

A VOYAGE BEYOND REASON

By
Tom Gauthier

Chapter One

*Don't walk behind me, I may not lead.
Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow.
Just walk beside me and be my friend.
Unknown*

**A Beach near San Felipe
Baja California, Mexico
September 13, 1996**

The tall, tanned, and fit twenty-four year old stood holding the rudder lines of his one man kayak firmly in his left hand, looking out over the Sea of Cortez. While he gazed intently he wasn't focused on the scene before him. Deep in thought he wondered just what it was that had enticed and possessed him to attempt what he was about to do.

Wondering without questioning, anticipating without fearing, he let the prospects of his near future slosh around in his mind, imitating the water around his feet. His next step would launch him into shark infested waters, a sea passage known for its lawless drug smugglers, dangerous surf, and rocky coasts. Launching his tiny craft would start the journey. A journey that would not end before three thousand and more miles had passed beneath its keel.

Or perhaps, much, much, sooner.

Some thought him crazy to plan his departure date to coincide with the hurricane season in Mexico. Just as inexplicable, his planned arrival in a few months will coincide with the monsoon season in the Southern Hemisphere. But today, standing at the edge of his future, this was not on his mind. These were decisions he would live to regret.

But first he had to *live*—before he could *regret*.

The young man's mind swirled with every thought imaginable, all pointed at excitement and a burning desire to succeed. With emotions running high his body grew tense and rigid. Raw anticipation clutched at his throat. His breath coming in short, ragged gasps. Drawn to this ocean and the real dangers it promised, he saw this moment as what he'd been waiting for, preparing for, for the past six months. Indeed he felt like this was the time he'd been waiting for his whole life.

A few feet behind him up on the dry hot sand, were the few people who came to see him off. People who loved him, and people who hated his decision to follow his dream. They were the same

people. In front of the rest his father stood, quietly resigned to the scene that unfolded around his son. His own last words to his son rolled around in his head, “Ben, you’re going off half-cocked. You don’t know what you’re getting into. People get killed out there on the ocean. It’s a very dangerous place and you don’t know the first thing about it.”

In the classic struggle of the ages between fathers and sons, he feared that his attempt to discourage may have only driven the stake for success higher and deeper into his son’s soul. Quietly, silently, the father prayed for the son, *God speed, my boy, God speed.*

Standing apart from the small group on the shore stood a young lady. She was tall and beautiful with golden hair that shone in the desert sun as it fell halfway down her back. Her name was Heather and Ben had known her only two weeks. But it was an intense two weeks that found them emotionally entwined and sweetly conflicted. Her arms hung limp and helpless at her sides, the expression on her face a mixture of admiration, sorrow, and fear.

All eyes were on the young man. At 6’1” tall with piercing brown eyes, his shaved head showing pale contrast to his tanned, broad shouldered body, Benjamin Wade stood waist deep in the blue green waters of Baja California’s Sea of Cortez. His heavily laden kayak floated faithfully at his side. The sun beat down hard on his brow. He squinted against its glare, and peered out across the sea to a world that seemed to open its mouth and swallow him whole. He stood there, pitiful like, in a valiant attempt to look confident, chest puffed out and jaw set tight. Slowly his mind calmed, working its way through the pall of a feeling of complete and utter loneliness that had begun to shallow his breathing.

Now he drew a deep breath.

This is it! It’s time! Now we put all the words to rest. I’ll live up to my expectations – or damn well die trying. They may not believe, but I do – and that’s what counts now!

This is it!

With a final push and a yell that was harsher, more primal, than he or anyone expected, Benjamin Wade shoved the kayak into the waves. He climbed nimbly into the cockpit, thrust his paddle deep into the blue-green water and began his journey. On the beach, people who cared watched him grow smaller and smaller as the distance and the sea swallow him into his future.

On the sea, Ben did not look back.

Time is relative at sea. Especially so, when one is alone in a small craft and learning as one goes. In only a couple of hours, but all too soon, Ben received his first shock—the stark realization that his training and mental preparation was nothing compared to what the ocean now hinted that it had in store for him.

