

TOM PAINE

## It Was Just Swimming

Fort Walton Beach, Florida. Him, his girl Catalina. Jimbo, who was like his brother. They asked the clerk at the Best Western if the water was safe . . . of course it was safe! Fort Walton Beach was a little safe haven in a dangerous world. The clerk looked way too old to have a child, but his twins were swimming right now. Would he let his own kids swim if it was some kind of acid bath? He would not! Drop the bags; let's swim!

"God-damn-yes," was all he said. He didn't pay attention to Catalina shaking her head . . . not today. It was 101 degrees out! Who wouldn't charge the ocean? The ocean was liquid salvation! God's own swimming pool! They had driven from Grand Isle, Louisiana, on their antique Harleys. It was his idea to take this safe-water vacation. Catalina was down on the trip, but she'd come around. The glass is always half full of *water!* All he wanted to do was torpedo through the blue. He should have been a dolphin! Catalina loved that he laughed like a dolphin: a strange head-back cackle. Once he started laughing it was unstoppable. He had a birthmark on his bald dome that marked his blowhole. Right now his dome was hot as his muffler. A few hours earlier at a gas station in Pensacola he'd cracked an egg to see if it would fry up there. A little girl in the car at the next pump asked him if the yolk stain on his T-shirt was a "flutter-bye" . . . *got to love that!* The Big C-girl was six months pregnant, and the plan was to give birth in a Jacuzzi. He had seen videos of babies snorkeling right out of the womb, and their kid was going to be a water-baby, baby!

The clerk's twins were catching minnows by dragging a striped towel through the water. People up and down the beach baked under a sherbet of umbrellas. The American flag was snapping. The sky was plutonium blue. He was going to ask his girl to marry him tonight. He'd gotten weird in the last few months, but a ring would fix all that! This was the Big Night! The zirconium ring in a boxing glove in the case of his Harley. Jimbo and him were amateur MMA heavyweight fighters. Two rabid bears in the ring. He raced his fingertips like little power-

boats through the water. It pleased him still! Catalina called him Orca-man, back in their old lusty days.

There were silver minnows nibbling at his toes.

“Yo BRO!” Jimbo tackled him. All-conference tackle for LSU. Drove him to the bottom. His bad shoulder pronged into the sand. Jimbo broke it once showing him an aikido move. He swallowed a mouthful of sand. It tasted like Clorox. A hand vised on his bicep ripped him to the surface. He corkscrewed around and forced Jimbo to dance like a marionette through the waves. Then he pressed his thumbs to his burning eyes.

“You got something on your face,” Jimbo said. And there it was: just something on his face. Sand? No. Seaweed? No.

Something grainy. Weird alien stuff. He scraped his cheeks and studied orange wax under his fingernails. Nothing he loved more than swimming in the big blue. Ever since he was a kid on Grand Isle, when he got in the ocean he clapped his hands and spun around in a circle with a maniacal grin on his face. *It was just something he did!* Like the way a dog spins three times before setting down, the thing with water was bred in the bones of this Louisiana boy.

Once he had to spend three months in Colorado. He wanted to hang himself. He was depressed by all the *earth, earth, earth*. Friends dragged him to a turquoise lake with canyon walls, a waterfall, and a hanging garden. He wanted water? Here was some sacred water! The name of this Shangri-La? Hanging Lake. He flew home the next day to Florida. Massive chills and a fever on the plane. He passed time squeezing a plastic bottle of water, blinking at the dissected earth below. It was like he had the DTs. Landing, he took his trawler straight out into the Gulf. Stripped down, swam out, floated crucified. His chest breathed the ocean waves. His ribs held up the heavens! When the sunset murdered the sky, he swam back and wept on the sand like a shipwrecked sailor. He vowed never to leave the ocean again.

“To the sandbar!” Jimbo dove under and emerged sixty feet out. It was shallow out there. On the other side of the sandbar a vigorous break. He and Jimbo bodysurfed the afternoon, their massive torsos thrown by careening, dominating waves. He rode with his arms out like skids, his broken-nosed face to the heavens, lopsided mouth grinning. A

magnificent wave Mack-trucked into him and Jimbo both, and they tumbled violently across the seafloor. Catalina waved from shore.

