

Sun Block

980 words

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That night I had my second bad dream. I was at a coastal resort in Mexico with my brother Hank, but Hank was the Peoria driver I got into it with. There was a Mexican kid lifeguard who had part of a leg because it got bit off by a shark. The lifeguard took us on a glass bottom boat. At the back my girlfriend Mabel was up against the rail, and her ex-husband Damien was making love to her. I wanted to break it up but Damien threw me overboard. Every time I tried to climb back on the boat, Hank beat my hands with a baseball bat.

I couldn't get back to sleep and *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* was on, and after a while the dream didn't bother me as much. I supposed I was fortunate not having continuous nightmares like people in similar situations, and I left it at that.

It shaped into a sparkling-clear April Saturday morning, the fog gone and the city already flooded with sunshine, and I decided to go to Stinson Beach.

First I stopped at a Big 5 and bought an ocean

swimsuit, a one-piece vest-and-shorts job made of thin wetsuit material, that supposedly left you enough flexibility to actually swim. I added some short fins and a pair of goggles, parked in Mill Valley, slung on my backpack and picked up the start of the Dipsea Trail.

It was one of my favorite hikes, seven miles up and over Mount Tam to the coast, and it began with a whole lot of forested steps climbing out of Old Mill Park. Then you opened up into bright daylight and the smell of the ocean, mixed with licorice from the wild anisette that was all over the place.

There were steep switchbacks down the back side of the trail, wide views of the coastline toward Point Reyes, and I was feeling it in the shins by the time I reached Highway One and the little town of Stinson.

The scene hadn't changed much; you had millenials and families and giggling high school kids driving the twisty road from 101 and going home sunburned from a beach where you couldn't comfortably put a toe in the water until about July. But they all seemed to have fun, and the setting was world-class.

I gave it a half hour and changed into the ocean suit, adjusted the fins and goggles and went in. The initial temperature shock was about as brutal as without the

fancy suit, but you warmed up pretty decent. There were scattered surfers out there, no one else swimming. I worked my way past the break-line, floated around, picked out a flag on the beach, swam parallel until I was in line with it, practiced going underwater a few times, and got the hell out.

I hadn't been in any body of water for a while but I felt reasonably good to go. The suit was bulky but probably a good idea. The fins helped for sure. The goggles were debatable, because someone might put them around my own neck and strangle me, but having the good vision seemed worth it.

I relaxed on the sand, taking in the spring collection of new activity. Under better circumstances you'd stick around.

I figured why not thumb a ride like the old days, and if that didn't work you'd have to take the bus, but the second car that came by stopped. Guy was a bleach-blonde surfer, heading back to the city, driving in flip-flops.

I asked how it went today. "You know Stinson," he said. "Short break. I live in the Sunset, so Ocean Beach is better, but I come here for the change of pace."

I said, "I love it here. I could live here. At least during

the week."

"I hear you. Looks like you got wet yourself."

"Yeah, trying a little open water swimming. I got a suit, feels strange, but you can move your arms and legs okay I guess."

"That's the only way to go. Otherwise you stiffen up pretty fast . . . You planning on going in the water this week?"

"Actually I was thinking about it, yeah."

"Well be careful. We got big surf on the way."

"We do?"

"Late Tuesday, supposed to hit. They're getting fired up at Mavericks, some Hawaii guys are flying in."

"Interesting," I said. "So when is high tide these days."

"Right now, around 5:30 in the morning? But with this thing it'll be big all day."

"After high tide though--typically--it goes out for the next twelve hours?"

"It's not quite that cut and dry, but yeah."

"So if a guy was floating around on a board and just went with it, or had drowned or something, where would he end up?"

"Starting from where?"

"I don't know, say from where they surf under the bridge?"

"They'd go somewhere outside the Gate I guess. Probably a mile or two."

"Would they ever just . . . keep going . . .or they'd get reversed back in eventually?"

"Reversed back in. Maybe not right away, lot of factors out there."

"I see . . . well where's the best place to watch?"

"Guys surfing big waves?"

"Yeah."

"Great Highway down past Sloat should be pretty strong. Earlier is always best of course. Cleaner sets, no wind."

"You going to be out there, then?"

"No man, I don't think so. I grew up down south and surfed some big storms in the '90s, but I got a wife and kid now."

We had reached downtown Mill Valley. I thanked the guy.

"No worries," the surfer said. "And you'll have fun with the open water stuff. There are groups, you can go online."

I said I appreciated it.

You weren't *ready*--that's too clean—at least you were under control—except nah you weren't.