTERY COVE

A wobble of temporary blacktop weaves across the golden rubble. Last January's storms, which dumped five years' worth of belated rain in two weeks, cleaved off half this mountain and swept whole chunks of this undulating section of Big Sur highway over the cliff and down to the ocean.

Even over the hum of the van's engine at my feet, I can hear the tide crashing on the rocks a hundred yards below as the road shoots out toward the edge for another look. Stripped of the dark green forest usually robing these great folds of mountain, the jagged hillside, caught in what looks like mid-tumble, gleams a garish yellow in the last of the day's sun.

This could be a wilder version of "Sunset Road," that mythic place Johnny made famous back in the '70s and has sung about 10,000 times since, the road *where your old life ends and your life new life bends*.

Johnny sings it every night, the encore of course, because that's what half of the audience came to hear. The stage lights come down, soften to pink and peach, like dusk falling over the small town at the end of the road, even though we're in some casino auditorium or state fair arena. Beers out, towels around our necks, and it's that last night around the campfire, everybody heading down their own sunset road. Even I, up there strapped into my bass and plugged into the boom of the PA, fall for it: there's that tug in my chest, like I'm sixteen again, falling in love with the girl I've never met, and my whole life is ahead of me.

This evening, the road north into Big Sur is my sunset road, the long way home after last night's gig with Johnny and the boys down south. A couple days of surf, sand, and sleep in my own bed, and then off to next week's gig with Amrita, a big yoga retreat up in Sonoma.

The sea-salt air blows through the open van and mixes with an old country blues rock jam, and I look over and there she is: Calafia. Her big blonde hair is a riotous mess in all this wind, whipping around to cover her face as if she were still dancing in front of the stage last night in that tie-dyed tank top. It spills

down her shoulders, muscled from the gym and freckled and honeyed from the sun. As she pushes it from her face, the sun gleaming in those sapphire blue eyes, she just smiles at me, like she did through the whole show. And for today at least, that smile will be enough. We'll meander our way north up the coast in silence, far west of the freeway madness, hugging the coast.

The inky tarmac of the temporary roadway crawls up and over another crest in the slide path, a mound of raw yellow dirt like the tailings of a played-out gold mine. Straight down the cliffside to my left, another cove opens, a chaos of waves and scattering of emerald light, wind-carved trees climbing up the opposite cliffside through rainbow mist.

As the road turns back toward the mountain, I lean out to see if anyone is down there surfing, human or marine, looking for skinny black wetsuits or big brown humps. Nothing but a fingernail of empty beach, a waterfall shooting out from the cliff, more mist, more color.

Calafia smiles again, flashing perfect white teeth out of a faceful of sun, not at all the soaring coastal mountains up ahead, but at me, for how drunk I always get on this scenery, no matter how many times I drive through it.

The road slips into the first big fold of forested mountain, into a deep, shadowy crevice where the wind always dies and everything goes forest-quiet, swallowed up by giant trees marching down the mountainside. This is the start of Big Sur from the south; and yes, Calafia, every single time I've driven this road, camping and hiking and surfing my way through this storied, forested ribbon of coastal highway, it still shocks, like the Grand Canyon, or the Tetons, or Yosemite, more dream than landscape, a hallucination with mileage markers. Sometimes, like all those places, it's too much to grasp, hold, believe. For all the gear in the back of this van, and all the places to pull out ahead and set up camp, suit up, and paddle out, sometimes it seems better just to keep moving than to stop and be overwhelmed by it all.

But today, for all this drunken scenery, something is off.

It isn't until I slow down, and kill the music as I'm pulling into the next turnout deep in the shade of a canyon, that I figure out what it is: the sudden press of intense, dry heat. The air is hot, and dry as crinkly old newspaper, and punctuated with odd gusts of even hotter wind, screaming out of a hair dryer. Like all cliffside landscapes west of the coast ranges up and down California, Big Sur is normally sheltered from the dry blasting heat to the east by this wall of mountains cutting it off from the rest of the world. Down here on the darkened

floor of a forest that towers and canopies to block out the sun, it is not supposed to be this hot, feel this hot, *smell* so oddly hot. It smells like dryness, like an old barn made from older cedar and full of old hay, like tinder aching for a match.

Calafia says nothing, her smile gone, her face blank. I wonder if she also thinks something is off, if she might feel it too.

“That’s weird,” I mutter to myself, let out a long hot breath and shrug it off, cranking the music and pushing on up the road.

The plan is to beat the sunset to Mystery Cove, my pretend-secret surf spot, set up camp by sunset, catch a couple waves before dark. It’s pretend-secret because it’s hard to get to: an unmarked dirt road dead-ends at an unmarked trailhead, and then it’s a half-mile hike with surfboard and gear down a crumbling cliff trail. And while I’ve never had Mystery Cove all to myself, I’ve never been down there with more than half a dozen others. By California standards, that makes it wild and remote compared to the parking lots strung out along the PCH — the Pacific Coast Highway, or just *PCH* down in SoCal, where only the Interstates get “*the’d*” — half a mile in both directions from every other beach trailhead between L.A. and San Francisco.

