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BIG WAVES

Mykonos suggested that we go surfing. We grabbed our boards from behind the house and headed to the beach. When we got to the ocean, the waves were huge. Way too big to surf. A storm was coming in, the wind was blowing hard and cold, the sky was gray with dense clouds, and the water was wild. Not a single person was on the beach or in the water. We stood on the sand and looked out at the churning water. An incessant wall of monster waves continually crashed as the wind howled.

“Well, are you ready to go out?” Mykonos asked.

Surprised, I wondered why Mykonos wanted to go out in these conditions. Even the big time surfers weren’t out. These waves weren’t just extremely large, they were messy, closing out, crashing down in a violent churn instead of providing smooth conditions for surfing.

“It looks pretty rough,” I said, afraid that Mykonos would still want to go out. The wind began to blow even harder and colder. Sand whipped up from the beach, stinging my skin and eyes. Through half-

closed eyelids, the water looked very harsh and menacing.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m going out,” Mykonos said, walking into the water, and paddling out.

150 I was afraid. Mykonos was bringing me to the edge of my fear, as he often did, but I also wondered whether going out in these waves was just plain stupid. Our lives would definitely be at risk, and the conditions were so chaotic that the surfing wouldn’t be enjoyable. I doubted we would be able to ride a single wave—and if we did, the probability was high that a forty-foot wall of impending water wouldn’t provide us with surf, but would come crashing down on us, burying us deep below the furious surface, churning us down and around in the current’s suction.

Mykonos was a vet—sometimes I wondered if he required the adrenaline rush of near death encounters to feed some kind of need. I didn’t know if this situation was a spiritual test of my courage, or just Mykonos being self-destructive.

I followed Mykonos into the water.

I had decided years before that I would go wherever Mykonos led me. Other than his teacher, Mykonos was the most open, deep, and fearless person I had ever met. And always his direction had led me deeper and more open in love—so far.

From the beginning, his boundary-free love revealed my fear. When we would drink beer or sake, Mykonos would continue drinking far beyond my limit. At first, I stopped when I felt that I was getting too drunk. I noticed that Mykonos would stop then, too—in fact the evening would stop. So, I learned to

match Mykonos, drink for drink, and go where Mykonos took the evening. I let go of my own fear—I listened to my inner voice of self-preservation, but I did not choose to obey it—and in doing so I discovered a wondrous expanse of beauty and love that lay outside my fearful perimeters.

Once, we were sitting in a room with four other people. We had been drinking for hours. I practiced, as Mykonos had taught me, breathing while feeling the open moment without clinging to or resisting anything. Mykonos was drinking hard and talking fast—everybody else had either passed out or was too fuzzed to follow the conversation.

“There is nothing,” Mykonos said. And that is what I felt. Nothing. Absolute absence. “Yet everything appears,” he continued. I saw the room, heard his voice, felt my own drunken state—and yet it was also nothing, as if a dream were being constantly evaporated, instantly, always, too soon to do anything about, and yet the images appeared, materialized, vanished. “Love is the only way to live that is not insane,” he said.

“Love. Love. Love. Love ...” Mykonos kept repeating that word, over and over, until it was just a sound. “What does it mean, ‘love’?” Mykonos asked. “Love. Love. Love ...” Hearing Mykonos repeat “love,” there was no meaning to the utterance; it was just a sound, a shape.

“You do not know what a single thing is,” Mykonos said. “Everything is happening. We can talk about it. But still, nothing means anything when you fully feel it in the present. You can

associate a meaning with it—whatever ‘meaning’ means—but you do not know what it is. It simply is.”

I looked around the room at the unconscious or nodding-off people. Mykonos was wide awake, sitting on the edge of his chair, passionately speaking.

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“Everything is just ... happening. That is the most that can be said. You can construct all kinds of words and thoughts and ideas—shapes in the mind—and associate them with the shapes you see—the glass of water, your friends here, the grass outside—but that doesn’t mean you know what anything is. You have simply associated various shapes together. Patterns patterning. You can feel, even now, that those patterns are nothing, can you not?”

“Yes, Mykonos, everything feels like nothing.”

“Everything *is* nothing. And yet it all exists. What a miracle! How can you live in such a place without going insane, unless you love? Hmmmm? Your closest friends are shapes, coming and going, meaning nothing before this birth or after death, yet occupying your life with patterns of bodies and filling your heart with patterns of feeling.”

Mykonos looked out the window, paused for a while, and continued speaking.

“Your heart would be crushed in suffering if you could actually feel all the beings in pain, the cats and dogs, men at war, women at home, lonely and unloved, all the children starving, dying, the disease—but here we are, enjoying ourselves, because we are able to limit our attention to the shapes in our little *room*, and act like we know what this is, what everything is.”

Mykonos drank, and I drank. Then he looked in my eyes with such love, speaking intensely, but quietly.

