On The Road to Self-Fulfillment via Baja California Sur: A Memoir

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This memoir is dedicated to the thirteen other college students who helped make Baja a life-changing place. I would also like to thank the numerous friends and teachers who helped me translate my life into words.
Introduction

The professor droned on about the pastoral poetry of Oliver Goldsmith and George Crabbe, but my attention drifted out the window to the cottony clouds stretched across the sky. The patchwork sunlight, highlighting some clusters of houses in golden beams, while casting the rest into shadows, reflected my attitude toward this class. The majority of my study consisted of trying to decipher the accent of my bumbling, curmudgeonly professor, but I was often too distracted by the unruly lawn of white hair that sprouted from his head. When the air conditioning cycled on, the white blades of grass swayed in the current.

Yet all hope was not lost. About a month into the semester, Professor Tadhg Foley assigned an independent project in which students were to choose a novel to read on the relationship between humans and landscape. The open-ended assignment promised to introduce some commotion into the class, an active alternative to the comfort of daydreaming. Indeed, with my newfound excitement for Professor Foley’s class, I opened the window to the pastoral, and with Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, I had the courage to climb through it.

Jack Kerouac’s protagonist, Salvatore Paradise, began an exploration of self-identity and fulfillment across the physical landscape of the United States. *On the Road* may be considered as the novel that started the Beat Generation, and indeed Jack Kerouac coined the term “beat” in this novel. However, it is not the first work of literature that expresses a desire to find the pearl, this ultimate source of meaning and fulfillment. *On the Road* records Sal’s interaction with the sublime nature of his world during five road trips across the United States. What Sal discovers, however, is that the fulfillment he is
yearning for does not lie hidden within the ever-changing physical landscape, but rather within the changes he makes in how he understands himself and how he relates to other people. He recalls, "I woke up as the sun was reddening; and that was the one distinct time in my life...when I didn’t know who I was – I was far away from home...I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future" (Kerouac 20). Sal may have left Paterson, New Jersey, in the hope of avoiding a dull existence and the resignation of stationary life, but he discovers that constant movement can also be a form of stasis. Sal does not have many constants in his life. Cities and towns are always different, faces are always changing, and although both of these elements are united in their ever-changing status, the one constant in Sal’s life is his friendship with Dean. Therefore, the novel explores how Sal and Dean relate to each other in unfamiliar towns across the Midwest and western coast of the United States.

The final scene with Dean and Sal is emotionally complex. They are forced to say good-bye on a New York City street as Sal is getting into a car to go uptown. The location of New York City is important because it is not the familiar Paterson, New Jersey, nor on the outskirts of something bigger. The setting symbolizes his realization that the physical environment of where he lives is not as important as the people he chooses to surround himself with. However, Sal could not have come to this realization if he had not first failed to find the “pearl” within the physical landscape of the United States and within his relationship with Dean. Even at the end of the book, Dean remains a nomad of the road, but Sal transforms from a wandering spirit into a young man who takes ownership over his life and his relationships.
Like Sal and Dean, I became a nomad of the road, united with them in the desire to live passionately and to test the limits of my existence. I began my semester abroad in Mexico on October 5, 2007. I lived, worked, played, cooked, and learned with the same thirteen roommates for seventy-five days. We celebrated birthdays, Halloween, and Thanksgiving, witnessed personal triumphs and failures, and accompanied each other on the road to adulthood. I first heard about National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) at an overnight outdoor camp that I attended every summer while in high school. And when I received the glossy fifty-plus page NOLS catalogue, I poured over the semester-long expeditions, debating which course boasted the richest pictures. The semester I chose included twenty-eight days of sea kayaking, twenty-nine days of sailing aboard twenty-foot Drascombe yawls, and ten days of keelboat sailing down the coast of Baja Mexico. With two red, medium-sized duffel bags containing the sum of my possessions for the next seventy-five days, I departed Seattle-Tacoma international airport unsure of what the future had in store, but confident that I had something beautiful and profound to learn from the world.

This is my coming of age story, a profound rite of passage. Like Sal, my journey became a reorientation inward, as what I discovered in Mexico is that the “pearl” does not lie hidden in some external source or person, but rather within my search to live a life of fulfillment. I did not emerge from the Mexican backcountry a worldly adult, sure of my future success. Instead, I realized the beauty of the daily struggle to live as the person I want to be.
On the Road to Self-Fulfillment via Baja California Sur

Chapter One

“One impulse from a vernal wood may teach you more of man, or moral evil and of good, than all the sages can.” – William Wordsworth

“Hey! Come over here! You have to see this!” I looked up from my journal to see the last shades of magenta and violet fading from my view before lighting up the endless stretch of water from Mexico to Indonesia. Behind me, Nate called again, “Guys, COME HERE!” A sideways glance to Lauren, who was preparing an exceptional feast of boiled lentils and vegetables, and her hazel eyes agreed with mine; curiosity is too enticing. I carefully stepped over the thorny leaves and branches of resilient Baja desert life, only to hear a human gasp for air. “What is that?” My eyes strained against the growing twilight to discern the living creature tied with several fishing knots to the trunk of a nearby bush. The flat, creamy-white belly of a sea turtle. And then I heard the gasping again. An involuntary shudder gripped my back and shoulders. I was witnessing attempted murder.