Calafia would say she remembers how it was long ago, before this road or any other, when we would have it all to ourselves. There would be a big extended family of sea otters — a “romp” of otters, as they’re called — swimming around in the cove, feeding on the same shellfish as we were; a bunch of seals barking on the beach and pair of dolphins playing in the waves; and further offshore, a pair of humpbacks rising and falling, rising and falling with the surf.

The road swings out of the shadow — out of that strange windy pocket of hot air pouring down off the mountain — and back into the sun, the ocean spreading out before us again.

Are the humpbacks moving at this time of year? I want to turn and ask Calafia.

But she won’t answer, only laugh at me. Because she never answers. Because she doesn’t exist.

Oh well, I say to myself, let out a long hot breath, and crank the music even louder.

Calafia does exist, of course, and has for the past 500 years, if only in everybody’s imagination. So why shouldn’t I have a turn?

I would be only the latest in a long line of dreamers to cast Calafia in my own fantasy, and certainly not the first to take her surfing.

She was the warrior goddess in a popular sixteenth-century European romance — *Las Sergas de Esplandián*, *The Adventures of Esplandián* — who ruled

over the vast, wild, golden “island” north of Spanish-held Mexico. She was tall, ferocious, curvy, sexy, and lethal, the queen of a tribe of warrior women. There were no men on her golden island; presumably, they killed them after bedding them, which was surely a better way to go out, back in the sixteenth century, than typhus or dysentery. Or maybe it was just the very first documented “girl-on-girl” porn for the lonely, horny Spanish explorers who dreamed of lucking onto the scene.

Calafia was the feral, carnal, indefatigable counterweight not just to the cold, chaste Virgin Mary but, I’d imagine, to the wife or mother or sister dying of pneumonia and *postpartum* infection back in some feudal hovel in Spain. Garci Rodríguez de Montalvo, the guy who made her up back in 1500 — and all those Spaniards who spanked along to his *Adventures of Esplandián* as they slaughtered their way north from Mexico — painted their fantasy black: she had pitch-dark skin and fierce black eyes. But that was way, *way* back, not just before Hollywood turned the fantasy blonde-haired and blue-eyed, but nearly three centuries before America slaughtered its way west from eastern states full of Northern Europeans.

Which is why this century’s version would be like that woman in front of the stage last night: blonde-haired and blue-eyed, yes, and tall, thin, and gym-cut, 35 going on 21, the “girl” at the end of Sunset Road — *who’s waiting just for me*. Or how Old Freya — lithe, strong, and still out there surfing like a sex goddess in her 60s — must have looked back when she was working as a PT and massage therapist on the pro tour, fixing banged up surfers.

But it’s not just me lusting after Calafia, wishing her along on road trips the way sailors used to wish mermaids out of the sea. It’s Hollywood, and the Laurel Canyon troubadours, and the Beach Boys, wishing they all could be California “girls.” It’s Amrita, Sanskrit for “nectar of immortality,” and her trailing tribe of yoga devotees and teacher-trainees and “brand-amplifiers” — the Acoladies, as we call them. It’s Johnny and his groupies, and all the other dreamers who ever followed their own sunset road out here looking to fall in love, get rich, or just start over. They all yearn for Calafia, even though they’ve never heard of her. If she has a last name, it’s “Promise.” Because she’s the patron saint of the gold rush, the big ranch with orange groves, your face on the silver screen, lots of room for a big new house in a brand-new town going up in the desert, an aerospace job, your face on TV, Haight-Ashbury, Silicon Valley. Calafia never grows old, not just because she doesn’t exist, but because she’s never seen a real

winter, just rain, if and when it comes, and maybe some fog, and then another eight months of sunshine and happiness. She never gets sick and she never dies, only shapeshifts in the golden light, dancing, smiling, beckoning.

I see two of her most popular, current incarnations all the time, at the two very different kinds of gigs I've been playing for a living for the past couple of years: Amrita's *kirtans* and the yoga festivals; and Johnny's state fair and casino shows. She's always up in front, moving with the music, a swirl of hair and color and sex and *now!* Maybe it's a little pathetic, especially at my age, but it turns out I'm just as prone to the fantasy as anyone else, and maybe I would have liked to figure out who that was last night smiling up at me from the rail for most of the show.

Until the last few months, after Old Freya worked her magic on me and Radhe came and went, I never thought that way about women in the crowd, except in the usual just-browsing way. I've been perfectly fine on my own for years, after the ten-year starter marriage, and then the ten-year midlife crisis, and then the crushing, two-year, here-today-and-gone-tomorrow of finding Leah and losing her to ovarian cancer.