“You are wide open. This *room* is wide open. God is alive as everything that appears and disappears, you included. You are either seizing up in fear—binding yourself to what appears, friends, lovers, children, homes, work, your body, your thoughts, building up a sense of self, a whole inner world of comfort and ideas and hopes for the future and so forth—or you are surrendering it all, loving *completely* and letting go *completely*. Love without limits, my friend. Trust love to live you and all things. As much as it hurts your heart to feel everything and everyone, as terrifying as it is to surrender absolutely, your only real option is to love without boundaries, wide open. Love is the only way to live. Feel everything. Feel without limitation.”

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I was drunk, and yet Mykonos’s words rang crystal clear, opening my heart beyond hold. Why not open and love? I felt nauseous, dizzy, about to pass out—but why not love? Why would I want to collapse my feeling less than love? I breathed and relaxed my body, as best I could. I felt my body, the air in the room, and everybody in the room with us. I felt Mykonos’s passion, the pain etched in his face, the light in his eyes, his constant efforts to bring me open—to bring everyone into love. My heart felt like it was turning inside out in gratitude.

“Do you know how many people have died?” Mykonos asked. “And every one of them was trying to survive, to feel good, to avoid too much pain, if possible. Some made grand gestures,

and vestiges of their lives surround us as art, religion, science, whatever. Most made smaller gestures: a few kids, a comfortable living room, friends they could talk with as the patterns of their lives came and went.”

Mykonos and I drank.

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“And then there are the rare ones,” said Mykonos, eyes glistening, “like my teacher, who appear in the pattern to remind the pattern itself of its source and true nature. I have been reminded, and you have been reminded, and until the whole pattern realizes that it is only love—*only love*—war continues here, pattern against pattern, each trying to carve out a little place of comfort, brushing up against other patterns trying to persist as they are, fighting against all that threatens them, forgetting love even as they fight with their lovers, their children, their own impulses—fighting with the very patterns they hope will save them.

“Alcohol can be useful if you know how to use it. It can help you see the patterns for what they are by softening the torrent of your jabbering mind-current. But most people just get dull when they drink. They don’t know how to breathe life through their body, so, instead, the spirit-force backs up—rather than sinking down, opening their heart, and filling their belly with love’s force, it rises up their front and makes them puke. Most people don’t know who they are when their mind stops, so they feel confused, lost, or they just blank out when no thought moves, when their thinking mind is obliterated. They can’t stand the gap. But if you can relax as love, if you are comfortable with no-thought, if you can simply be con-

sciousness without needing a self-sense to cling to, then drugs and alcohol can help sweep away the usual and incessant patterns of body and mind so you can recognize love now—your mind, every body, this entire universe, is only love, appearing as patterns, and it all comes and goes, and surrender is the only way to live that isn't terror, you know?"

Paddling out into the churning sea, I tried to surrender rather than freeze up in terror. Mykonos was ahead of me, ducking under waves as they came in, paddling further out. The waves were much bigger now than they had seemed from the shore. I genuinely felt we might die. We were idiots. There wasn't a soul anywhere on the beach or in the water, the sky was darkening with storm's gray, and the waves kept getting bigger. We paddled outside of the area where the waves were breaking. This far from the shore, the swells were huge, lifting us up and down like tiny floating specks. As I looked back toward the beach, I could see the waves breaking, careening toward shore, monster walls of roiling, crashing madness.

Mykonos's face looked serious. The air was turning chillier as the winds whipped faster. Spray from the chop whacked our faces and filled our nose and eyes. The waves were now so large I didn't think we could make it back in. I paddled toward Mykonos. I assumed he had a plan.

"This was a pretty stupid thing to do," Mykonos said without smiling. I heard him quietly say his teacher's name, three times.

We stayed for more than an hour rising up and down with the swells outside of the break, waiting for the storm to subside, but it

was only getting worse. On the shore, through the gray mist and white spray, we could see what I thought was a coast guard vehicle pulling up on the beach. They were yelling something through a megaphone, but we couldn't make out what they were saying over the roar of the crashing waves.

There was nothing we could do. I had followed Mykonos into this situation, willingly. I couldn't blame him.

Suddenly, Mykonos said, "I'm taking this one in." He paddled to catch the next wave and disappeared. All I could see was the back of the wave, charging into shore, until the wave broke into whitewater. I strained my eyes to find Mykonos, but I couldn't see him.

I was alone on the swells. Mykonos was gone. The evening's looming dark was adding to the visibility problems. I could barely make out the shore through the darkness. And then I saw Mykonos, a tiny speck carrying his board, walking toward the coast guard people. He had made it.

I felt the swells as I tried to calculate which wave to take in, but I was too afraid. I didn't know what to do. I tried paddling parallel to the shore, thinking that maybe I would find a place where the waves weren't breaking so hard, where I might be able to ride a wave all the way to shore without being crushed beneath its furious load. I realized it was getting late and soon I wouldn't be able to see a wave's gray shape looming against the night sky.

I was alone. Mykonos was safe on shore. The coast guard could do nothing.

