

The Underage Traveler

by

Richard Pierce Thomas

Contact:

503.860.0822

rickpthomas@comcast.net

© 2014, The Underage Traveler
Richard Pierce Thomas
rickpthomas@comcast.net

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. This book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without express written permission from the author / publisher.

Prologue

Though mom has been gone for almost ten years, I can see her as if she were sitting in her armchair in front of me, legs tucked beneath the purple throw.

“We don’t get to choose our moment, Mijo. We can only prepare for when it happens and how we respond is what matters. How did you respond?” Her eyes smile through bent reading glasses.

I sigh, burying my head in my hands. “I don’t know where to start.”

I reach into the dark corners of my mind, seeking a thread to pull. I can find none. Each story blurs into the other. Distant shores, foreign cities, and people. Unforgettable people, stained in my memory. Perhaps the beginning does not matter, I reason. Just that there is one.

“*Dime Mijo,*” she says, and I begin to tell.

Chapter One

Tomato Soup Eyelids

The American radio station faded in and out, competing for airspace with the Mariachi music as we sped deeper into Mexico. In a sober voice, the English-speaking newscaster recounted the latest tally of enemy dead and wounded in Vietnam. It was 1968 and the US was faring badly under the Tet offensive, but it didn't matter to me. Being six years old and stuck between my sisters on the rear seat of our coffee-brown Plymouth Fury, my only worries were fighting boredom by annoying my sister, Christine. Two years older than I, we fought regularly and the back seat battles diverted our attention from the stifling heat gluing our legs to the vinyl upholstery.

"*Cayate!*" Mom snapped, her strappy red size six sandal a ready missile; though I'd never seen her throw one, the threat worked. Christine folded her arms and stared out the window. Her nostrils flared defiantly.

"Why can't I ride in the trailer with Harris and Albert?" I whined. There were too many of us for the car so Dad allowed my two teenage brothers to ride in the trailer. I never got to do the things they could, though I don't know why I wanted to be in the trailer with them anyway. Albert picked on me constantly. He even made up a song about me and taught it to Christine: *I*

know a boy who plays with knives. I can't wait until he die-ie-ie-ies. They sang the stupid song all the time.

The Plymouth skimmed the heat shimmers for hours, until we dropped into a valley filled with citrus trees. As we sped along, I watched our shadow shape-shifting across the tree tops, the neatly planted rows looking like long stilt-legs running beside the car, ducking and dodging effortlessly over the terrain flying by. Captivated by the fellow traveler, I drifted off, chased into sleep by the pacing shadow.

“How much longer?” Christine’s voice pleaded, invading my dream. I peeled my cheek from the vinyl seat, sleepily fingering the indented upholstery pattern in my skin. Yolanda, my baby sister, fussed in Mom’s lap.

“We’ll be there in just a couple of hours,” Dad said.

“Can’t we give the kids a break, honey?” Mom asked as a statement more than a question. And Dad rarely argued with Mom. “They’ve been cooped up in the car all morning,” she stated, ensuring his silent capitulation.

He sighed and pulled off the highway beside an expanse of beach. Christine and I exploded from the car and ran for the ocean while Al and Harris followed close behind. The sand burned the bottoms of our feet as we screamed and squealed all the way to water. Standing in the foamy lip of the spent wave, the large breakers in the distance thumped against our eardrums like a marching band -- first the bass, then the cymbals, and then the seed gourd as the wave raced across the pebbles, reaching our toes.

We laid grass mats under an umbrella on the sand and ate lunch. Afterward, Dad went back to the car to pack. The girls collected seashells and rounded bits of glass, while my brothers

threw a football to each other. Mom settled into her book. My hands were sticky from the mango we ate for lunch and I wanted to swim.

“Just stay within sight,” Mom said.

I ran to the water, skipping on the balls of my feet until I reached the wet sand. Taking my breath away at first, I sank into the cool water until waist deep. Standing in the surf, I dug my toes into the shifting bottom as the undertow pulled at my legs and sucked the sand from under my feet. Breakers that turned to white boils knocked me backward.

I heard laughter over the surf and sighted a small group of boy’s body surfing in the distance. I watched intently as they swam out to the oncoming swell, diving under the folding wave and safely emerging in the calm behind the breaker. They stroked hard toward the shore until the next wave picked them up and carried them along until they were swallowed up in the wash. After a moment heads emerged, black hair glistening against brown skin, white teeth flashing with laughter.

I waved at Mom, pointing to the swimmers. She smiled and waved, then turned a page in her novel, absorbed. Yolanda and Christine played together under the umbrella, and Harris buried Al in the sand, his head barely visible above the mound piled on his chest. I dove under the coming wave and headed toward the body surfers. Surprised at the force of the wave pushing me toward shore, I paddled hard through one wave and another, soon finding myself beyond the breakers. I floated in the swells for a few moments, looking for the surfers.

“*Ven aquí!*” I heard them shout as they waved their arms, beckoning me. They chased a wave and rode it to the beach. Eager to catch up with them, I waited for a swell. A couple of small waves passed by until a large one approached. I paddled as hard as I could but the large roller quickly passed under me. I chased the next one, and the one after that, but I could not catch

a wave. As I treaded water, I began to drift further away. The swells were less pronounced and the surf sounded distant. On the shore, under the umbrella, Mom and Dad were waving and cupping their hands to their mouths, but their voices were lost in the breeze.

