

Without Hesitation

by

Chip Ford

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On this warm, humid, mid-September night, returning home from a hectic Sunday evening meeting in Boston, I was lured to this seafront park. Red Rock has often been a place for tranquil introspection, the search for new perspectives, or just a temporary reprieve from life's routine demands. It'd been a frequent destination for walks with Rip, my old yellow Labrador who'd loved playing fetch and swimming from the rocks. I didn't think this eleven o'clock visit was any different. I wandered across the broad lawn toward the most seaward point and onto the wide walkway that follows the perimeter and overlooks the ocean. One look out alerted me that tonight was different.

The sea was dark and heaving. Crashing white spray beat upon the outermost rock formation, the outcropping I was usually drawn to. I recalled that Hurricane Gabrielle had been working its way up the East Coast for days, though well offshore. This was its effect and I'd witness some pretty dynamic action tonight. The anticipation was pleasantly exciting but conditions would alter my usual routine.

The ocean has always held an attraction and fascination for me and, since the thirteen-hour boating near-disaster of '76, has imbued in me an awesome and healthy respect. The inherent power and ambivalence of the ocean, especially learned the hard way, have always since been carried within, but my love of it has never diminished. This place of solitude transfers to me some of that strength and a sense of timelessness and inevitability. It is a catalyst for clear thought. Many seemingly profound solutions have come on these vigils.

The ocean possesses sheer, unmitigated power, power none should attempt to defy or defeat, but rather should appreciate with a healthy respect. With that recognition and an approach with minimal risk, I could still draw upon it without fear.

I confidently bounced down the familiar concrete steps leading from the walkway to the rocks below and sauntered fifteen yards further to a large jutting boulder. Lightly leaping

to its peak, I took a comfortable position. From here I could view the angry sea's tantrums pounding the furthestmost rock formations some hundred feet beyond.

The air was cooler, the sky clear and sparkling with stars undiluted by city lights. The ocean was dark and menacing in the near distance, thundering in explosions of white crashing waves against a pitch-black backdrop. Streetlamps back up along the walkway garishly cast light over the nearby rocks creating deep shadows among the faceted and round-edged boulders surrounding me, reflecting in the tidal pools. They lit a haphazard and confusing path fading out to the dark peninsula and the big, barely discernible, round rock formation that was the most seaward reach. Large oily swells, their humped backs subtly glistening, mysteriously snaked onshore from hundreds of miles away, driven by hurricane-force winds far out in the Atlantic. The pounding surf, the crashing, foaming waters, were borne of stupendous and distant forces and I felt favored to be discretely included in their spectacle.

High tittering voices came suddenly from behind and rushing footsteps interrupted my quiet contemplation. Six running youths in white fled past my secure observation post in a burst of excitement, their language foreign and their features Asian. "Cambodian, Laotian ... Vietnamese?" I pondered, watching them pursue each other in high spirits and head further down the erratic rock surface toward the crashing surf with naive abandon.

I hesitantly weighed intervening. "Hey, be real careful," I finally shouted to the receding figures as I realized their intent of closing in on the sea. "That's an incoming tide and it's coming in fast."

One of the youths abruptly stopped, looked over his shoulder in apparent surprise, turned away in dismissal, and continued to lead further out without regard. The last of them, one of three young women, halted, turned, and looked back apprehensively. "Miss, those are hurricane seas out there and this is an incoming tide. To go out much further is very dangerous ... very foolish."

She shouted to her companions in their lilting tongue, apparently relaying my warning, and was rewarded by laughs and offhand remarks. She looked back sheepishly, as though I must have understood their brash bravado, unsure of her reaction, obviously having

absorbed the gravity and sincerity of my warning but unable to convince her friends.

“I’ve lived around here all my life. I’m familiar with this place, and it’s crazy to go out there tonight. Someone will be killed if they don’t listen.”

Again she shouted out a translation as I climbed down from my perch and approached, but her friends ignored her plea and continued their headlong plunge.

Standing alongside her, I explained that every year a few such foolish adventurers inevitably were fished out of the ocean in this area from unnecessary risks taken in calmer times, that I wouldn’t think of venturing beyond here tonight.

Concerned, she began pursuing her companions, hesitantly picking her footing among the increasingly dark seaweed-draped rocks, angular shadows and crevices, distancing herself among the tidal pools still further from the weakening light of the streetlamps.

I knew better, but the need to follow overcame me. I had to persist trying to talk some sense into them, to draw them back. I hoped I could prevent the potential tragedy I felt approaching.

As I caught up to her, I passed on an observation that’d been interrupted by their intrusion. “These waves are coming in eights. The first three are small and even, followed by five increasing in size. They don’t want to be caught out there for the eighth one.”

She plodded on, rapidly calling to her friends, growing desperation now edging her voice. Though I couldn’t understand a word, I knew she was trying to help turn them back, avert the impending tragedy.

They’d reached the most seaward rock, the promontory, and were reveling in their foolish daring.

She climbed out with brave determination. Her moves were slow and cautious as she daintily leap-frogged from rock to rock from the last major outcropping of mainland, across the slippery maze of kelp-laden stones, dodging tidal pools filling with surges. She reached the promontory and clambered up to join her friends.

I saw no alternative. Reluctantly I followed across the rocks, climbed up the face of the huge egg-shaped promontory, and stood alongside the irrepressible youths.

“Tell them we’ve got to get out of here. Now!” I gruffly advised, my patience and common sense strained to their limits. She relayed my demand to stubborn ears. “Tell them people have died in better conditions out here.” Again she was rebuffed with laughs and rapid sing-song chatter as they scurried about the face of the rock, increasingly daring in their dangerous game of dodging waves.

