

CHAPTER 1

I shouldn't have put the snake I'd captured into the pocket of my Toughskins blue jeans.

It seems an absurd act now, of course, but when I was ten, it made perfect sense. The plan was to take it home and place it in the bucket that had housed my other great childhood discoveries: frogs, toads, butterflies, worms – whatever piqued my curiosity on any given day. I'd play with these findings for a while until I tired of them, at which point I'd ceremoniously release them in our backyard and embark on another expedition to collect more specimens. Unfortunately for everyone involved on that particular day, I tended to be as absentminded as I was curious, and whatever the distraction was (my money is on the local Blue Bell ice cream truck), it was enticing enough to make me forget about the snake nestled in my jeans. He must have been comfortable in the warmth of my pocket, as he didn't put up much of a fuss, even when I removed the muddied pants at home and pitched them down the laundry chute.

It's worth mentioning that my mom, whom I consider to be an exceptionally courageous woman, has two acute phobias: the first being bats and the second, snakes. She also happened to be the one doing laundry that afternoon. I was upstairs when she started the load so I didn't see what unfolded in the basement, but the first step in the washing process must have been to search through pockets to remove coins, Legos, pens, or any other items that shouldn't go into the machine. It would be an outrageous understatement to say that a live snake was “an unexpected discovery.” Not until my dad and I had raced to the basement in answer to her shriek did I remember the snake, now clearly as terrified as my mother by all the commotion.

This type of incident could have easily happened to any of my friends at the time, all of whom engaged in similar forms of shortsighted, youthful nonsense in our hometown of Madison, Wisconsin. Exploring the nearby woods bordering a stream we called the Frog Pond provided us

with a taste of the dreamy adventure that is nearly impossible to recreate as an adult. The stand of trees couldn't have been more than a dozen acres, yet through the eyes of a child it was as vast as the Amazon Basin. There were seemingly endless maples to scale; streams to ford; occasional unearthed animal bones to examine; forts to defend; and, of course, snakes to catch. All of it stoked my young imagination: I was the greatest of explorers, held back from the rest of the globe only by my lack of a Land Rover and my parents' irritating rule about being home by dinnertime.

Sadly, these adventures began to dwindle right around the same time we decided it wasn't cool to wear Toughskins jeans anymore. Our immense forest became smaller, the towering maples didn't seem so tall, and the raging river that transected our wilderness could be seen for what it really was: a city drainage ditch. Expeditions into the woods became fewer, our time now consumed by Atari video games, J. Geils Band records, *Magnum P.I.* episodes, the pursuit of perfectly feathered hair, and the flagship of all pubescent male distractions: girls. With so many worthy activities begging for our attention, who really wanted to spend time tromping through the woods daydreaming about exploration?

As is so often the case with the dreams we had when we were young, most are slowly eroded away by time, circumstance, or reason until their remnants are so faint, we don't seriously consider chasing after them anymore. Occasionally, the more tenacious ones stick around, pestering us for attention now and then, evolving to fit our changing lives. Those childhood dreams of exploration did just that, tagging along through my teenage years and into college, where – still itching for adventure – I decided to study archaeology and begin scuba training.

It was an exciting time. I was mesmerized by lectures about ancient sites such as Pompeii, Olduvai Gorge, and Machu Picchu. My fascination with the expeditions and discoveries themselves, however, far outweighed any interest in social systems or the cultural origins of

humans. My rather imprudent career goal was to set off and look for neat stuff, just as I had done as a boy. After all, that was where the fun was. Not surprisingly, “looking for neat stuff” wasn’t a thesis topic that would springboard me to a tenured anthropology professorship at Stanford – but I wasn’t cut out for business school, wasn’t sharp enough for engineering, and the idea of working inside all day in a cubicle was too unnerving to even consider.