Local fishermen in Baja California sometimes catch turtles in their fishing nets and have since discovered that turtle eggs make a rare and expensive delicacy. Since refrigeration is costly and almost impossible for the fishing camps that are often occupied for only a few months during the year, the most economic way to preserve the eggs is to tie the turtles to the underbrush. This both hides the turtles from obvious view and takes advantage of dehydration as a time-consuming way to die. The fishermen can then return in a week’s time to harvest the eggs and sell them for additional profit, perverting death as an inexpensive way to incubate the delicate product.
However, my first thoughts did not consider the fishermen’s desperate and callous motives in their position high atop nature’s food chain. I was only concerned with getting the turtle back into the water, but neither Lauren, Nate, or I were sure how to do it. The other students noticed our commotion in the brush and hurried over from their makeshift sun tarps to see what was going on. No one raised the question of whether or not we should free the turtle. We realized that we were putting ourselves in danger by freeing the fishermen’s source of cheap and easy money, but we were compelled to act. Jaren pushed his way to the front of the crowd. He knelt before the withering turtle, untied the coarse rope, and picked up the fifty-pound wild animal by pinning the flailing fins to the turtle’s sides so that they were not damaged. As Jaren lunged past me bearing the weight of this distraught animal, my eyes searched the barnacled body for any sign of injury, but I did not find anything that I could heal. I could only see the right side of the turtle’s face and an eye that frantically darted from one human face to another. Our expressions were blank. There was nothing to say. I would not turn my eyes away; I wanted the turtle to look at me. I paralleled Jaren, walking next to the turtle and unwilling to break eye contact with it. The pupil was as large as an entire human eye. I blinked in wonder at the sea-green color of the turtle’s iris, yet she did not return my bewilderment.

Once free of the brush, Jaren set the turtle down on the sand and hovered over the distressed and panicked animal, guiding it toward the water, toward life. Fourteen American students, hailing from Connecticut to California, stood in communion on a beach in Mexico, willing a sea turtle to life. Twenty-eight eyes scanned the distance to be covered, a seemingly impossible ten meters for a body burdened with such fatigue,
dehydration, and hysteria. The turtle thrashed at the sand, her fins digging small holes on either side of her body as she inched toward the water. The agony of her crawl back to the water stretched fifteen minutes into an eternity. A flick of sand washed over the turtle’s back; about eight feet, ninety-six inches, separated her from the water. We began to cheer, although it felt awkward, but nonetheless, cries escaped our mouths. “C’mon, c’mon, c’mon,” I chanted. We would have gladly carried the turtle into the water to spare her any further torture, but her bites of self-defense at hands that approached her indicated that this was her fight. And she won it. Small waves lapped at the turtle’s fins, then head and shell; the stubborn awkwardness of her fins on land disappeared as she danced in the water. There was a subdued celebration on the beach, as smiles and laughs announced our disbelief in the events of the past half-hour. But then our eyes fell downcast as we turned around to face the bramble under which two more turtles had been discovered, one of whom did not appear to be breathing.

We quickly devised a plan to replicate Jaren’s actions. Groups of four or five students interlocked arms under each turtle, straining to maintain a hold on the slippery, slimy shell. The turtles varied in size from fifty to one hundred pounds. I helped mark the path from the brush to the water, flattening any branches or thorny stems that might cause one of the carriers to stumble. The turtles writhed in their struggle to be free from human contact, and the stoic faces of the students carrying the turtles betrayed the paradox of the situation. We were only too happy to free the turtles, the same creatures we had been aching to see for the past month and a half, but no one wanted to see them like this. The next morning we combed the beach to ensure that no other turtles were left
abandoned to die. We found thirteen more, and freed the turtles from the fishermen’s hardened knots.

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Chapter Two

"I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ship.” – Louisa May Alcott

My intentions for the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) semester course were simple: do something crazy, earn the respect of my long-idolized camp counselors, and become an expert kayaker. However, I did much more than this; I tested the temper of my relationship with nature, and the power of my voice. Even more importantly, I initiated a life-long journey of realizing who I am and how I relate to the world.

Kayaking was the first section of the course. Three seasoned kayaking instructors and fourteen excitable college students from the United States and Canada departed the NOLS Mexico base on October 12, 2007, ready to begin the twenty-eight-day section. The bright yellow, red, and white kayaks contrasted sharply with the raw earth colors of Baja. Nonetheless, schools of tiny flying fish welcomed us, and occasionally splashed us, as we paddled past the rough rock walls and arroyo canyons. The instructors began to entice us with a possible layover at San Francisquito, a small beach resort, after the first week of kayaking. For some students, it provided the motivation to continue pushing down the coast of Baja. For others, it meant one less meal we had to cook, and a few less dishes to scrub with sand and sea water. When we were within a day’s paddle of the taco stand, a Norte windstorm blew in, and the sea state became too dangerous for safe kayak travel. The swells grew to five or six feet before we located a safe beach for a surf
landing. Surf landings require precise paddling strokes, experience in reading wave patterns, and reckless courage because the possibility of serious injury is real. Our kayaks were loaded with about two hundred pounds of gear and could build up enough momentum riding a six-foot wave in to shore to snap the legs of benevolent rescuers lying in wait on the beach. Images of someone's legs possibly being broken or my own spine snapping under the pressure of an overturned kayak quickly ate away at my small store of courage.