There was no option but to take a wave in, and pray. I paddled back and forth for another twenty minutes or so, alternating between moments of strange peace and mind-numbing panic. I didn't know what I was waiting for—the conditions were only worsening. Finally, I forced myself to take a wave, and I held onto my board as I was lifted up and then dropped over a charging ledge into dark space.

Once, when drinking with Mykonos and our friends, Erin disappeared. We all looked for her in the house, and then we looked outside in the yard. Nobody could find her. As dawn approached, someone found her a few blocks from the house, lying on the side of the road, naked, passed out. She seemed fine, although she couldn't remember what happened to her.

During another drunken evening, a friend's wife disappeared with another man. She ended up divorcing my friend, marrying the other man, giving birth to a seriously handicapped child, divorcing her new husband, and years later, regretting that she ever spent time with us at all.

I trusted Mykonos more than anyone I had ever known—and he was also the least trustable person I knew. He frequently told me what a jerk someone was—and then acted like he was that person's best friend when they showed up. He lied and made up stories and twisted facts to suit the needs of the moment. He would pour his life into helping someone for years, and then never speak to them again, for no reason at all.

He was more loving, more compassionate, than anyone I had ever met, and he also couldn't care less about anyone's life. Nothing

about my—or anyone’s—daily life interested him. Months could go by and Mykonos would never ask a single question about how I was doing or what was going on in my life. Except for a few rare moments over the course of many years, he didn’t want to hear about my relationships, my career, or even my health. He’d listen for a few seconds and then change the subject—always to sex or death or God, which were all the same thing to him. He would talk for hours about his time in Vietnam or his childhood friends, and later I would realize I didn’t know anything more about Mykonos than before, but I had learned a great deal about love and how to open as love, and about death.

I heard people talk about Mykonos. A few people respected Mykonos greatly. But many more hated him. They told me he was a “back stabber,” how he had pretended to be their friend only to shaft them later. They told me how he would never admit to being wrong, and that he would never talk about his own spiritual or sexual issues.

With other people, I saw Mykonos say one thing to their face and tell a totally different story when that person wasn’t present, so I figured he did the same with me. One time, he strongly insisted that Paco prepare himself for an upcoming disaster, and then later he joked with me about how Paco was so neurotically insistent about preparing himself for the disaster. This kind of two-faced behavior was so common for Mykonos that I simply assumed he told every person a different story, perhaps what he felt they needed to hear, with no concern for what the facts “really” were.

Mykonos had no friends—at least not the kind of friends most people have. I had known Lemuel since childhood. Paco and Dimitri had been close friends of mine for many years. We shared a sense of loyalty. I knew I could count on them for the long haul. But unless I called Mykonos on the phone, or went to visit him, he never would even contact me. And, as far as I could tell, he was this way with just about everyone.

And yet, nobody gave me more than Mykonos. I couldn't count on him to help me in bad times, or even to call me in good times. I couldn't trust a word he said about anything. I assumed he criticized me in front of others just as he criticized them to me. And I knew, if I didn't get in touch with him, I'd never see him again—he'd never seek out my company, or anyone else's.

Still, the gifts that poured from Mykonos in an hour of drinking beer with him left me stunned, opened, grateful, and awakened to a dimension of heart-truth that my other friends—the friends I trusted with my life—barely knew existed.

Mykonos wasn't a person, really. He was a hole in the universe.

The wave began crashing down on me. I closed my eyes as the water pounded my body. I gripped the board as hard as I could, knowing that if I lost the board, I would be dragged beneath the water by the churning force of the wave, unable to come up for air. I was being washing-machined, sucked down and tumbled in the water. In the darkness, I couldn't tell what was up or down. I held to the board with all my strength, holding my breath, tumbling head over heels, waiting for the buoyancy of the board

to bring me back to the surface before I began breathing water into my lungs.

160 I could feel my heart beating. The roar from beneath the water sounded like distant drums. I was running out of breath, out of time. I began to suffocate. There was nothing else I could do but wait for the board to bring me to surface. I waited, searing in my head and lungs.

When I hit the surface, I gasped for breath and inhaled ocean spray. Choking, another wave came down, burying me beneath the water, tumbling me upside down and around in the darkness. I reached again the surface and tried to breathe, coughing up water while clinging to the board. The next wave was smaller, pushing me closer to the shore that I could barely see through the spray. Regaining enough breath, I paddled and kicked to help the waves push me toward the beach.

Finally, I got close enough to the shore to see it clearly, although I couldn't see Mykonos or the coast guard people. Paddling through the chop and currents, I reached the shore, got out of the water on weary legs, and sat on the sand, my heart pounding hard.

I had drifted about half a mile from where Mykonos and I entered the water. After a few minutes, I walked back, chilled, feeling very good to be on land.

Mykonos was sitting on the beach looking out at the water when I reached him.

"Where did the coast guard people go?" I asked.

“They left a little while ago. You hungry?” Mykonos asked.

We went to a little Mexican food place near the beach.
Mykonos never again mentioned our day in the stormy waves.