In disbelief that I was here, I looked out to the heaving ocean, its utterly intimidating presence now only a few feet away. I could see only darkness melting into long rows of greater undulating darkness, shadows and highlights of hilly twelve and fifteen foot swells endlessly rolling in from across the Atlantic. One crashed into the base of our rock, thundering and throwing up a curtain of heavy spray. The others scurried up and down the rock’s face gleefully dodging the airborne sheet of ocean as I gravely scrutinized our situation, judging the speed of the incoming ocean, its effect on our precarious escape route.

“Look, tell them we’ve got only minutes at most to get off this rock and then we won’t be able to,” I ordered in exasperation, wondering why I was still here. “This rock will be underwater long before high tide.” She flashed another look of concern then fired off a command to the others. They looked at me with sudden sobriety, exchanged glances, then in single-file began climbing down the rock toward safety. I wondered what she’d said to finally get their attention, but they now seemed clearly aware.

“Hold it!” I commanded. I gauged the approaching wave, waited its arrival, and watched as it cascaded across the twenty-odd yards of open crossing, burying the jumble of rocks and crevices between us and the safety of mainland. There were sudden looks of surprise, an abrupt respect for our situation. As the surge began sluicing in chaotic return, reopening our path, I shouted, “Now! Go, go, go, go, go!”

I stood fast as they scrambled rock to rock, tripping and slipping over the treacherous kelp-slickened terrain. I allowed them precious moments to get ahead, anxiously awaiting my chance to follow without contributing to the confusion. When they’d sufficiently crossed the rock hazard, I leaped from my vantage and streaked after them, one eye on the roiling ocean and incoming wave, one on the obstacles ahead.

Almost halfway across the hurdles, my ocean eye registered alarm. Without hesitation, I broke stride, spun about, and raced back toward the promontory. A killer wave was quickly rolling in, bearing down on us. They would make it to high ground on the other side, barely. There was no way I could in time. My only chance was to regain the rock and use it as cover.

I leaped for the leeward side, scrambled to high ground, flashed an apprehensive last look seaward, turned my back to it and hunkered down with the fearsome sight burned into my brain. I gulped a breath and held it as the monster struck my rock with a boom, shot ten feet overhead, for a moment held itself impossibly suspended above, then collapsed engulfing me.

“This is nuts!” I thought aloud, gasping in shock. “The only one who knows better and I’m gonna be the damned victim!” The irony infuriated me. Memories of the reports of past drownings suddenly raced through my mind, how they usually occurred to some passing do-gooder seeing a child daring the waves and swept from the lower catwalks of the seawall, leaping to the child’s rescue only to disappear beneath the violently churning waters. Jeff and Billy dead off Misery Island, both liveaboard friends drowned. This was to be my fate too, my reward for being a Good Samaritan? I watched in shock as those I’d managed to remove from harm’s way continued on their path to the illuminated stairway, total safety now theirs, my crisis of no concern.

“Hey, don’t leave with me out here!” I shouted in outrage and desperation, hoping they might be able to provide some help if the next wave swept me from the rock, at least be witness to my envisioned tragedy.

I’d experienced the feeling of aloneness on this rock before. Not loneliness, emptiness and lack, but solitude, contentment of being one with the ocean and life, of leaving landlocked confusion behind. This bore no resemblance, was not remotely comparable. This was cold abandonment to irresistible natural forces and to my fate. It was recognition of poor odds, confrontation with a deadly situation. Vulnerability. Quickly-rising choking fear. Helplessness in an increasingly hopeless circumstance. Anger. Growing, all-consuming determination not to submit. It was not fair. This was wrong, outrageous.

It was not my time, damn it!

Boom! The next wave pounded my diminishing foothold. I quickly assumed the position and took the breaking sea on my soaked backside, gritting my teeth, anger fueling determination.

“Damn!” I roared, looking out and seeing only dark broken by rolling darker. They were assuredly bigger, more powerful, closer. More threatening. A darting glance below at the confused ocean pulling and pushing against itself confirmed that the flood tide indeed was strangely racing in. My escape route already was deeper in foaming water. Time had run out. It was now or likely never. I leaped from false security to the rocks below and raced across the seething eddies, sprinting with abandon for the opposite outcropping. The safety beyond screamed to me.

I don't recall touching even the first rock. My mind was consumed by pure survival, engaged in sheer determination. I couldn't afford conscious thought, aware only that one slip, a sprained ankle or broken bone, would seal my fate. My feet carried me from slippery rock to rock unconsciously executing intricate zig-zag leaps without stumbling. I flew on automatic pilot, my life depending on absolute accuracy and speed. There was not a split second to spare, no second chances. Somehow I never missed a step.

My race against the dark forces didn't cease until well along the outcropping with the thunder of the predator wave breaking, chasing me, closing quickly behind, then receding. I dared not look back for a few more long strides, fearing it would still be hungrily stalking me, but when I did, I'd comfortably outdistanced its clutches. I had survived.

I climbed the steps and sat weakly on the cement seawall, surprised by a gathering of a half-dozen onlookers and a muddle of comments. We watched the once-potential victims ambling away under the lights of the walkway like white ghosts, without a word or backward glance.

My heart pounded, a receding adrenalin rush draining me after its need had been served. After a few moments I got up on shaky legs and one witness commented, “Goddamn stupid foreigners, not even a thanks! Good job, man.”

“Yeah, good job,” I muttered, and soaking wet slowly began the trek across the open field and back to my car, feeling pretty damned good about myself.

Epilogue: The next morning . . .

The Boston Globe

Monday, September 11, 1989

**6 New Englanders missing
in wake of ocean surges caused by hurricane**

At least six persons have disappeared and three are presumed dead in accidents the Coast Guard said were related to the sea swells, undertow and waves that reached a height of 15 feet....