He had expected the waters in the Sea of Cortez along the Baja California coast to be fairly calm and protected from the path of the hurricanes and the stronger swells of the Pacific Ocean. His plan was to hug the Baja coast down to La Paz, nine hundred miles to the south. Then he would *simply cross over* to the mainland of Mexico, a good month’s journey away. Ben figured that this “*little cruise down to La Paz*” would give him plenty of time to adjust to a life of solitude on the water—and the prospect of increasing danger. He figured that after this first month into the voyage, he would be fit to tackle the twenty foot waves, the strong gales and the continuous storms of the open ocean.

He was wrong, maybe dead wrong.

The currents in the Sea of Cortez are stronger and more unpredictable than he had anticipated. At the end of the first day he was more tired than he had been in his whole life.

Sunset on the Sea of Cortez
September 13, 1996

This is my first entry in this journal. The sun is setting, but I have light to see as I stop for dinner and to write this.

I have always been drawn to the ocean, transformed by its beauty, afraid of its power, changed by its pleasures, and totally mesmerized by its mysteries.

These massive living bodies of water that surround us have a magnetic passion, a dynamic energy that defies all logic. With a mind of its own, the ocean gives us but a fleeting glimpse of its storied and oft told past.

I have seen its raw power myself in the churning surf and raging swells that reshapes the land beneath our feet, and with seeming indifference, destroys anything foolish enough to defy it. So too have I experienced its serene beauty and splendor on a quiet night in a secluded cove, reflecting the moonlight, its waves gently pattering on a soft sandy shore.

With all of the focus back there in the world on man's so called progress and achievement, the ocean gives us a glimpse, a small example of how ruggedly beautiful the hand of God can be.

These thoughts have been rolling around in my mind all day. I'm anxious to write them down, for me, or for whoever might find them. I will keep a record of everything that happens to me on this voyage. Some see this as a shot at the world's record for a solo voyage in this craft, but for me this is my search for who I am, what I am, and if I'm a quitter or not.

Too often of late, I accuse myself of being a quitter.

I WILL prove myself wrong.

The bottom of this page is smeared, apparently by a splash of seawater. The top of the next page continues and the hand writing reflects the words.

For the past six months I trained every day, six hours a day, seven days a week. I knew I was prepared. But now as I sit here, a tiny speck in this endless and powerful sea, I know I am not prepared for this, my first day. The grueling agony of hours of aching muscles is pure torture. Even as I sit here watching the sunset, my hands have not stopped shaking. I can barely read my own writing!

Back home, I used to sit in my kayak on my living room floor, lights out and listening to soothing music, while I tried to visualize what it will be like to sit in the darkness of the wilderness, miles from any human being. I truly believed that my mental toughness was awesome, the better of any man or situation.

Well, I was wrong. On all accounts, I was wrong!

I am tired, hungry, thirsty, and ... God knows, lonely.

Oh, how I wish I had someone to talk to, to share this moment with. I feel that I'm on the verge of something great. But, there is a chasm of fear and doubt that has welled up in front of me. Will I make it? I must! Will I die? I cannot!

There is a scribble here. Like a pause in his thinking.

I will write more in my journal later. For now I will set down this pen and paper, and concentrate on the majestic sunset that sweeps as a panorama before me. The water is gently lapping against the hull of my tiny craft. The seashore is a phantom, several miles in the distance, and I am content to sit here and let this dream of mine encompass all that is in me and around me.

On the Sea of Cortez September 14, 1996

The second day at sea repeated the challenge and the drain of energy as the rough current seemed to make the miles and the minutes drag by. Doubts began to sneak into his thoughts. The craft that had seemed so strong and up to the task back in California, now took on a very fragile and Lilliputian dimension in the face of the vast sea. Eighteen feet long and two feet wide at its widest point, the gray

Kevlar hull of the kayak is strong. But the egg shaped cockpit that is Ben's 'hearth and home' is only three feet long by fifteen inches wide. The depth of the hull is twelve inches, which means that Ben's exposed body is never more than six inches above the water—and any sea creatures that choose to explore this intruder. An outrigger pontoon, eight feet long by eight inches wide and deep, completed the craft that would be Ben's home, refuge and life raft for the months to come. The potential fragility of craft, of body, and of mind, crept into the picture now, framed by a blue, brown, and green, restless sea.

On the Sea of Cortez

September 15, 1996

It was early on his third day on the water. Ben woke from a fitful slumber with a start. He stretched limbs, stiffened from the night of cramped sleep on the kayak. With a brief look around he began to paddle at an even pace. The water was calm and his spirits rose with the sun. The warming rays eased the stiffness in his back.