Or mostly fine.

Fine enough to consider running off with Radhe, after the incident with the redneck and the gun finally drove her back out of the country.

She practically begged me to go with her, if in that understated, forceful, presumptive way of a skilled surgeon. And I really thought maybe, maybe it was time to do what so many other people seem able to do: shape my life to fit the contours of another's life. Because I really did think about going with her, about jumping off this burning, sinking museum ship of a country. And I would have — right? — if I weren't having such a damn fine time playing the fiddle while this whole country burned. (Though, technically, it's the bass with Johnny and the guitar with Amrita.) And/or if I hadn't lucked into my little cottage in Angel Rest, an abandoned hamlet now fully off the grid thanks to Brooke, my bed — empty as it is — all of 50 feet from a big empty beach an hour south of San Francisco. But nobody's life is perfect; and after all the crap I've been through to get to here, what's a little loneliness?

Sure, I miss Radhe. And maybe I'll change my mind. Johnny will finally spin out and end up back in rehab. Or maybe one of Amrita's Acoladies — or one of the Man Buns, the young male groupies, as we call them — will turn on her in a classic California cult killing. Or my cottage will fall off the cliff into the

ocean, along with the rest of Angel's Rest, finally, and I'll run off to New Zealand and beg Radhe's forgiveness.

I don't know. Maybe there is something about turning 50 — even if you're still surfing and playing music for a living — that sets the heart to yearning for the simple presence of a woman the way it used to yearn for the simpler pleasures of her body . . .

The road swings out of the shadow of the forested mountainside, flooding the van with screaming sunshine.

The engine digs in as I start up the next climb, the road shooting toward cliff edge ahead, an overlook, nothing but blue oblivion beyond.

So maybe I am just holding out for my own version of Calafia; and if Radhe had been her, she wouldn't have fled. Maybe Calafia was that woman on the rail last night, in the purple tie-dyed dress and cowboy boots, half a foot taller than the rest of the crowd, beaming up at us, the warrior-goddess-queen with her sun-splashed arms raised in benediction of the band, the crowd, the music, herself. She sure looked the part, one of Joni Mitchell's ladies of the canyon, or the one Led Zeppelin went to California for, down from her urban mountain cabin to drink beer, smoke weed, and dance.

If I were in my 30s, or maybe even 40s, I could have given in to the fantasy. I could have been that skeezy guy in the band who spots her from the stage, eye-vibes her the whole set, chats her up as she's lingering over the merch table. Then we're off into the hot summer night, up some juniper canyon to the hot tub behind her hippie cabin for howling sex under the stars.

And there I go again. Great. How long has it been since Radhe left?

But no. No sex, no juniper canyon, and no stars, if only because the gig was in that crappy casino down in San Bernardino.

So I'll skip out on that ugly reality, and stick with the part of the Calafia fantasy that doesn't make my loins tingle and chest ache — for Radhe, off to New Zealand? for my sweet Leah, off to oblivion? for somebody, anybody? — that much more. I'll spare myself the clawing industrial light and burnt metallic air of a San Bernardino County morning, and the awkwardness of getting out of her shitty apartment at the crummy end of the wrong valley, and instead slink back to this van to sleep alone in the casino parking lot. And I'll wake up again this morning, pretending last night's Calafia — warrior-goddess-queen of the whole world, riding me all night long under the stars — is just my road buddy

today. I'll make it so she can surf like she dances, as powerfully and fluidly and gracefully as Jill and the other Bettys could ski and snowboard back in Colorado.

Because Radhe could never do any of that, and never wanted to. She is a surgeon, and surgeons are serious people, like accountants, corporate lawyers, historians. My Calafia would be none of that. She'd be cool, right to the end, like Old Freya.

Besides, I made my choice about Radhe when she left for that job down in New Zealand. Radhe thought the mountains and surfbreaks and deserts would sell it, knowing that once before I'd happily left behind everything — a wife, a new house, a big job back East — for adventure and adrenaline in my 30s. So why not in my 50s? It's not like I had kids to worry about, then or now.

Sweet Radhe. You tried so hard. The wild new landscapes down there would have been a bonus, and I might have gone there *for* you, not just *with* you.

But for these gigs. I guess.

Radhe was never really dug in here that way. She was just here for residency and the fellowship. After her run-in with that racist piece of shit in San Jose, I knew she was gone and just hadn't left yet. But she told me exactly what was going to happen the night we met, at one of Amrita's *kirtans* over in Palo Alto.

She came in a few minutes late, and worked her way to the front, the crowd parting with smiles and waves. She sat down right in front of me in jeans and a flowing red and orange scarf, and I watched her dissolve almost instantly into the music, like most people who work their way to the rail. But in between songs — when Amrita was telling one of her endless stories about gods and goddesses and universes and whatnot — Radhe stared at my hands the whole time, in a way that felt both odd and good. Which made instant sense when she came up to me, right after we were done, asked me something about my hands, and told me she was an orthopedic surgeon and working on an artificial tissue implant small and strong enough to work in fingers ruined by arthritis.

