

## Young and Wild and Beautiful Once<sup>♦</sup>

Odd the way a moment returns, a life-occurrence apparently lost through time's neglect, the mental resurrection the end result of a sequence of recollected images, a one-to-the-next process ruled by the arcane illogic of the subconscious, but then, unexpectedly, the procession climaxing with perfect sense -- the summoned moment as clear, flawless and inevitable as the finale of a well-wrought tale.

I daydreamed a seascape of long ago in a foreign land, blurry but for a certain wave my old surf-chum Christopher rode upon it, which image then segued to a remote shore-side campsite the two of us shared at another faraway place, which in turn conjured a certain risk we took, a law we broke, a laugh we had at the certainty of our invincibility.

I see the logic of it now: the shared laugh, the lawlessness, the invincibility, the endeavor of wave riding in foreign lands; how they all connected and culminated in the resurrected moment, so long lost.

It was the south of France, near Biarritz, in the summer of 1970. The European surf scene was in its infancy back then. All the good surfers on the continent were foreigners, primarily Americans, Aussies and a few South Africans. Christopher and I had made friends with a cadre of beginning but stoked French surfers who were hell-bent on staging a contest, up the coast at a little town called Hossegor, which has since become famous for its fine beach breaks. I didn't believe in surf contests in those days, still don't, but these French had been very nice to Christopher and me, had taken us into their homes and so forth, so I agreed to enter. Christopher, who felt even more negatively about contests than I did, finally acquiesced at the last minute.

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<sup>♦</sup> Written on the road in Central America in 1997.

Well, I won the thing, or at least that's what the judges said; aside from Christopher, there were some pretty good surfers in the finals, all serious foreigner travelers. (Christopher placed third or fourth, as I recall.) After the awards ceremony, Christopher and I paddled back out for a sunset session. I came in first and was walking down the beach toward the parking lot when she approached me, this exquisite young French girl whose name has been (truly) lost to me over the years. Although we had no common language, we'd smiled and flirted a bit that day. Now it was dusk and the beach was deserted and the image is so clear of her sliding off her bikini top in the warm glow of that perfect light, her wide, slightly crazed eyes daring my response.

This is the resurrected moment I refer to, real and true these many years later -- as if just a heartbeat ago I'd shut my eyes on that distant beach, perhaps the better to contemplate *the simple perfection of my young life,*\* as it was there and then.

The French girl had never been with a man before and decided to give it up to a foreign surf bum. Whether she'd picked me earlier in the day or waited to see who would win the contest, mattered not at all to me. Confronted by this vision -- part designing woman, part naughty child, part female animal possessed by some deep biological imperative -- I was suddenly and completely overcome with pure lust, mindless and unencumbered.

But how beautiful she was...

It seems incredible that she's in her fifties now -- although I'd bet a valued possession that she's still beautiful. I can imagine her in a few years, that physical beauty fading now, talking to a granddaughter, and the adolescent girl asking who her first lover

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\* Italics added for my purposes here.

was. Oh, this young American surfer, she'd say. Then, smiling at her own resurrection of the moment, she'd describe the evening on the beach at Hossegor in 1970 when she threw off her bikini top and drove herself and that young surfer mad with desire. The granddaughter would laugh and scold her jokingly and then they'd hug and the grandmother would say that she was young and wild and beautiful once too.

*"Young and Wild and Beautiful Once" was originally written for In Search of Captain Zero but was cut at the insistence of my demented editor. Here's a passage I cut from the book that explains a bit about how this went:*

Every time I did this, refused one of her edits, I knew my book was getting closer to being dropped from publication, out of spite.

As explained via a footnote, I wrote the little up front piece about the French girl on the beach while I was on the road in Central America in 1997. It was to be part of *In Search of Captain Zero*. (I futzed with it a bit and gave it a title to make it better stand on its own here.) I liked (and still like) the piece, mostly for its subtext, and thought it perfect for *Zero*. It worked well in every sense – subject matter, the nostalgic, somewhat melancholy tone, the reference to my old chum (the Captain Zero whom I was in search of), plus in its original version and context it was a seamless fit; you name it. My editor did not want it included in the book and although I felt strongly otherwise, it was not.

I caved.

Fear.