Okay, this is how it's supposed to be, he thought, reveling in the smooth movement through the water. As the morning progressed he could tell that he was making substantial headway. Occasionally he looked over to the passing shore and sighted landmarks that he could identify on his map. His spirits as buoyant as his little craft, he settled into a decisive rhythm. He focused on the bow of the kayak eight feet in front of him that parted the small rolling swells and sent glinting fragments of water rushing by. *Yes, this is how it's supposed to be.*

Gliding along in his state of peaceful bliss and concentration, Ben was only mildly surprised when a sandbar emerged from the calm waters directly in front of him. It stretched out toward the kayak like a knife. He calmly pressed his right foot down on the rudder and steered around the obstacle. Then another one appeared, and yet another. Somewhat confused and pondering what it might mean, Ben stopped paddling.

I know I'm far enough out from shore.... there shouldn't be any outstretching piece of the coastline....

He looked around, suddenly becoming aware of dozens of little islands that he hadn't seen before. They stretched across the horizon. Now he realized that he was floating in only a few inches of water. His paddle occasionally scraped bottom sand.

Good God, could the tide have gone out this rapidly?

He felt jerked back into the reality of how unfamiliar he was with the Sea of Cortez and how suddenly the water along this stretch of coast can change.

The water level must have dropped over thirty feet!

Ben shook his head, smiled sheepishly at his own ignorance and resigned himself to what was happening, as the sand islands slowly connected to each other until he was surrounded by one continuous ring of sand. Soon, the crystal clear waters receded so much that his now useless paddle buried itself in the bottom and he was stuck in the sand miles from any shore. He climbed out of the kayak to stand in only a few inches of the puddling water.

Benjamin Wade laughed out loud, *Lunchtime, I guess.*

Opening the front storage compartment he retrieved some dried fruit and sat down on the wet sand with his feet resting in a puddle of cool water. It was surpassingly peaceful, sitting a few miles out from a desert shore, eating a light lunch, and taking a break from the monotony of the morning's paddling. He smiled and leaned back against the boat, soaking up the sun and stretching out his weary back.

"This isn't so bad," he said aloud.

Popping another morsel into his mouth, he drifted into thought.

It's so quiet here. I think I like being alone. The stresses of my old job, friends, bills, they all seem to float by carelessly. Hey, just like those clouds up there. They're part of another world.

Sometimes I really want—intend—to go back to it all. But now, I don't know. Alone, rested, and miles from the nearest human interference, I'm thinking that I can forget my past - for a while at least.

He laid his head back against the little craft and drifted into a peaceful sleep. The peace ended all too abruptly. At first the distant sound of waves crashing was barely audible, more like a buzzing sound that was far away and intertwined with the dream-visions that swirled through his head.

As Ben lay there basking in the sun, he was oblivious of what was to come that day, as well as the next six months. Had he truly known the ferocity of the ocean, he might have thought twice about confronting her power. But naiveté and stubbornness refused to allow him the luxury of “stop and think.” Now he was going to pay the price for that stupidity of youth. Like many of the lessons learned in life, he was about to learn the hard way. But, out here where he had ventured, unlearned lessons can cost him his life.

The northern coastline of the Sea of Cortez is affected by extreme levels of tide. The water comes rushing up along this slender area between Baja California and the mainland of Mexico with vicious intensity and force. Second only to the Bay of Fundy, the distance between high and low tide can fluctuate as much as forty yards near the northern tip, where the Colorado river once dumped its mighty contents into the Sea. At low tide the water hesitates at this level for only fifteen minutes. It then begins to work its way up the beach, sometimes at a speed of more than fifteen miles per hour. Each day the time for high and low tides advances one hour in accordance with the travel of the moon around the earth. During a full moon the difference between high and low tide is the least, the water often becoming tranquil, almost lazy, offering a perfect time to travel on its surface. But after this short period of rest, the gap between high and low tide widens steadily for fourteen days. During this time the ocean becomes more and more restless. Without warning, vicious storms, winds, and currents can arise in a manner of minutes. In some areas along the Baja peninsula, the tide can be overwhelming. It can capsize and consume small craft, swallowing their human cargo with little or no remains. Experienced fishermen and boaters know well the dangers on this perilous sea. Their sailing schedules coincide strictly with the tidal flow and, during some seasons such as the one approaching, they would not be caught dead in the middle of the Sea. Unfortunately, Ben was to learn most of this by dangerously experiencing the power and tenacity of the Sea of Cortez. Once again his naiveté and stubbornness had placed him in peril.