Two instructors, Alex and John, led the group in the surf landing. Students in plastic single kayaks followed soon after. Then the fiberglass singles were guided in to shore by following Alex and John's paddle signals. A vertical paddle meant "safe to paddle." A horizontal paddle signaled to stop paddling, and a waving paddle indicated to back paddle because a large wave set was coming. I was paddling a fiberglass double with Lauren that day, and we were the second to last to come in to the beach. We waited with our backs to shore so that we could keep the bow of the kayak pointed into the waves and avoid being swamped by the rocking swells.

Lauren's scream cut through my feelings of nausea and anxiety. I caught a flash of grayish-black, but it was too fast to see what it was. My mind struggled to discern whether I saw anything at all as my thoughts rolled with every passing swell; I wanted to get out of the washing machine before the spin cycle started. Lauren shouted that it was a whale shark, but the terror that now gripped my heart and mind did not allow me the leisure to appreciate the rarity of this sighting. The vertical paddle had been raised from shore; I had to steer us in now.
I lifted the rudder, and we began to drift toward the others on the beach. Most of the waves slid under us, slimy like soap running down the side of a washing machine. When John’s paddle on the beach shifted to a horizontal position, we obediently stopped paddling; “Here comes a wave set!” The first two waves rocked our kayak stern to bow, but I thought “I can do this, I can handle this.” Then the third wave of the set crashed over my head, pummeling me like a pile being driven into soft sand. The wall of water knocked me off balance, blurring my vision, and bitter salt water spewed from my mouth and nose. My confidence quickly faded to panic and I began to consider whether the waves could swamp the kayak completely. I steadied myself long enough to see the vertical paddle sign return and we cautiously dipped our blades into the water. We were not paddling to move forward but to create another source of balance by increasing our points of contact with the water. The remaining bit of salt water in my mouth stung my throat on the way down; a horizontal paddle had been raised from shore.

The roar of the coming waves announced the apex of the agitation cycle. I heard just a few shouts from shore before every doubt, every reaction, everything was obliterated by a wall of whitewater. Frantic waving paddles screamed “Back paddle, Back Paddle, BACK PADDLE!” But the waves had grabbed hold of our kayak. We were dirt to be cleansed from the Sea of Cortez. The kayak rocketed off on the back of a five-foot swell while Lauren and I strained to pull against the momentum. The kayak banked left in a tight curve; my upper body was thrown to the right. The merciless water ate up the perilous angle of our kayak, flipping us over. We were washed ashore like the carcass of a dead fish – belly skyward. Two hundred pounds of pressure pushed down on my torso, seeking to separate my upper body from my legs, but my rubber-band spine
withstood the tension long enough for John and the other students to sprint over and right our kayak. The sea turtles and I traded places; while they were rescued from the land, I was rescued from the sea.

The Norte lasted for two more days before we could get back on the water, but we reached San Francisquito and our eagerly awaited tacos by the twelfth day of the expedition. Those more zealous than the rest changed outfits once or twice to find the cleanest combination of clothes to wear into town, meaning an open-air diner and a few run-down hotel buildings. Nevertheless, I think we cleaned up pretty well. And so did the group of dirt-biking firefighters who happened to be camping further down the beach.

A group of firefighters who lived out their mid-life crises as dirt-bikers on an annual trip every summer just happened to be staying overnight at the same beach. Since the adjacent restaurant might house the only prepared food for twenty miles, we stood around talking before dinner. Our instructors were nobly concerned with not letting fourteen rambunctious teenagers overrun the restaurant, so we kept our distance from the bikers during dinner, but on the walk back to our humble tarps and sleeping bags, we jumped at the firefighters' invitation to join their fire. Boisterous laughter filled the still night air as the firefighters put on a show of machismo. But before I could stereotype these men, including the one who ripped off his shirt to flex his pectoral muscles, Jerry, the firefighter sitting next to me, asked me if I would like to learn how to make balloon animals. He brought the balloons and air pump with him because it was something easy and cheerful that he could offer to the local children. The firefighters also had a stash of coloring books, crayons, and candy, all for the children that they might meet along the way. The firefighters were not representatives of a humanitarian organization, nor
members of a religious group distributing goods collected through a church fundraiser. They were individuals who thought critically about their relationship to their surrounding environment and responded with compassion. I immediately desired to emulate their simple kindness.

Later in the evening, I talked to Steve, the leader of the bike trip. A quiet, reflective man, he was not the first to shout and howl with laughter at the stories being told around the campfire. Instead, I had barely noticed him, and I imagine he had not acknowledged my presence either until I joined his conversation with Thomas, Lauren, and Matt. I drifted off, mesmerized by the crackle and spit of the fire and disinterested in the topic of conversation. I looked up once, trying to catch Lauren’s attention to see if she was ready to head back to our group’s camp on the other end of the beach. Instead, I locked eyes with Steve, and he said to me, “If you’re an introvert, say one thing everyday. If you’re an extrovert, say one thing everyday.”