The two stumbled over the sandbar, sore to the bones. Nothing better than total destruction by the sea gods. It tore the bullshit off you! *You felt born again!* Insignificant, but *alive!* He tossed an arm around Jimbo, and then stopped in his tracks. Jimbo stumbled on past the grandmother at the shoreline. She lay in an aluminum lawn chair as if she had fallen from a plane. The chair half-sunk in the sand. The waves rolled their froth into her lap. It was very odd. She was shriveled to bones, and her blue housedress was sopped. He thought she was crying . . . she was crying . . . *with joy.* A wave suddenly toppled her over. She was on her back, waving her mottled arms in the swirling sand. Like she was trying to make a sand angel! Her wig floated away like a black anemone. She was bald. He scooped her up. She clawed her fingers into his chest hair and said, "Take me out there." He looked back to the breaking surf, and there were two real surfers out there now. The beach was pretty empty. Catalina was watching him with her hands on her hips. She looked angry.

Jimbo was already up at the showers.

So he carried someone's grandmother out to the sandbar. He walked with her in his big arms into the smashing waves. It was something he had to do. He cradled her body as the waves walloped them. She was in a cave of his strength. He had never been defeated as an MMA fighter.

A surfer railed past them, cutting and spraying. Knocked to his knees once, he held her tight in the crashing water, only to rise again from the foam like Poseidon. Coughing, choking, and gasping, she kissed his lips hard when he returned her safely to shore, even slipped him some ancient tongue. Kinky as it might seem, it was his sexiest kiss ever, though he had no idea why.

Catalina raged at the strange orange beads.

It looked like suntan lotion. The stuff was shellacked to him and Jimbo. They took turns in the outdoor shower with a bristly brush. Soap. Shampoo. Handfuls of rough sand. The water was near boiling and wafted of chlorine. The only way to get the waxy orange off was to go at it with plastic knives from the dining room of the Best Western. Even then, a couple of layers of skin were lost!

A cloud went over the sun as he scraped at his biceps. It was the only cloud in the sky. He bent his neck back and laughed. Ever since he was a kid he loved to look at clouds!

How many times had he almost driven his Harley off the road, stealing glances at a black stormy anvil of a cloud?

The hotel clerk's twins showed up with a bucket. There were a couple of dozen silver minnows in the bucket, but only one alive. The rest bounced in funereal procession, jaw-down on the bottom. One kid was driving the live minnow along with a finger and saying, "Come on, come on, you can do it!" The minnow rolled over like a fighter jet, slid to the bottom.

The twins said they were all pretty dead when they caught them in their towel. They looked at him as if to ask *Why are the minnows all dead?* He glanced out to sea. He was afraid of a return of *the weeping*. Catalina called it that with disgust: *the weeping*. It was a match dropped between his legs into his Harley's open gas tank. He only wiped an eye this time, and got some of the weird alien stuff in there. It burned, and he had to squeeze the eye shut. One of the kids tossed the bucket on the sand. The dead minnows clutched at the sunset. Angry red exclamation marks in the sand. When he was a boy on Grand Isle, they'd catch hundreds of minnows with a towel. As long as they kept them cool under a porch and changed the seawater every few hours, they'd live until they could be slipped onto a fishhook and dropped off the back of his father's shrimper when the nets were up. They didn't just *die*.

The twins settled down to build a castle in the wet sand from the shower. One of the boys had gold braces on his teeth, the other's mouth a rainbow. As a boy he used to build moats around his castles by the beach showers while waiting for his father to dock the trawler. He came from two centuries of shrimpers. Acadian men, only alive at sea. Now *Frère Jacques* was on cinderblocks in Grand Isle. Too much of the fiberglass of the hull dissolved! The shrimp were now black, and sometimes mutated. His father collected two-headed shrimp and kept them in beer bottles in rubbing alcohol.

His shower water raced down the newly carved river toward the castle of the twins but evaporated on the journey to their moat. The boys glumly surveyed the failed flow. Their castle was a half-assed pile

of sand with slapped handprints. It looked like there were streaks of oil in the sand.

He shoved his face directly in the showerhead and decided to teach them how to make a castle with towers and turrets as soon as the weird stuff was off his skin. He never understood why adults wanted to wash the salt off. Skin burned and crisped, salted and cooled by the evening stars of a beach, was the only tuxedo for him! He wouldn't be in the shower now, except for the freaky orange stuff. The night he had originally planned included him in a salt tux with mahimahi and daiquiris and karaoke, walks on the beach with champagne in fluted glasses the shape of his Catalina (even with the baby!), a midnight bridal carry into the sea under the full moon, and a diamond ring sparking in the sunrise.

He was blinking one eye like an insane pirate, and said to the boys, "Arrgh, I'm a pirate now, mateys! Will ye join my ship?"

One kid said his throat was burning. He slapped his hand to his neck. "It really hurts!" Jimbo bought both kids Cokes and told them to gargle it.

"Where's my mother?!"

"Isn't your father the clerk of the hotel?"