Newly certified to dive and perpetually on the hunt for excitement, my friend and I would load scuba gear into my old truck in between semesters and make the 1,500-plus mile drive from Wisconsin to the Florida Keys after scraping together just enough money for gas and dive boat fees. The truck doubled as our motel, where we would spend nights squatting in parking lots or tucked away in the stifling mangrove stands hidden from the police – who, we quickly learned, didn’t look favorably upon broke college kids sleeping in vehicles along the road. In the morning, we’d rinse off in the ocean, dine on budget-friendly peanut butter sandwiches, and begin our search for the cheapest dive shop that could take us to whichever reef or shipwreck they were visiting that day.

It was during these years that diving evolved from a recreational pursuit to a professional one, the romantic visions of captaining a dive boat or leading divers through the tropical coral far too alluring to let pass. I began taking more advanced scuba courses, listening to far too much Jimmy Buffett music, volunteering at the local dive school, and exploring any body of water that I could crawl into. As it turned out, there was just as much neat stuff to look for underwater, and to uncover even ordinary items like tires, fishing reels, and bottles while on a murky lakebed somehow inspired a level of excitement far greater than if the same discovery had been made out behind the neighbor’s garage.

By the early 1990s I had managed to find employment as a low-level field archeologist and was training scuba divers on the weekends, desperately hoping that either career would lead to a life filled with the international travel, exploration, and adventure I had been craving. In retrospect, I was a bit optimistic about the former vocation: It led to such exotic locations as Des Moines, East St. Louis, Milwaukee, and Sioux Falls – arguably not the caliber of expedition worthy of note on Edmund Hillary’s curriculum vitae. It was my involvement in scuba that ultimately proved a bit closer to what I had been looking for. I begged my way into a position as a part-time travel guide for a local dive shop, leading groups of scuba divers to the Caribbean. I was terribly underqualified for a number of reasons (including the rather troubling fact that I had never actually been to the Caribbean) and it didn’t pay much, but the tradeoff for the low salary was worth it: pages of colorful stamps in my passport and a regular dose of new experiences.

My first trip as a dive leader was to the island of Bonaire. Located off the coast of Venezuela, the small Dutch municipality had earned the title it boasted on its license plates: *Diver’s Paradise*. Driven by a tourism economy based largely on scuba, Bonaire was custom-tailored to divers. From the island’s protected nearshore reef system and calm seas to its first-rate dive facilities, Bonaire had become one of the world’s premiere destinations for scuba enthusiasts. I led a group of about twenty vacationers desperate to escape the frigid Midwest winter and dive someplace other than a local lake or murky quarry.

I was billed as an experienced guide, and, as such, the others put far more confidence in me than I deserved. The truth was, other than a couple of jaunts to Canada, I hadn’t even been out of the country. I spent a good part of that week suppressing urges to blurt out things like “Holy shit! Look how pretty the money is!” or “Well isn’t that interesting? They sell their gas by the liter down here,” or other touristy blather that would have surely tipped off someone to my

embarrassing lack of worldliness. I frantically pored through every book and article I could find about Bonaire (a time-consuming task in the years before the internet) in the unnerving and very probable event that someone in my group had the gall to ask their guide a question about the island. Miraculously, the week passed without incident, and I returned to Wisconsin deeply tanned, a bit more confident, and itching to travel again.

That visit to Bonaire was an important one for a number of reasons. Topping the list is that it marks my first trip to the Caribbean. In more cases than not, first trips to any given destination tend to be the most memorable. It's the visit against which all subsequent travels are compared. Every facet, from first seeing the turquoise water as our plane descended on approach to Flamingo Airport to drinking beer along the moored sailboats at Karel's Pier, stirred an awe that has been all but impossible to recapture since.

In the following years, I was fortunate enough to lead similar trips to a number of spectacular locations: Belize's Turneffe Atoll, Honduras, the Yucatan, and the Cayman Islands, to name a few. I even managed (based far more on the people I had befriended than on my qualifications) to combine my two professions and land a job at the University of Hawaii's underwater archaeology program, where I helped map sunken World War II airplanes. There were a lot of places out there to see, and I was determined to reach as many of them as possible.