I tried paddling toward them but only pulled further away. A crowd had now gathered on the beach, like crazed ants on a bed of sugar. Mom and Dad were indistinguishable amongst them. Then, as the current carried me further away, one of the ants scurried to the water.

I continued to drift further out of the bay, catching glimpses of the vast Pacific Ocean. I didn't feel panic though, it feeling more like an adventure on my bike exploring beyond the known boundary of my neighborhood. At the peak of a large swell, I noticed an outcropping of rocks and headed toward them. Though I paddled hard, I didn't move closer and shiver ran through me. My legs felt like dead weights as a gasp escaped my mouth. A wave engulfed me and pushed me underwater.

Suspended below the surface, sunlight splayed around me, as motion slowed like a movie played at half speed. Pillars of light shone into the depths. Millions of bubbles danced; escaping gasses and fragments of flotsam all moving in synchronous rhythm; silvery shapes morphing and darting. The burning disc in the sky looked distorted in the beautiful watery prism and I heard laughter.

The salt water burned my throat as I broke through the surface. Clawing instinctively at the air, my fingers found a hard surface and I drew next to it. A large black rock covered in holes, I clung to it as I caught my breath and began climbing. Reaching the top, I sat with my head between my legs as I shivered in the bright sunlight. I stared at the ebony surface, mesmerized by the jillions of finger-sized holes, like a perforated headliner of a Volkswagen bug.

Looking to shore, I could barely make out the bleached white strip sandwiched between the indigo sky and whipped blue-green ocean. A shudder ran through me, chattering my teeth. Seagulls perched on some nearby rocks, crying in protest as the waves pushed them off their perch. Then, faint under the crash of waves, I heard my name.

“Rick-eee!”

It sounded like Dad. Standing, I shouted into the breeze, “Dad. DADDEEE!”

A large wave rolled over the rock, almost pushing me off. As the roller dipped, I saw Dad, swimming hard toward the rock. He took huge over-arm swipes at the water, straining to get closer with every stroke. He looked up again and shouted.

“Hold on, Ricky!”

Dad’s head disappeared below the water for an eternal moment, and then a large hand shot out from under the surface, grabbing onto the rock. I crab-crawled down to grab his hand, helping him find the handholds.

Shoulder muscles rippled as he pulled his barrel chest out of the water. Slowly he crawled to the top of the rock. He gasped for air, vomited water and then lay down. I sat beside him and the pent up fear inside me released. The seagulls cried back to me as I wailed.

“It’s okay, Ricky. We’re going to be okay,” he sputtered, trying to catch his breath.

Dad lay for a few minutes recovering while the salt water sprayed us. Finally sitting up, he put his arm around me and squeezed. I placed my head on his thigh and his warmth burned into my cheek.

“We’re going to have to swim back Ricky.”

“But how, Dad?” I whimpered as he pulled me upright.

“You are going to ride on my back like Curious George, okay?” Dad forced the smile as he stood.

“Uh huh,” I said unconvinced. I didn’t want to get back in the water.

Dad squatted down and hefted me onto his back. I wrapped my arms around his neck tightly, holding my cheek against his spine as he picked his way down the side of the rock.

“We’re going to jump in. Are you ready?”

“Okay,” I chattered, squeezing my eyes shut.

“One, two, three!”

The water forced my eyes open and shot up my nostrils. Gripping his shoulders tightly, I could feel his muscles working as he swam to the surface. I gasped for air as we bobbed in the water. Dad started swimming toward the shore.

“You doing okay?” he asked between strokes.

“Yes, Daddy.”

Dad swam hard, stroking fast as the swells rose in front of us. The beach looked much closer now and I could see mom and the girls huddled together with a group of people. Harris and Al were in the surf calling to us.

“Last big push,” Dad said as we raced to catch a swell. I could feel the acceleration as we sped along the front of the break. The collapsing curl enveloped us, pushing me beneath it. Torn from Dad’s neck, I tumbled and groped wildly for something to hold onto. Something grabbed my arm and I instinctively wrapped myself around it, as it pulled me out of the water.

“It’s okay Ricky. We’re safe now,” Dad whispered in my ear.

We walked out of the surf and into waiting crowd as they folded around us. I could hear all kinds of voices. Mom’s. Yolanda’s. Christine’s. My brothers’. Unfamiliar voices speaking

Spanish. I kept my eyes closed and clung to Dad, determined not to let go. Settling under the umbrella, he sat me in his lap. I curled against his chest feeling his pounding heart against my cheek, and behind tomato soup eyelids I receded into sleep, warmed by the sun, and the sound of Dad's voice.

In that moment I had everything I could ever want.

I close my eyes and hold the image from memory. I can almost feel Dad's embrace. The brush of his chest hair tickling my nose. The smell of saltwater on his skin. The beat of his heart against my cheek.

The pain of the years that followed doesn't touch me now. But as with all memories, it slips away leaving only the reminder that escape from the present is impermanent.