The buzzing of the tide caused him to get up and look around. With relentless force the water moved in, rapidly rising up past his knees, and then higher. Ben calmly climbed into the kayak's cockpit, finished swallowing his last bite of lunch and dipped the paddle into the water. At first there was no place to go, no specific direction to take. But then, up ahead he could see an area of deeper water angling out toward the main part of the Sea. It seemed to flow between the mysterious sand islands. The kayak headed straight toward it and then banked hard to the port side to pick up the current. Suddenly, Ben distinctly heard a distant crashing.

Looking out, he saw several huge sets of breakers battering the sand of an island not too far ahead. Hardly believing his eyes, he watched as the water continued to rise at an alarming pace. Islands of sand were disappearing without a trace. The tide was roaring in.

It waits for no man - and it's sure as hell not waiting for me.

Before he could react, waves leapt among the sand banks and pounded over the kayak's bow and into his lap. Ben jammed the rudder into the direction of each new wave, avoiding when he could the water that wanted to turn the kayak sideways. There were hundreds of waves crashing in front, to the sides, and on top of him. Several of the waves towered over seven feet tall from trough to crest. He began to worry that he would make one mistake and capsize. The kayak's cockpit was half full of

water, adding another hundred or so pounds to the already heavy, supply laden craft. Though not full of enough water to make it sink, Ben wasn't going to take any chances. He could already feel the strain in his arms as he tried to pull not only the weight of the kayak and its supplies, but the added weight of the water inside. He steadied the kayak, aimed it at the next wave and reached behind his seat for the automatic bilge pump. Quickly grabbing the soft foam handle, he sat it between his legs and pushed. *Damn, there must be a hundred pounds of water . . .*

It was well past his stomach, sloshing around and making the boat all but unmanageable. His physical training had not prepared him for such additional weight. He feared that his muscles could not keep up with this added strain, and now the pump was not keeping up with the incoming water. He tried to splash some of the water out by hand. That didn't work. Every time he stopped paddling, the kayak would spin sideways in the crashing waves. He could feel the strength of the current forcing him backwards. Every few seconds a new wave would roar over the combing and threaten to completely flood the cockpit.

How much more weight can it bear without sinking?

He looked around the cockpit, desperate to find a faster method of bailing. The handle of an aluminum cooking pot was sticking out from behind the seat to his left side. He picked it up and began to bail the water out. He felt the conditions about to overwhelm him. His mind balked at reality. He was forgetting again about the strength of the current—and forgetting one of the elementary rules at sea. *Never take your eyes off of the ocean, shit . . .*

He felt the boat suddenly surge forward and down. He looked up and saw another towering wave about to crash against him. Throwing all of his weight against the side where the wave was breaking, he thrust his paddle into the water for balance. Angry water poured into the cockpit again, filling it almost three quarters of the way full. The water level soon neared what he knew would be disaster. The kayak was sinking. He had to do something fast.

Holding the paddle in one hand and the aluminum pot in the other, he began to bail and paddle at the same time. With an effort born of urgent fear, he was able to bail enough water out of the kayak in a short period of time to give it more stability and lighten the load. His effort was enough, at least, to make it easier on his aching muscles. The easing on his muscles corresponded with an easing of his tensions. *I might be getting ahead of this thing . . .*

He now had enough time, finally—if not tragically too late—to put on his spray skirt, the device he should have been using to keep water out of the boat. He pulled it tight around his waist and checked to be sure it was sealed to the cockpit's edges. All was secure. There were still several inches of water in the bottom of the cockpit, but at least for now he wouldn't take on any more.

For the next three hours, with the tide continuing to come in unabated, Ben battled the wind and the waves. The muscles in his arms, back, and legs, ached beyond belief. He could feel the blisters on his hands swell where he gripped the paddle too tightly. His legs, having to steer the kayak's rudder in so many directions at once, were cramping. Now his breath was coming in short, rapid gasps. He wondered how long he could hold up without heading for shore.

As the sun began to set over the desert brown hills of Baja California, he realized that he did not want to spend another night out on the open water.