Still, there was a draw to Bonaire that was hard to shake, and I found myself returning again and again to the island in a variety of capacities: as a scuba instructor, a sun-starved vacationer, and years later as a writer and photographer. Each visit brought me a little closer to the heart of the charming island. I met a number of local characters, explored more extensively (both below and above the waterline), researched articles for the island's tourism magazine, and became fascinated with the region's history.

A few things have changed over the years: the currency has shifted to the U.S. dollar, my favorite seaside restaurant, Richard's, has closed, and there are more ice cream shops. But the changes are inconsequential for most. People still flock to Bonaire for what lies beneath the water, not for the waffle cones.

A few short years ago, in my early forties with no children and seemingly none coming our way, my wife, Becky, and I were convinced that our future would hold more intensive, adventurous travel. Conversations about the Pacific Rim, sailing, Europe, and even surfing camp were occurring more regularly. And of course, there was Bonaire. It had been more than twenty years since I had first visited the island as a young, green tour guide, and I had been returning every year since. My affection for Bonaire had grown with time, a sentiment fully shared by my wife, who had logged numerous trips there herself. It was a relationship we planned on fostering through more extensive visits in the future, possibly even purchasing a small rental property on the island.

It was a muggy July morning when the pair of pink lines made their appearance. They weren't there at first, but slowly they materialized, becoming darker in hue and more pronounced with each passing second. Two thin magenta lines were a strange, almost comically understated way to inform us that our lives were about to be turned upside-down. A second pregnancy test was conducted, just in case we had somehow misinterpreted the crystal-clear results of the first. Same thing: same pink lines, same need to sit down for a minute and get my bearings. While we were busy thinking about faraway adventures, one closer to home had moseyed up to our front door and rang the bell.

A few months prior, while drinking wine along the Arno River in Florence and feeling far more cosmopolitan than we had right to, our conversation had turned to Becky's upcoming 40th

birthday. The day would represent far more than a number – it would mark a deadline beyond which we had agreed to stop trying to have children. On that night in Italy, the weight of this felt especially heavy, and as the shoppers swarmed the Ponte Vecchio market and the local cabernet softened our resolve, we made a rather spontaneous decision: Why don't we give it just one more year? The pressure dissolved with the deadline extension. Now, here we were, sitting on the bathroom floor staring joyously at a plastic stick.

Suddenly, all the other parents we knew made it their mission to point out what was coming. In the middle of a conversation, we'd get that look, head tilted slightly, eyes closed, subtle smile, and the slow cadence of nodding. It's the knowing look that uncontrollably seeps out of parents when talking to those expecting their first. It's a look that says, *we know something you don't* (which of course they did) and, albeit kindly, *you really don't know what the hell you're getting yourselves into* (which, of course, we didn't). And the look was invariably followed by what would soon prove to be the truest of statements: *"It's all going to change."*

"So, you had a good time snowboarding last weekend? Good for you... that's all going to change."

"The trip to the Caribbean was amazing? I'll bet it was... it's all going to change."

And so on.

Things had already changed, and we were still months away from being parents. At first, the changes were tactical: like how the desk in the room that was once my cozy office had been replaced by a crib, or the way a station wagon and a sedan now sat in the garage where our Jeep and two-door sports coupe once resided. We made countless trips to unfamiliar stores to purchase unfamiliar things: bulbous silicone nose aspirators, bottles, pumps, strollers, car seats, baby

carriers, and salves with unfathomable names like Pregnant Belly and Nipple Butter, an ointment that I desperately hoped was intended for the mother's nipples and not the father's.

There were classes to take and books to read to prepare us for what was coming, both of which provided more than enough detailed information to scare the hell out of me. Then, as our due date crept nearer, the other changes began to happen: behavioral shifts. Like the way I became obsessed with making sure the doors were locked, my constant worrying, and the frequency that I found myself comfortably using – and perhaps more mind-blowingly, *understanding* – terms like dilation, effaced, and breast milk expression.

