

Introduction

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One day two winters ago, the other editor of this book, Tyler McMahon, and I were riding up the chairlift at Snowbowl in Missoula, Montana. We were engaged in our usual chairlift discussion, a sort of competition of who could come up with the most cogent yet out-of-reach invention ideas.

I began with nitrous-carbonated soda—a creamier more delicious soda. He offered up octopus-flavored butter (hold your laughter until you're in Spain dipping your bread in the melted butter surrounding fresh octopus). I came back at him with Rent-a-Dog, for when you just want a dog for a few days. He countered with an inflatable surfboard bag that offers ultra protection on airplane trips and doubles as a sleeping bag and pad.

I hit back with the surfboard that plays your theme song as you take the drop. Then Tyler said, "*Surfing's Greatest Misadventures*, a book of surf stories for the people by the people."

"Well, we are qualified," I said, referring to the fact that we are both solidly mediocre surfers with hazardous tendencies. I seek too much from my waves, often riding myself into closeouts and then bouncing headfirst off my board in the throw down. Though a more cautious rider, Tyler has a larger set of problems: quick onset hypothermia, a blood sugar disorder, poor eyesight, and ribs that always break at the beginning of the summer. The rest of the summer he surfs in a Percocet daze. We both share a natural ability to distill from a wave its bruising, bone-breaking, fin-gouging elements.

“Well, we are qualified,” Tyler said. “But we have no contacts, no connections.”

“We both surfed with Sam George once,” I reminded him as we unloaded from the chair. We strapped on our bindings and dropped silently through steep, waist-deep powder. I disappeared into the trees, into a conditional bliss of deep breathing and snow spraying turns. Rides like these are topped only by carving up and down the face of a sizeable, fast-breaking wave. After riding top to bottom in the trees without seeing anyone, I found Tyler at the bottom waiting by the chairlift. We loaded and began another ride up.

“I think we can put this book together,” I said.

“Well, I’ve got a lot on my plate,” said Tyler, employing the catch phrase he uses to duck anything that smells of responsibility.

“Okay. I’ll call Sam George at *Surfer* magazine and tell him we need that story he told us in the lineup at Cardiff—the one about his brother winning the dance contest in Brazil.”

Just then the chairlift jerked to a stop. It turned out to be a full-scale breakdown, not a regulation liftee stop. So we dangled up there and laid out the plans for the book. An hour later, a ski patrol came down and threw us a rope. He yelled up for us to toss the rope over the cable above us. That took me about ten tries with Tyler saying, “Dude, let me try,” after each failed fling.

Tyler secured himself in the harness at the end of the rope, and then looked at me and said, “And another thing: there are two anthologies of surf stories already in the book stores, and they both mention rock climbing in their introductions. Promise me you won’t mention rock climbing in the introduction.”

“Why do you care?”

“Because climbers have enough of their own books, and they don’t mention surfing in them.”

“Fine,” I said.

He eased off the chair and was lowered slowly to the snow. I followed.

And so the weeks went by and we did nothing, took no action. Tyler kept on with his job serving espresso drinks, and I continued with my job editing employee benefit directories. Winter ended and we had not managed to materialize one of our hundreds of collected invention ideas. The ideas, meant to catapult us out of low-income jobs, dissipated when they were spoken

into the air. Perhaps all of our words floated upwards to become dim stars that might shine upon us another time. In late spring we parted ways and went off to teach at our respective surf camps, his in Southern California and mine in Northern Baja.

After surfing a thousand cold water, choice Baja waves, I moved to Seattle for the winter. I allotted myself plenty of time to go snowboarding, but the snow never fell. With nothing but rain, the ski areas never opened. (Thank our collective, obsessive use of petroleum, termed more pleasantly as “global warming,” for birthing this book.) With my glut of time, I began finding and editing surf stories. After six months I’ve come up with thirty true stories with well-developed characters, gripping plots, and solidly paced action.

Some notes about the title of the book: The word “misadventure” is like the word “art.” It is all-encompassing and much misunderstood. The word “greatest” is a superlative, and perhaps one could argue that this collection does not contain the greatest surf misadventure stories ever. But that is only because some people, like you and your friends, have not written your stories yet.

Looking over the final selection, I noticed three commonalities that link these stories. One, all the stories seem to arise from the surfers’ sense of invincible possibility (for pleasure, passion, movement, escape, the perfect moment, or whatever lies out there). Two, surfers’ indefatigable wanting and seeking eventually leads them a bit too deep on the surfer’s continuum, which has at one end pure joy and at the other horror, with absurdity and mockery in the middle. And three, what we can say about ourselves as surfers, we can say about these stories: there is always a gap between our expectation and realization of reality, or to moralize: expectations can never be exchanged for reality.

We, like the subjects of these stories, are on a search which ends with the unsought. In this collection, the unsought is always right around the corner.