In the fifteen days since I had left the NOLS base in Conception Bay, I had been torn down to a simple desire to survive the wind storms and dangerous surf. Yet here was a man who desired to share his wisdom and experience with others so that we might benefit from his existence. I realized that I had much to learn about who I wanted to be and how I was going to get there.

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Chapter Three

“The potential of the average person is like a huge ocean unsailed, a new continent unexplored, a world of possibilities waiting to be released and channeled toward some great good.” – Brian Tracy
Squatting with one leg on either side of my kayak, I sat down on the damp, slimy seat of the yellow plastic single. I adjusted my foot pegs one last time to ensure that my rudder would work properly and pushed off from shore. I dug in, pulling my paddle through the sluggish water to turn the kayak south and begin the day. The muscles in my back and arms were tight and knotted from yesterday’s paddle, but it felt good; I knew that I was pushing myself physically. Twelve miles to go today, I thought. We were going to Salinas de Trinidad, a beach rumored to have natural hot springs; you just had to dig down into the sand and make a pit to sit in. I established an easy tempo for my paddle strokes to warm up my muscles. Dip, pull, swing. Each stroke rippled the reflection of sandstone and sky, sending shock waves through the previously undisturbed image. Up ahead, a football splashed into the water, just short of the intended receiver’s hands. Whoops of Whit’s and Thomas’ laughter followed, echoing through the arroyos; they often tossed the football while out on the water. An involuntary smile stretched my sun-dried lips; the salty air was intoxicating.

My muscles warmed to the task that lay ahead. Dip, pull, swing. My feet initiated each stroke by pushing against the rudder pedals. The energy traveled up my legs, past my knees braced against the inside of the kayak, then up through my core and out to my arms. I leaned forward with each stroke, reaching for my toes with the blade of my paddle. Dip, pull, swing. Pulling with the bottom hand, pushing with the top. I rotated my torso while pulling the paddle back to my hips to maximize the power of each stroke. My abdominal muscles tightened in response to each pull; every muscle in my body worked in coordination. Dip, pull, swing. Small whirlpools spiraled out behind my kayak as I glided through the water. I was into the rhythm now; the miles slid by. I
marked my progress with the passing of lone cacti, standing on the edge of the sandstone cliffs. More often, the cacti were in groups of three or five, or even hundreds, but I looked for the single, suicidal cacti standing alone on the cliff’s edge. They stood guard like lighthouses, acknowledging how far I had traveled, but spurring me onward.

On the kayaking section, we paddled between twelve and eighteen miles every day we were on the water. My upper body strength has always been proportional to my petite stature, so I preferred to paddle in a double kayak. However, as the kayaking section progressed, every expedition member was required to plan and lead a paddle with two other students. I hesitated to sign up for my leadership day because that meant I had to paddle in a single kayak. The leaders had to be mobile in single kayaks in case there was an emergency on the water or we needed to change the planned destination due to weather or other unexpected circumstances.

The night before my leadership day, Libby, Lauren, and I sat down to plan the route for the following morning. Looking over the topographical maps, I followed the steep elevation lines down fifteen miles of coastline; there were no beaches in sight. We had two options: we could lead a short, three-mile paddle to an adjacent beach, or we could push forward eighteen and a half miles to Punta El Mojon. Punta El Mojon was the planned location for our solo overnights, a 24-hour period spent in isolation on the beach or in the backcountry, and an event that the group had been anticipating since San Francisquito. Libby, Lauren and I all stood about 5’2” tall and had been rotating paddling in double kayaks with each other since the start of the trip. I looked from the mischievous smile on Libby’s heart-shaped, freckled face to the reserved, confident expression in Lauren’s eyes, and then back at the map. I scanned the distance to be
covered once again, and said, "So what time should we wake everyone up in the morning for the 30K passage?" There was no question that we were going for it; we were raw energy compacted to a travel size.

Not only was this passage a physical challenge, but it was also my chance to break free of my role as a follower. For years I had elected to let other students, adults or group members take the risks while I waited in the safety and loneliness of my reserved nature. Failure terrified me. I overcompensated by working hard to ensure that I would not stumble or get caught making a mistake. Yet this assignment, planning the route for tomorrow’s passage, had elements that were beyond my control. The surf landing earlier in the section taught me not to discount the power of nature in determining my success and survival in Mexico. The sting of my near-death experience shot up my spine. It was time to start living as the person I wanted to be, the leader of my own life.

The next day, late in the afternoon, and 2.3 miles short of our intended destination, Libby, Lauren, and I located a strip of sand just long enough to shelter twelve kayaks and seventeen fatigued kayakers. Dehydration, sun exposure, and long passages over the last few days had slowly depressed group morale. In addition, everyone wanted to complete a solo overnight the following day, and Libby, Lauren, and I understood that we needed to be in a healthy mindset to benefit from the solitary experience. We succeeded in the decision to finish the last few miles of the passage the next morning, although it wasn’t the success I expected to have at the end of that day. Instead, I became a leader, and I finished the last couple miles of the passage the next morning in my yellow, single kayak.