So much for surfing camp.

The questions mounted and with them came plenty of speculation. Would our lives as parents have to replace the lives we had before, or could the two coexist to some degree? One thing seemed perfectly clear: we either give up the things we love to do or we find a way to bring our child with us. People do this all the time, don't they? We would pack diapers in our gear bags, buy overpriced drinks for passengers on the plane irritated by the crying, and ask as many questions as we could about life with a child. Visions of striking off across a coral-strewn Bonairian coastline with our giggling baby in a backpack began filling my head. We could do this. We'd be the envy of all of our friends. How hard could it really be?

After our son, Luc, was born, this optimism made it about a week before crumbling. It met its abrupt demise late one night while I was pacing around the kitchen, a sleepless, wide-eyed infant in one arm and my iPad – displaying an article I had just Googled on “how to get babies to sleep” – in the other. I had never experienced so much confusion, felt so helpless, or been so staggeringly exhausted in my life. Travel to the Caribbean with this little guy? I was scared to even go to the grocery store with him. Stroll along a tropical shoreline with him in a backpack? I was

far too tired for strolling. I now had more pressing fantasies, such as sleeping for more than ninety minutes at a time, or eating a meal while sitting down.

Our days were filled with baby monitors, coffee by the gallon, diapers, and incessant fatigue. Could our lives before Luc coexist with our lives afterward? I was beginning to have serious doubts.

And then I felt it slipping away: the excitement of travel, the adventure I was still chasing, and the small Dutch island that I had once assumed would be a constant facet in my life. I saw a mundane suburban future filled with soccer practices, potty training, strained peas, chicken pox, and teacher–parent meetings. No more stepping off the plane and being met with warm equatorial trade breezes. No more late nights on the pier fueled by too much Cuban rum. No more cresting the head of the reef and gazing off through the saltwater vista as schools of tarpon lazily circle the iron hull of a shipwreck. There was just no way all of this could fit together. I was sleep deprived, overwhelmed, and feeling utterly unprepared. And now, just days into being a parent, I was selfishly and shallowly mourning the loss of my previous life, at times even wallowing in jealousy knowing that our childless friends would continue to travel, setting off into the world while, for the first time in my adult life, I would have to remain stationary.

But here's the funny thing: In the broader scheme, I realized none of it really mattered that much – the exhaustion, the confusion, even the petty jealousy. There were much bigger things in play now. I was simultaneously more miserable and happier than I had ever been before. It was an utterly bizarre dichotomy that defied reason, a real mind-screw. Love had been redefined: pure, raw, biologically hardwired, and in its own way, simple. The sudden presence of such a feeling was overwhelming and more than just a little unnerving. I had been consumed by it unconditionally – almost fiercely – since before my son was even born. I knew then that I would let my passport

get dusty from lack of use, pack my dive gear away in the basement, and endure hours of *Sesame Street* videos if need be. And it would unquestionably be worth it. A few months ago, I would have deemed this notion ludicrous. Now, impossibly, it seemed logical.

Yet change seemed the one constant in my life, and in that I could glimpse the subtle glow of possibility. Things had changed drastically from a year before, from a month before, from even a week before. And more was coming – of that I was certain. It was nothing more than speculation (speculating was just about all I had done since discovering I was going to be a parent), but if I concentrated, I could look ahead, beyond the haze of baby monitors, spit-up, fatigue, and relentless worry to a day when Luc would see fit to sleep through the night, to crawl, to smile, to talk, maybe even to stash live snakes in his pocket and terrify his mother. A day would come when I wasn't so exhausted and confused. A day would come when Becky and I could start stitching together our past lives and our lives as parents.

And if that's true, who knows? A day may come that I'm back on Bonaire, I thought: not as a guide or a carefree vacationer, but as a father, a different guide of sorts. Maybe it was just a pipe dream, something I would forget about over time as my new life took hold and more pressing matters replaced the frivolous dreams of travel. Maybe.

There was no harm in hoping.