The boys gazed at him as if he was dangerous. He turned and jogged into the Best Western. The new desk clerk reported that Gil—the former clerk—had no children, but liked to mess with the heads of guests.

"We'll find your mother. Don't worry, buddy," he said, returning to the beach and taking the stricken boy by the hand. He felt strange. Discombobulated. His skin itched. Maybe it was the fierce rubbing with the bristly brush. His arms and chest were blotchy. His eyelid was sealing itself shut. Where was the kid's mother? Jimbo had the other kid by the hand and was telling him to keep gargling the Coke. Jimbo had a strange faith in the curative power of Coke.

The mother was Cuban and a hundred yards down the beach. Her bathing suit looked like a pink tutu. She was screaming at him and Jimbo in Spanish. Why were these giant tattooed men—one with a spastic eye—holding her little boys by the hand and dragging them down the beach? Both kids were now freaked as well as sick. The boy with the sore throat was bent over and gagging, and the other boy was hyperventilating.

A crowd was gathering. The beach had been nearly empty; now there was a circle of hostile Cuban-looking men. Why didn't *the mother* get it? The boy was *sick!* The woman should listen to him, damnit! He put on his command voice from the navy. He had been a chief petty officer, a trained deep-sea diver. He had gone down two thousand feet in a diving bell, where a mistake crushed you like a beer can under a semi.

"We were worried about your boy. We're not pervs. Jimbo got him a Coke. Look at his face. He's chalk white. He should be burned, or red, after a day in this sun. And he's freezing. He's got chills. Go to Fort Walton Beach hospital! Do not pass go! *Tu comprendes doctor? Ir al mèdico!* Look at the other boy. He's going down too. Listen, let's help you get them to your car. The kid's legs are wobbling. Can you keep up, ma'am?" The beach was strangely spinning now.

Catalina was pointing to the specks of orange goo on the kid's mullet and calling 911. Kid number two was in some sort of asthma attack. He was on his back, waving his arms and legs like a poisoned cockroach. His face was gray. His pupils were like dinghies in a storm. Black spittle was bad, pretty freakish. The mother didn't speak English but was on her knees, slapping her palms and wailing for *Jesús*. The Cuban men were no longer threatening but in a circle encouraging him to save the boys, as if he might choose not to!

He scooped up the kid who was clawing the air. The beach was spinning under him, but he charged with the boy to his Harley. Taking action! The boy had his eyes locked on him. He knew that look and had seen it on divers with the bends: *Please don't let me die!* He had trained as a medic in the navy and carried a first aid kit, including an EpiPen, on his Harley. He gently laid the gasping kid on the broken sidewalk and jabbed him with the epinephrine. Jimbo had gathered up the other boy and was standing right behind him. He heard the boy vomiting, felt the warm bile spraying his back. It didn't bother him. He'd put his life on the line a dozen times to save drowning sailors. Once he dove off an aircraft carrier at night to rescue a suicidal one. The admiral asked him later how he found the man in the black water. He said in the ocean, a sort of weird primordial GPS took over his body.

The mother in the pink tutu was again praying over her son. He had to push her out of the way to check the boy's pupils. He pushed

too hard, and she tumbled under his Harley. There was a crowd now: the Cuban men, rubberneckers climbing out of stopped cars, and a drunken woman who kept accidentally banging him with her knee as she touched the boy's cheek and told him *it would be alllllright, help was on the way*. Traffic backed up and honking. There was no ambulance, and the kid's pupils were fixed.

He scooped the boy, motioned to Catalina with his chin. She jumped on his Harley and kicked it over, and he got on behind her with the boy in his arms. Jimbo handed the twin to a short man in a tank top that said *Havana Is for Lovers*, jumped on his Harley, and the man climbed on with the boy. The mother also scrambled onto the back of Jimbo's bike, and he slid his crotch up over the gas tank to make room.

Catalina roared down the middle turning lane of a four-lane road. Near Benny's Pawn Shop they were almost sideswiped by a FedEx truck. A cop pulled behind them with siren wailing. By speaker the cop said to pull over, then came alongside. Jimbo yelled that they had two dying kids. The cop pulled ahead of them, and soon they were blowing down the road at seventy, busting through intersections with barely a slowdown. His boy still wasn't breathing, but they were at the hospital!

He and Jimbo charged in with the kids. No nurses at the admitting desk, so he elbowed a security guard and smashed into the ER. That got their attention! Bells and whistles and sirens! Nurses, doctors, security out of the woodwork. The Cuban mother was doing her hysterical thing. The cop was with her. The kids were tossed on two gurneys, and Code Blue was in full force. The security guards shoved him and Jimbo out the double doors and told the cop to clear the crazy bikers from the waiting room.