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Chapter Four

"And that was the one distinct time in my life...when I didn’t know who I was – I was far away from home...at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future.” – Jack Kerouac

On November 10th, we began the Drascombe sailing section. The fleet consisted of four twenty-two-foot boats: Gjoa, Mischief, Spray, and Chosovi. Each vessel had its own personality, and each skipper had his or her own expectations for the running of the boat. During the sailing section, we often fell subject to winds that could overpower our sailboats, or no wind at all, which created plenty of time for self-reflection and journaling. A few days into the twenty-nine day sailing section, we were blown off the water by a Norte windstorm, so Paolo, one of the instructors, suggested we walk down to the end of the beach on Isla Carmen. As we left the natural wind shelter created by the sagebrush hills behind our campsites, I felt the strengthening gale-force winds. It struck me that there is no counteraction to wind like this; it just has to blow itself out. So I decided to write about that day, hoping to reach some conclusion about my relationship with nature and my place within it.

November 15, 2008

Megan was the first to notice the starfish. Hundreds, maybe thousands of starfish. At first I did not recognize them as starfish; it looked as if the water had been dyed red with algae. Most of them were lying in a few inches of water, but about a hundred or so were stranded on the beach. “How did they get here?” Thomas asked. Louis echoed in disbelief, “Where did they all come from?” My first thought was that they were seeking shelter from the wind and had gotten beached by the ebbing tide. Picking a starfish up by one of its appendages,
Thomas brought it close to his face, hoping to figure out an explanation for the curious scene before us. Unable to reach a conclusion, he lobbed the starfish back into the water. Jaren and Louis quickly followed suit in tossing the starfish back into the water, but there were hundreds of them. After picking up four or five, they passed by the rest, helpless. I picked one up; it felt stiff and prickly against my calloused hands. I could not throw the starfish back into the water as I would throw a ball for an eager puppy. I waded into the sea, lowered my hand underwater, and waited for the starfish to move, but it didn’t. I started to panic. I tilted my palm until it was almost perpendicular to the sandy bottom of the ocean, and then the starfish slid off my hand, kicking up sand as it plopped down, lifeless. Unlike the sea turtles, there was no clear direction guiding our action and easing our helplessness.

Later that same day, we began gathering wood for a campfire after dinner. Walking down the opposite end of the beach, away from the starfish, we were surprised to discover bleached white bones, each about two feet tall. Years ago, a whale carcass must have washed up on the beach, and since then, the sun, wind, and waves eroded the whale’s body, leaving only a few bones as evidence of its existence. Whale vertebrae about the size of a small stepping stool became our chairs; the two prongs sticking out at a right angle to the spinal column, our armrests. The weathered, smooth bones were bleached to the cleanest white; however, the sun did nothing to lighten the smell of decayed animal flesh. It wasn’t the kind of odor that slapped you across the face, obliterating every other sense, but rather a smell that, undetected at first, crept into your nostrils so
stealthily that it was easily dismissed as just a whiff passing on the wind. But as the evening wore on, the whale’s presence became more pronounced, calling to our attention the consequences of reclining within a graveyard.

The line between life and death seems so frail out here.

I was no closer to finding a conclusion to the surreal events of that day through writing when I overheard a nearby cook group’s dinner conversation. The students were talking about the grades they received on the kayaking section of the course—comparing and complaining about who received high marks. “All Maddy ever does is talk about wanting to go home”; I turned away because I didn’t want to hear what more they had to say about why I shouldn’t have received an “A.” My face immediately paled with fear. It was true; the other students had caught me in my moment of failure. I had expressed a desire to go home almost every day of the expedition because the environment, experiences and people on the trip were pushing me to a point where I didn’t think I could survive. The line between life and death that confronted the starfish, whale, and sea turtles was waiting for me too. Here I was, far away from anything that was familiar, at the dividing line between the North of my youth and the South of my future.

And so I drifted north, back into my past. I don’t remember whose idea it was—probably the all-too-adventurous camp leaders, the supposed adults in the group—to jump off the fishing pier that unusually hot summer of 2004. A couple of the boys ran to the end of the pier, shirts flying off as they went. The distance from the wooden ledge of the pier down to the water looked to be about twenty feet. I have never been afraid of heights, but I was afraid of how shallow the water was at this point. The swimming
Lessons I had taken from the age of six drilled into my head the danger of jumping into shallow water. From the end of the pier, I looked back at the beach to confirm that the tide was indeed going out. "Jump! C'mon just do it!" Nick’s frivolity interrupted my rationalization of why I should not jump.

I was comfortable just balancing on the splintery boards of the old fishing pier with the filmy green water of Puget Sound far below. The smell of the water’s salty fermentation drifted through the air. I could taste the salt of the ocean water, bitterly pungent, yet sweet to my childhood memories of vacations on the coast. I looked to my left and was shocked to be confronted with the profile of the oldest fisherman on earth. Grisly whiskers sporadically lined his jaw; they looked sharp enough to dull a razor if they were ever threatened by a shave. Greasy smears darkened his terra cotta skin, which made me wonder how dirty my face looked. My skin was caked with dirt and sunscreen, and itchy from the salt water that had dried on my arms and face. I looked down at my feet, shifting my weight uneasily in response to my curiosity regarding the fisherman.

I turned back to him then, only to notice his eyes. They stared, unflinching, unmoving, at the water beyond the rail of the pier. But I knew they noticed everything. I knew they saw me—an eager, scared, city kid, hanging on the edge of the pier because I couldn’t decide if I was going to jump. I knew his ancient eyes were watching the salmon and trout dart between the canoes, rafts, motorboats and other human detritus that cluttered the water. I knew his eyes differentiated between those who belonged, and those who were outsiders.