Over our first drink across the street, after too much nervous talk about my hands, I asked her what she thought about the music. She said it made her nostalgic, whisked her back to her childhood in Bangalore, and made her miss her parents. That's when she told me exactly what would happen: one day she would want to leave, after paying back her med school debt and finishing up work on that implant.

Maybe somewhere back in Asia, she said. Where I do not stick out so much . . .

Yes, somewhere out *there*, I think, as the van makes the crest of the next cliff.

I look out at the great glassy metallic plate of the Pacific, shimmering in the sun.

At the next turnout, I pull over and jump out of the van, and scramble up the grassy bank to the very edge of the cliff, bracing for the usual blast of onshore wind.

But — nothing. Just an eerie calm this afternoon.

I stand on the edge and let the vastness of it wash over me.

The ocean, the ellipsis at the end of the story . . .

. . . but this isn't the end of the story, not when you're still around to tell it, right?

Radhe is out there — way, way out there — and I'm still here, still trying to figure out what to do with my life at an age when most most people seem to have figured out theirs, or at least surrendered to what theirs became.

Alone in my 50s. No family, no kids, no real home, not much of anything — just this impossible dream coming true. I have this wild dumb luck of not one but two steady paying music gigs, after two decades of an on-again, off-again corporate grind. Making an actual living as a musician is something I'd never dared dream, even back at the age people do dream it, as thousands of musicians are far better than I'll ever be, and burn their whole lives down for it.

Sure, both my gigs are weird. Amrita is a dazzling mess, a 60-year old woman with big blonde hair, big fake boobs, and still, somehow, the body of a college gymnast; and the yoga festival crowd is a freakshow of women who want to look like her and men (and women) who want to sleep with her. And Johnny is an even bigger mess, a fallen rock star, who goes psycho at least once every gig, either onstage or off, for a crowd of aging hippies who mistake his between-song tantrums for political prophecy.

Yes, both scenes get old. And like it did for Radhe, the seemingly sudden emergence of armed rednecks everywhere — though it doesn't surprise me at all, given where I grew up — is maddening and terrifying; and I too would love to blow off this whole raging, idiotic, shit show of a failed nation.

But look over there, at those soaring mountains, blanketed with primeval forest; look down there at those emerald waves, crashing into a sculpture garden of rock; look out at that magnificent mirror of ocean, ageless and timeless, promising everything and nothing but a dissolution into eternal peace.

Sorry, Radhe, I say silently to the horizon. It wasn't you. It was all of this. This is who I am now, and how can I ever leave?

I climb down the grassy bank and back into the van, and start down the hill.

The road swings back into the sudden shade of the next forested side canyon, one of the dozens hanging like enormous drapes from the mountains over Big Sur.

But it doesn't go cool like it usually does out of the sun, or dank with spicy green. It's dry like sweetgrass, or old wood in a campfire.

Inside the switchback, the road passes a clutch of little cabins sitting in a copse of towering redwoods.

Up the next cliff, there's the turnout, the cliff where I can see down into Mystery Cove.

I pull in, grab my binoculars, jump out of the van and walk over to the edge.

There it is: the little pocket beach, wedged between two jagged rocky points at the bottom of tumbling cliffs. I scope the trail cutting past the little waterfall to hike down there with my board and gear. But where's the waterfall? I scan the cliffs and it's not there. Dry already, even though it's only June. Huh.

Then, another odd thing this time of the year and hour of the day: a big offshore wind, rushing down from the mountain looming up from the other side of the road, blowing the wrong way, toward the setting sun, feathering the waves down in the cove.

I study the surf through the binoculars. Two surfers out on short boards — only two!

The surf rolls in, one quick little peeler after another, throwing iridescent spray into the offshore wind. Organized, for a cove anyway, breaking a little more right than usual, and feathering pretty badly. But it breaks right, and I'm regular, and can stay low.

I climb back into the van and head down into the canyon feeding the cove.

There's a blast of heat from behind as the highway cuts back into the mountain, the wind dying, the heat welling up inside the van. It will be good to camp down on that beach after a session out on those waves, even without an onshore wind to cool things down. The cove is sheltered on all sides by these cliffs, trapping cooler, moister air from the ocean and turning it into an everywhere-rainbow.

The road turns back out of the canyon, and there it is: that little scratch of unmarked dirt road sneaking behind the guard rail.

I make the turn, and ease the van slowly down the two-track, under the highway, down through a canopy of redwoods to the little clearing.

Another van down here, a Westy, and that's it. Utterly deserted by surfbreak standards. And it's not just because of the tough hike down this trail to the beach. I've seen endless conga lines of people, burdened with surfboards and gear bags and coolers, picking their way down tougher trails than this on surfbreaks from San Diego to well north of San Francisco. This place just happens to be far enough away from both, and inaccessible from any direction except straight down.

I pull on my hiking boots, grab my surfboard and backpack full of camping gear, and start down the trail.

It's a tough hike, especially with my board, switchbacking across the face of a tumbling cliff spiked with agave and wind-sculpted tangles of juniper and chaparral. The seaward side of the trail drops straight down onto great piles of rock and the blanched remains of trees washed down from winter storms.

I climb down the last switchback to the narrow beach, and see the camp from the Westy folks set up at the south end, so I head to the north end and drop my gear.

And breathe out.

Finally, fully, ahh.

I turn to look back up that impossible trail, at the sea cliffs soaring to bound it on either side, and breathe out again. It's an almost perfect half-amphitheater down here, the cliffs tumbling down and exploding into rocky ledges that collapse straight down into sea stacks, the air all about me misted with rainbow.

I remember reading a few months back that if not for the utter isolation of this very cove and two or three just north of here, the whole of the Pacific Coast would have no sea otters. None. Gone.

In the early 1700s there were hundreds of thousands of these smart, goofy, playful creatures — who swim on their backs for pleasure and each have their own preferred shellfish — thriving around the Pacific Rim. In 1911, when the US, Russia, Japan, and Great Britain finally got around to signing an agreement to stop killing them, they had been hunted to complete extinction everywhere but right here. By then, an estimated one million had been shot and clubbed, for their exquisitely fine and thick fur, in less than two hundred years: by Russian hunters from the north; Spanish hunters from the south; American hunters from back East. It was the marine version of the wholesale slaughter of the beaver in every mountain river to the east, and a prelude to the fate awaiting the bison on the Great Plains and old growth forests of the Northwest. To those at the leading edge of “civilization,” the sea otter's hide was money, swimming

around in the ocean waiting to be “harvested.”

But down in this wild and rocky cove, too rugged for anybody’s ship to navigate, an estimated 40 to 50 sea otters survived, unmolested, and served as the source for restoring the entire population up and down the West Coast. Even after the signing of the 1911 agreement, the sea otters’ survival was precarious, as they were easily caught up in the gill and trammel nets used by commercial fisheries along the coast. It wasn’t until the 1990s, when Californians finally woke up to the endangerment of this quirky, beautiful keystone species, that gill and trammel nets were banned and the sea otter population began to grow again.

In romps. A romp of otters. Maybe there’s one out there now.

I find a good flat spot in the sand past the tide line to set up for the night, spread out my gear, and climb into my wetsuit.

The tide is coming in, pushing each peak higher, illuminated from the inside by the setting sun like moving, flowing, emerald glass.

The two surfers from the Westy are working the north point, so I paddle out the other way, as far from them as I can while staying well clear of the maw of rocks closing off the south end of the cove.

I push furiously through the foam, out into rolling green hills of water, duck-diving the first two and popping out the back side.

I sit on my board, rising and falling and breathing and beholding: the great folds of dark green mountains thrusting straight up into a perfect blue sky, the lift and push and pull of the ocean, the cleansing salt air. And there it is, descending like light after a cloud moves off the sun, everywhere around me, the perfection and the purity of this moment, the palpable presence of this moment, the very Presence itself. Every breath in feels, suddenly, like a gift; and every breath out is a prayer: *thank you thank you thank you*.

Then, the same thought I’ve always had when the Presence makes itself known like this: I could die right now, and not from drowning or a neck fracture or any of the half dozen other ways you can die while surfing, but from my heart swelling with so much joy that it explodes.

Like the sudden holler of joy, over the roar of the surf, from the other end of the cove.

I have a good laugh at myself for that old, nurturing, morbid, intoxicating feeling, and kick my board around to see what those two are doing.

Looks from here like a skinny dude and a curvy woman, probably in their 20s,

both with long hair and short boards. They are struggling a bit, taking turns, cheering each other on.

I watch the ocean swell up behind them with a good one, the same wave rising up behind me, so I turn and paddle but I'm late.

The next ones are all mush, so I drop to my board and paddle a little closer toward them, into the center of the cove, where the waves are setting up, and here comes one.

I paddle like mad, but I'm late.

Then another, bulging and swelling right behind me, and here we go!

I paddle and kick even harder, my board lifting beneath me, desperate to run, pushing and pulling and urging me on as I pop to my feet.

And time stops.

I unfurl myself, and I'm ten feet tall and weightless, moving fast and steady as a freight train straight at the beach and the light becomes water and I'm no feet tall, just liquid and water and wind and speed and everything and nothing.

Then the wave collapses, all foam, and I fall back into the drink, and spit out a mouthful of ocean, and with it lungfuls of southern California traffic, Johnny's tantrums and armed rednecks, and missing Radhe, all noise and nonsense . . .