The antagonizing voices of teenagers disrupted the moment of solitude the fisherman and I shared. "What are you waiting for! Jump!" Nick yelled to Dillon,
slapping him on the back. I heard the splash, the water spitting back up into the air, displaced by Dillon’s added bulk. I didn’t need to look behind me to know that I was the only one who hadn’t jumped...yet. I sneaked a look at my fisherman one last time, straining to see his face without moving my head. A tiny smile, so small I was unsure whether it was a smile or a wince at the stifling summer heat, creased his dry, chapped lips. And then it was gone.

The other kids, distracted and shouting about how exciting it was to jump off the pier, lost interest in seeing whether or not I would do it. Inhaling deep, deep into the depths of my lungs, I felt content. No one was expecting anything from me; no one even cared whether or not I would jump, except for maybe the old fisherman. I silently climbed over the wooden railing, not wanting to draw attention to my preparation to jump. I waited until a filmy puddle of oil, probably the residue from one of the powerboats zooming around in the bay, to pass before I leaned with my arms stretched out behind me, holding onto the railing. And then I let go. The part of me who was so desperately afraid of failure and not fitting in was left abandoned on the pier. Just before I plunged into the frigid water of Puget Sound, the threshold separating my past from the self-determination of my future, I heard the fisherman high above, welcoming me with a chuckle.

The bite of a sand flea brought me back to my current predicament of fear and confrontation on the beach in Mexico. I could either remain tied to the part of me who equated success with being accepted by my peers, or I could choose to start taking risks and learning from my mistakes; I could sink, or swim, but I had to jump. After the adjacent cook group finished dinner, I confronted Lauren because she was a member of
the cook group that I had overheard. I explained that I made the decision to be here every day. I admitted my desperate longing for the familiar, not equivalent to homesickness, but rather a consuming fear of the unknown, and my desire to be accepted by my peers. Looking into Lauren’s eyes, I fought the urge to retreat my gaze to the sand or my green journal that I was now clenching in my hand. “Well, do you want to know what we were saying?” she replied after I paused to consciously remind myself to breathe. “No, it doesn’t matter,” I said, already disengaging myself from a conversation that was nothing more than pettiness. In that moment, I realized that the limits I felt restricting my identity were self-constructed. My fear that others’ might disapprove of me if I acted a certain way had controlled my life for too long. I no longer wanted others to define my identity, because I could. I realized that if I didn’t take risks, if I didn’t abandon the comfort of what I know and push myself to travel on the road to fulfillment, I would forever stay suspended between who I am and who I want to be. Lauren and I went on to be great friends throughout the remainder of the expedition because I no longer looked to her, or any other external source, to verify my identity.

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Chapter Five

“You have to leave the city of your comfort and go into the wilderness of your intuition. You can’t get there by bus, only by hard work and risk and by not quite knowing what you are doing.” — Alan Alda

The last ten days of my semester in Mexico were spent in the luxury of two forty-foot keelboats that NOLS contracted from a marina in La Paz, about two hundred miles south of where we began sailing. The marina boasted a large, artificial Christmas tree, perhaps reminding yachters that just because the temperature was still above seventy degrees Fahrenheit, Christmas was only fifteen days away. Unconcerned about the
upcoming holiday, seven dirty, boisterous students quickly filled the cabins of each sailing vessel, only to discover the fun and fumbling of climbing the stairs between decks. The fourteen students were split between two boats, with an instructor on each. Louis, the instructor on Las Animas, quickly quelled our naïve presumptions of being experienced sailors. His solid stature was at once intimidating and welcoming. He was the director of the NOLS Mexico base, and would provide our final evaluations at the end of the course. His unflinching brown eyes seemed to measure each of us against an ancient sailing code, no doubt practiced by skippers everywhere to demand the subordination of their crew. I understood that I had only begun sailing a little over a month ago, so I had nothing to prove, but at the same time, I dared him to underestimate me.

On the second night of the keelboat section, I went up on deck to write in my journal and record the colors of another Baja sunset. I reclined against the sloping deck, the sun setting over the distant mountains to my right, and the bay of Ensenada Grande opening out to my left in a semicircle. Never a fan of hot pink or other traditionally feminine colors, I was astounded by the colors of that autumn sunset. If I had known that hot pink was a natural color, perhaps I would have been a little more open-minded to wearing it while growing up. The sudden addition of Las Animas’ cabin lights added to the ambiance of the evening, reflecting in the cerulean water and signaling that it was time to start dinner.

Free from the usual chores of meal preparation, I relaxed into the back rest provided by the gentle curve of the deck. The smell of Justin’s famous peanut curry sauce wafted out the open hatches, and mingled with the raw earth smell of the nearby
desert. It had rained recently, a phenomenon that I wanted to record in my journal because Baja received rain only a few times a year. But I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the sky just yet. There were more colors to see as the florescent pink melted into a magenta with ripples of eggplant purple. I didn’t hear Louis until he was up on deck and sitting on the bench behind me. “You know where you need to be, don’t you?” he said, marveling at the paint set pigments streaked across the sky, and answered, “Right here,” before I had time to mumble that I was on dish duty tonight.