I paddle back out, beaming like the happiest fool in the world with no one around to see, except of course the Presence.

When I spin back around to catch the next one, there *is* someone to see, 20 feet away, his big gray head popping out of the water, all whiskers and curiosity, a big seal or small sea lion.

"Hey there, buddy!"

But he just stares at me, not sure if he wants to say *Hey there* back to me.

Then his face finally says *Yeah, whatever*, and he plunges forward and steals my wave.

"So be that way then," I laugh, and set up for the next one.

They keep coming, and I catch two dozen more waves like the first, until my arms are so beat from the furious paddling, and all the paddling back out after each one, that I can barely lift them and it's time to call it.

Back on the beach, I'm so tired and thirsty I can't climb out of my wetsuit for a good ten minutes.

Instead, I sprawl out next to my gear, gulp water, and watch a red-tailed hawk work the cliffs.

Something metallic flashes off one of the high points, then a couple flecks of

moving color, and more flecks out on the edge of the cliff.

I dig out my binoculars and see people staring down here and pointing, maybe at me or the other surfers, maybe at the seal out there.

It's good to feel like wildlife, like I did earlier today when I was scouting the break north of Pismo. Or some kind of zoo animal, who doesn't know the tourists in the rental car in the turnout are staring at him and talking about him.

Though I can't blame them for that: I was standing there barefoot — how I like to drive — and shirtless in the heat, just a pair of beat up old surf shorts hanging off me like a hula skirt.

Lotta surfers out there, huh? they'll finally say.

Yep.

Then, seeing how I'm half-dressed, and the open van, *Do you surf?* or maybe, *Are you from around here?* and always, finally, *Where's the best place to eat around here?*

The farther back East they're from, the more the question *Do you surf?* becomes *Do YOU surf. . . ?* without ever finishing with . . . *at your age?* Or . . . *really??* Or . . . *Cool!*

And when I answer the question the same way — *Every day I can* — I morph from zoo animal to creature in his natural habitat, into that exotic species glorified and ridiculed, often in the same movie, from a person who surfs into a Surfer: edgy, inarticulate, unemployed, oversexed, stoned, free.

Right.

Little do they know that I'm a Surfer because of a chance encounter two years ago on a ski mountain with Gordon, Johnny and Amrita's manager, that brought me to California. Or that I'm a Surfer because I'm still chasing after the same thing I always found above treeline when I was a Snowboard Mountaineer back in Colorado during my rager of a mid-life crisis between corporate jobs: what I call the Presence — or what others might call *God*.

So, no, I may be lanky, and tawny, and standing there half-naked next to the ocean, but I'm not a blond (and wasn't before I went bald), and I'm not stupid. But I have fallen into the cliché anyway: surfing isn't a sport for me anymore than climbing up and skiing off all those mountains was a sport. It's a ritual, a gateway, a quest every bit as profound as what other people do in monasteries or ashrams. It's a way to glimpse eternity, just a glimpse, but in a way so powerful and profound it never leaves you.

I was laughed at every time I tried to explain that to people, so now I don't

bother. But if they're curious, or at least willing, I take whoever is visiting out on the big foamie Ike keeps around Angel's Rest for just such an occasion, and try to help them catch a wave, and maybe get just a glimpse of the glimpse. Because watching others on their first wave light up like they probably never have before, from the inside — to connect with the best of who they are — is another chance for me to experience my own first wave again.

That's exactly what happened when Aaron — my old friend from mountain rescue in Colorado — was out visiting with his eight-year old son, Jimmy. I hadn't seen him in nearly eleven years, and suddenly he's a Dad, and more serious than ever. And just like on mountain rescue, he was furrowed-brow focused on surfing as another *task* — as a thing to figure out. But after a few hours of mad paddling and thrashing around on the soupy beach break, when he and Jimmy each caught that first real wave, they both lit up, from the inside, and Aaron's brow let go, and they were both as giddy as eight-year-olds for the rest of the afternoon.

But surfing isn't a task, a thing to figure out, at least not once you figure out how to find your feet on the here-and-gone of a wave. I've seen plenty of attempts at instruction manuals, and not a single one can convey what you do once you find your feet because it is all *feel*.

Maybe this is why surfers are so famously inarticulate. How to describe what it feels like when your body slips from *terra firma* to stand on moving water? To be lifted from the muck of the self into the purest ephemera of space and time, your spirit released from deep within your body to soar — for just a moment that your body will remember forever — toward eternity?

Beats me. Because there's really no good way to explain what that feels like without falling back on the usual surfer *bon mots* — *Sick! Radical! Gnarly!* — no language to describe what it feels like to dissolve into the amniotic, to join the ocean within to the ocean without, to the great ocean, tugged by the moon, that encircles this entire planet.

Or maybe it really is just a God thing, and what the devoutly religious feel in their bodies as they melt into divine consciousness. What the bhakti yoga tribe feels as they dance and sway and sing and cry and writhe on the floor at Amrita's feet when the music is really cranking. Maybe it's that same experience of ecstasy — of dissolution and transcendence the mystics have always craved, sought, blown up their lives pursuing, and tried to describe — because that's what happens when you find your feet on a swelling of the ocean that seems to arise

out of nowhere, severs your body from everything you've ever experienced on the earth, and sweeps you away. Just try explaining that to anyone, and the most honest thing out of your mouth is a grunt. Dude.

If to those tourists up there, a serious surfer seems cool, self-possessed, a little aloof, unimpressed with the goings-on back here on dry land, it's because — like me right now — they're exhausted from the thrashings of a good session. And because a part of them is always still out there, on the edge, unafraid. It may look like cool, like a pose, or some studied Buddha calm, but it's the physical residue of what just happened to me out there: the confrontation with all that moving water; the fight to paddle out, stay afloat, and read the swelling of the ocean; the thrill of mounting it, and riding it into the beach.

Maybe that's what has always made surfers look *cool* — to the tourists and magazine readers and armchair dreamers, to everybody back there in landlocked, arrested-adolescent America. Maybe it's why all the kids in the middle of Nebraska and Ohio — and the “still cool” parents among them — wear surf shorts, and checkerboard Vans, and t-shirts and hoodies and hats with Billabong, Quiksilver and Rip Curl logos.

The greatest generation of rock 'n' rollers may look like rich old ladies after yoga class; but even the most aging and broken-down surfers, like Ike, never really seem to age. And in a society that worships youth, fitness, and physical courage, surfing is a ritual of purification requiring all three, rendering surfers — *not* the rock stars — as the ones who are still eternally young, eternally cool. Like Old Freya, pushing 70 years old now, out on those waves every day, as lithe and strong and sexy as any woman of any age, dancing up and down her board in that black wetsuit. Even Ike, hobbling around on his broken hip, has that rugged charisma, the swimmer's bronzed and muscled shoulders, the faraway stare.

I look up at the turnout and there are more flecks, flashes of metal with the sinking sun, tourists lining up for their sunset selfies. To post for their friends back in Nebraska and Ohio, who have no idea why how they came to be wearing t-shirts with Billabong, Quiksilver and Rip Curl logos. I know why; Ike told me one night. In the early 1990s, the founders of California-based Quiksilver traveled to high schools all over America and asked kids who were the most popular jocks in each school. Then they gave those kids their branded clothes to wear. Ten years later, they and half a dozen other brands were selling half a billion dollars worth of t-shirts, hoodies, sneakers, caps, and “board shorts” to kids all across the country. It was a different kind of gold rush story,

like the one planted in the 1840s by land speculators in California, except for this version of the dream, nobody had to pick up and move; they just had to go to the mall.

But many did leave, because they wanted a whole more than a cool t-shirt. Maybe it was all the songs, or the movies; maybe it was somebody's big brother — just like in the gold rush — spinning tales for the folks back home about how well he was making out in California. He hadn't sold his screenplay or landed that big tech job, but he was surfing. And to the folks back East, there was nothing cooler than that.

Because he really was changed, and when he went home, everybody could see it.

After a session out on the waves, like just now down here in cove, when I wash ashore after an hour of adrenaline-fueled transcendence, I'm flushed with nothing but peace and quiet. This may be what they see, what has become mythologized: the self-containment of the Surfer in a society of anxious people crawling around in their own imperfect bodies. Maybe this is the thing people sense: the Surfer really has been elsewhere. And while he or she may have come back, they're still out there somewhere, in a place so much more rarefied than the one the rest of us occupy, a place melded with the eternity of the ocean, a place touching the holy.

I hear laughter and look up to see the other two surfers crawling on to the beach exhausted, elated, emptied.

The sun is working its way to the horizon, so I drag myself to my feet, wrestle myself out of my wetsuit into the sudden chill, and set up camp.

I'm making beans and rice for dinner when they come over for the usual check-in — happy-looking kids in their early 20s — to make sure they won't be spending the night down on this remote beach with a psycho, then skitter back to their own camp.

I sit against the drift log I've pulled over, eat, and watch the sun go down. It is not setting so much as dissolving into a rising marine layer — a long, thin, milky streak for a horizon — dropping blood-orange into the blur of ocean and sky.

I slide further down on the log, and watch the cliffs rising all around me turn rose, then magenta, then fade into shadow. The fingernail of a new moon rises out of the inky silhouette of redwoods spiking the mountain ridge to the south. Behind me, I can hear the tide going back out, the roar slowly turning to a gentle rumble.

I have no idea what time it is but don't care to look. I'm ready to pass out and don't want to. I want only for this moment to last forever.