“I don’t think I could ever get tired of watching these,” I said.

“I haven’t yet,” he replied, with a quick nod of approval at the celestial lightshow. We sat there in silence until blue became the dominant spectrum of color, washing out the yellow, orange, and pink of the day. All of the students, including myself, were eager to know all about Louis—How many continents had he been to? What was it like to sail across the Pacific Ocean? What was his most daring sailing adventure? We knew that he was from an island off the coast of France, and that he had a house there, as well as living at the NOLS Mexico base for part of the year. We also knew that he had sailed with Alinghi, a sailing team that competes in the America’s Cup. But knowing these details only made us eager to know more. I refrained from bombarding him with questions because he asked me one first.

“What are you going to do when you return to the real world?”

I smiled, knowing that this was the real world, and he was testing what I had learned in Baja. I was going to miss this place when I returned to the mundane tasks of city life, where wind was reduced to an annoyance for my hair style and no longer a mode of travel. “I’m actually going to Ireland after this. For a semester,” I managed,
after a lingering stare at the freshly scrubbed cliff walls surrounding our anchorage. I could feel how much I had grown to appreciate the stark, almost painful beauty of Baja.

“Good” was all he said, but his eyes squinted briefly and his gaze shifted to a spot behind me. Perhaps even beyond the present moment.

He began with a story of when he lived in Africa and explained how the experience tested everything he had learned about himself and his world. The poverty he experienced there, which can perhaps never be adequately communicated through language, challenged the core of his being. When Louis left Africa, he moved to South America, and his life there fleshed out the raw desire for survival and life that Africa created. Captivated by these brief scenes of his wanderings and worldly adventures, I pondered his road to self-discovery and what adventures lay ahead of me, of how my core would be fleshed out in the future.

I began to put some meat on my bones sooner than I anticipated, however, for later that week we practiced crew overboard (COB) drills, the summative assessment of our sailing skills and experience. We were to complete a COB drill individually, after weeks of practicing similar drills as a team during the Drascombe section. I was fifth in line to perform the drill, so I waited below deck as the boat swung between port and starboard. A spotter shouted the distance between the boat and the COB pole, a bright orange fiberglass pole that floated six feet above the water and marked where the imagined crew member lay waiting. The sails snapped and luffed as the students practiced tacking. Normally, one person controls the mainsail sheets, another person passes the foresail across the boat, and a third person is at the helm to control the tack. But in this solo drill, one person was responsible for the mainsail and the helm. The three
of us waiting below decks muffled laughs and guffaws, staring wide-eyed at each other as the boat groaned through each tack. Then Evan’s head ducked into the cabin to call me up for my turn.

Evan was assigned to be the spotter. He dropped the COB pole into the water just a few minutes after I was underway, and Tex, Lauren, and I all shouted “Crew overboard” in unison. I began to prepare mentally for my tack, sailing far enough away from my target so that I could swing around and depower my sails before picking up the downed crew. Once I was at a distance of about 300 meters, I initiated my tack, sailing closer and closer to the angle of the wind. I held the helm in my left hand and the mainsail sheet in my right. Yanking on the line, I tightened up the mainsail, angling the boat into the wind. And then it was time to tack. “Helms to lee!” I shouted. I watched the boom swing gently across the boat until the sail filled with air and I began sailing rapidly toward the COB pole. I cranked the wheel lock into place because I needed both hands to let out the mainsail, which would hopefully slow me down. The sail began to sag, no longer puffed out with wind, and I breathed a sigh of relief. “One hundred fifty yards to port,” Evan yelled.

Back at the helm, I released the wheel lock so that I could maneuver the boat and decrease the speed. Vessels have to be moving at five knots per hour or less when picking up a downed crew member, and I was still cruising at 9.7 knots. I spun the helm even harder to port, trying to swerve downwind and depower the sail. Wheel lock on, I released the main sheet again, easing the mainsail out to a one hundred and twenty degree angle to the boat. And then it was back to the helm, only to do the opposite maneuver, and head upwind. By switching points of sail from upwind to downwind, I hoped to slow
the momentum of the boat. I glanced down at the instrument panel and was surprised to see that it was actually working. I was down to 7 knots. From below deck I heard the dramatic cat-calls of my friends; I guess they didn’t trust my spastic flip-flops as effective sailing.

The sailing pattern of properly executed COB drills is supposed to resemble a figure eight. My sailing pattern was looking more like a figure eight drawn by a person experiencing a seizure, but I persisted. "Sixty meters," Evan called. I grabbed at the spokes of the wheel, spinning the boat upwind, and yanked on the mainsail sheets, almost heading directly into the wind. The COB pole bobbed relentlessly in the water, mocking me like a five-year-old on the playground, "You’re never going to catch me!" I spun the wheel back down to port, heading just above my intended target, and released the mainsail completely. "Twenty meters!" The goal was to let the sail luff, snapping aimlessly in the wind, so that the boat could just glide in, similar to cutting the engine just before a plane touches down on the runway. I stole a quick look down at the instrument panel in the last few seconds before I picked up the pole. "4.7 knots," it read. The pole played peek-a-boo above and below the deck as we cruised alongside it. I locked the wheel into place one last time, then leaned over the safety cables to grab the bright orange marker.

I handed the cumbersome pole to Evan so that I could return to the helm and power up the sails again. Cranking on the wheel, I spun us around to avoid the approaching sienna cliffs, sloping in the lazy heat of another Baja afternoon. Lauren was next to take the helm, and we exchanged knowing smiles as I let go of the wheel. That may have been the worst solo COB drill ever preformed, but I was ecstatic. Two and a
half months ago I would have panicked as soon as I thought I was losing control of the situation. This whole semester was risky, and at times, I had no idea what I was doing, but it also brought me to places that I never thought I would reach. I looked around at the other crew on deck—Tex unabashedly stared at me open-mouthed and an arguable look of disgust quickly flashed across Evan’s face. He had missed the pole by about five feet after executing his tack with enough precision to afford brief feelings of smugness. Louis didn’t say anything to me because he was already concentrating on Lauren’s drill, but then he held out his hand for a high-five as I turned to head below deck. I laughed, announcing my newfound ability to take risks and define my success on my own terms.
Epilogue

“I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to find only the essential facts of life and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” — Henry David Thoreau

Windows. Sitting in a 200-level English Literature class the spring after my semester in Mexico, the professor draws a green rectangle on the whiteboard, but my gaze drifts out the window into the hazy sunshine and clouds outside. She continues, “Your frame of reference, your worldview, the frame through which you see the world,” in describing her rectangle. My eyes dart back to the board, eager to see my window. She writes on the sides of the now elaborated picture frame. Her family, her schooling, her life experiences color her frame with red, black and purple markers. She turns then, looking at her students to see if anything she has just said was actually heard, if anyone is thinking or even breathing. I jot down the word “window” as the clock ticks away the last few seconds of class, pick up my backpack, and embrace the freedom of my last class of the day.

Windows, “the frame through which we see the world,” were our source of adventure and exploration as we passed another idle afternoon on the beach in Baja California, Mexico. The rocky cliff above protruded to a point and this “window” was simply a weak point in the wall which had since succumbed to wind and sand erosion. Unlike the smooth sandstone of similar arches protected in national parks in Utah and Nevada, this rock was rough, unpolished, and vulnerable. Thomas, Jaren, Nate, and I may have spotted the obscure geological formation at the same time, but we approached it for different reasons. Thomas, Jaren, and Nate did everything together. Baja was their playground, and I envied their youthful and carefree spirit, while it also infuriated me that I felt the pull of adult responsibility and maturity. Nonetheless, this ragged group of
friends approached a portal to another world, hopscotching the rocks and boulders slick with seaweed and slime. And then we arrived, each of us edging closer to the window but no one daring to go inside.

One by one, we passed through the circular portal. Nothing happened. The skies did not rumble with thunder and lightening, the sun did not break through the clouds in streaks of divine apparition, the water did not recede in reverence and awe. Instead, we found the same rocks and stones covering the beach as on the other side of the ragged arch. The view of Auga Verde bay and the distant Montserrat, the island we set sail from earlier in the day, was the same. Thomas, Jaren, Nate, and I were certainly acting consistently with how we had been behaving for the past forty days. But I do not doubt that we experienced something extraordinary and marvelous—not a glossy pearl of realization, but an authentic recognition of sublime nature and the complexities of developing self-identity. The road to fulfillment is not accomplished by solitary acts, like passing under an obscure rock archway, but by the continuous effort to “live deliberately.” My experiences in Mexico will forever affect my worldview, and demand that I keep walking new paths.

“Family, school, life experiences”: the edges of the professor’s frame. I can still hear the curiosity in Nate’s voice, “So do you have a place to live in Ireland yet?” My semester in Ireland began two weeks after my return from Mexico. I was to live in another foreign country for five months—twice as long as my NOLS semester, and three times farther away from my friends, family, and everything familiar. I worried that if I gave up halfway through my semester in Mexico and went home early, there was no way
I could go to Ireland. But what I learned in Mexico is that to live an easy life within the comfort of what I know and trust would be boring and unfulfilling.

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Wind whips the ocean spray into my face as I stand on a path cut into the rugged and gusty southern coast of Wales. I came looking for the Green Arch, a geological structure formed from hundreds of years of wind and water erosion, on a spring break excursion to Wales during my semester in Ireland. The path leads me closer to the edge, and I calculate the risk of being overpowered by the wind and free-falling down to the jagged precipices below. I turn around to shelter my face from the unforgiving gale—when I see it. Across an inlet rises a rocky cliff, layers of earth and sedimentary rock tilted not quite to ninety degrees. A small gap is visible in the time-wearied wall, as if a child poked a hole through the soft clay, creating a peephole to watch the turquoise water churning below. The Green Arch lies fifty yards in the opposite direction, but this is what I am supposed to see: my window, my collection of life experiences, the frame through which I see the world. Damp, salty air coats my face and hair. The relentless pounding of the Sea of Cortez echoes across the ocean to these sedimentary cliffs standing at attention to face the unknown. I breathe the crisp, salty air in deep, and listen as the Atlantic waves crash against their first earthly barrier in a thousand miles. A pearl sky stretches out to the horizon; I am ready to embark on a new path.