I try to stay awake by remembering the first time I'd been to Big Sur. It was on a work trip, way back in my first corporate job, and the first of what would become an almost weekly ritual to keep my marriage from falling apart by staying away from my wife. We'd gotten married way too young, during the first of our several attempts to fund and finish a college degree; I was 23 and tending bar, and she was 24 and waiting on tables, at a steak and seafood place next to the Baltimore Beltway. We finished those degrees, eventually, and found corporate jobs; and suddenly I'm on an airplane for the first time in my life, flying all the way to the West Coast.

I had a work meeting in L.A. on a Friday. And rather than fly back to a marriage that was dying a long, slow, inevitable death, I kept the rental car and headed north, to this place I'd heard about in the English class I had to take to finish my engineering degree. Stories about the poets and novelists and seekers who came out here to listen to this ocean, run around naked, do a bunch of drugs, have lots of sex, and write about it for the folks back East.

I suppose all that proto-hippie lore was the American Century's version of the Spaniards and Calafia. And it may have been Calafia herself who beckoned to me from that first rental car, down a well-worn tourist trail to this very ocean. If so, she would have been the adventurous, rugged, sexy counterpoint to my always worried, always working wife back East, the reward I imagined I had coming to me after our long struggle to escape our crazy families, grind our way through school, finally get on our feet.

But it wasn't Calafia I found here where the mountains tumble down to the sea. It was the Presence, the same exact thing I'd felt years earlier in the woods outside that small town back East where I would run and hide when my father was on a drunken rampage. It was that sense of being seen, looked after, kept safe. If there was any other presence in those woods besides what one would call "God," it was the presence of the Iroquois, the Indians who'd lived there for centuries—a small multitude of them in longhouses like the one anthropologists had excavated half a mile from our house.

Back then, I tried to imagine it was them, or at least their ancestors from way back, because they were all living in trailers over on the reservation west of town. Like the big kid I worked with in the grocery store. What was his name? But the woods of my childhood had been emptied of them, except in spirit of course, the way that longhouse was reduced to a nub in the woods.

No, it wasn't them I'd grown up with out in those woods. It was still alive, still present, still the Presence, like what I found in the mountains of Colorado, what was out there in those waves an hour ago.

I remember on that first trip out here how alive Big Sur was with that sensation, with the thing I'd lost touch with when I fled to the nearest city for work and school, a place full of crime, and filth, and racial hatreds, and way too many people. Big Sur was and is filled with the Presence, with what is here right now — with the crowd gone, the phone off, and nothing but the sensations of the earth turning beneath us.

I look over at my tent, sitting there in its bag, and I'm too tired to set it up. But that doesn't matter: it's not really cooling off, even down here 50 feet from the ocean.

Which is weird. Because it's almost always chilly in Big Sur, always a little damp from the fog coming in, the heavy mist that waters the redwoods and clouds that usually wreath those hills and inspired all those poets and writers and seekers.

Tonight, it's actually still hot, so I throw a tarp down on the sand and a light blanket over me just because, and stare up into a sky suddenly awakening with stars.

A wave crashes in the distance, and I turn and there it is, the ocean, and I burrow down through the tarp into the coolness of the sand.

Radhe is out there somewhere, at an angle I can approximate from here: New Zealand, the last place left, one of the last English-speaking countries that hasn't completely lost its mind. Right about now, she's going to work, maybe scrubbing into a surgery to fix somebody's ruined hands. Radhe. All those brains and all that dark beauty. I can see her sitting there perfectly still at one of Amrita's *kirtans*, her curves wrapped up in a big flowing red and orange scarf as the music swirled all around her.

I hope she's happy over there, maybe even recovered enough from the incident to think about coming back.

But who comes back from the West? And there's no place more west than that. I never did. And I'd never want to.

Because this is it, right? The end of the trail? When you paddle out around here, you face west, into the sun for most of the day; and when you turn to paddle back with the surge of the ocean, and rise to your feet to ride something

that wasn't there and then is there but soon won't be, you can't see the wave, only feel it in your body. It's the same way you can't see that halo all around you, but you know it's there, like the last of the golden light on those cliffs when the sun goes down.

I fight off sleep, try to hang on to the last of the golden light. But the lifting and dropping of the waves a hundred feet away reverberate through the sand, like they do anywhere near the beach, except here they don't just echo through the ground. Here, you can feel the ground lifting and falling with them, down into the crust of the earth as the ocean slips back and forth on that crust, and the crusts slips back and forth on the earth, in waves that come like a great body breathing.

The harder I fight off sleep, the sleepier I get, so I try to remember bright sunshine, Radhe and me walking along the beach, the first time she came out to Angel's Rest.

She said the ocean has the exact same salinity as amniotic fluid, and wasn't that interesting?

And it might be, but I'm too tired to stay awake amidst all the gentle, ceaseless crashing of all that water, the great whoosh of the womb, rising up and carrying me away.