A doctor with a handlebar mustache was asking what he knew . . . *what he knew?* He knew those twin kids were just playing on Fort Walton Beach! Building a sand castle like every other American kid in summer! That's not supposed to be playing with napalm! There was something in *the water! In the water!* The minnows were all belly-up. That was a sign like in the Bible! Not as good as frogs from the sky, *but still!* No, he wanted to be more help, *he did!* But he was a shrimper, not a doctor: He knew the minds of blue crabs and shrimp, the moods of kingfishers and laughing gulls and egrets, the salt of Barataria Bay

from the brackishness of the inlets and estuaries and marshes. He knew how to catch croaking male redfish with mud minnows, his mother and father's gumbo secrets, diesel engines, his friend Jimbo, but most of all, *he knew Catalina here!* He knew her tides and moons and sudden sunrises and had since they were in fifth grade—so he knew things, but he *didn't know why the water in the ocean was killing those kids*. But again, why didn't the doctor take his thumb out of his ass and *save those kids?* How about now!

The doctor's gray eyebrows flew up. He spun in time to see Jimbo go down, falling like a snapped mast. His linebacker's body dropped back to the red-and-green linoleum. Catalina tried to catch him. Jimbo's eyes were wide open as if he had seen a UFO. Catalina had tumbled hard and was sitting with her arms nestled around her pregnant belly. The doctor had his fingers on Jimbo's thick neck. He had his ear to Jimbo's mouth, watching his chest, and yelled, "He's not breathing!" Nurses tore open Jimbo's shirt as they lifted him onto a gurney. There was the chest with the missing nipple from the shrimp-truck wreck in Shreveport when he was seventeen.

Catalina cried out her water had broken. Her yellow sarong sopped between her legs. She was lifted onto a gurney and driven like a wedge through the double doors. Catalina yelled, "We want a water birth!" He was holding Catalina's hand and repeating, "It's okay, baby. It's okay." But it wasn't okay. She was hysterical about the water birth. Jimbo was riding on a gurney behind them with his own posse of doctors and nurses. They parked Jimbo in one stall, Catalina in the other. Between them was a hanging sheet covered in gaudy tropical fish. Catalina's sarong was tossed aside, and her legs split open and there was a crescent of wet, bloody skull. Catalina's upper molars sparkled as she gasped she wanted a *water birth*. The doctor was saying, "Bear down now!"

He poked his head around the sheet. Jimbo was naked and blue. There was a breathing tube down his nose. The handlebar doctor was working compressions like he worked the winch on his trawler. They zapped Jimbo's heart with the paddles. Handlebar doctor glared up at the red numbers of the digital clock and stopped compressions. *Handlebar stopped compressions!* He flipped the curtain back and moved to his friend's side. He continued compressions and called out to Jimbo.



He'd saved at least five lives in the navy with CPR. Sometimes he compressed so hard he broke ribs, *but they lived!* Handlebar put his hand on his bicep. There was a gooey white stuff bubbling out of Jimbo's mouth. It looked like yogurt. He wiped it off his friend's chin. The nurses were filing out. Jimbo looked like he had been punched in both eyes. He kept pumping on his chest. He hit his chest with his fist and screamed, "Jimbo, man, fuck no!" Security circled, and the cop, but the doc pushed them back and pulled the screen around. Jimbo's pupils were black opals.

There wasn't any noise coming from the stall next to Jimbo's. He kissed his Jimbo on the forehead and ducked around the fish curtain. Catalina was curled up on her side. A nurse was stroking her blond hair. She was explaining they had to get the afterbirth. The doctor was mouthing the words *I'm sorry*. A nurse was holding the baby. His skin was translucent like a shrimp. He tried to hold Catalina's hand, but she squeezed his fingers backward violently. She was trying to break his fingers. She swiveled her head and whispered, "God damn your ocean." He was going to let her break his fingers, but she let go. The nurse asked if he'd like to hold his son. He took the baby in his big arms, and for a split second saw the *Frère Jacques* motor across his blue eyes. He moved his lips as if they belonged to someone else, "You were going to be a trawler-man. A seventh-generation Louisiana shrimper."

A nurse with a face like a lobster took the baby away. The itchiness started on his arms. He scratched and looked down. His arms were covered in sores. Horrible lipstick sores the size of a dime. They looked like the bites of a brown recluse. He pulled his T-shirt up, and his hairy chest and gut were covered in the same nasty red sores. There was white pus coming from them as if they were giant zits. He scratched at them, and a few burst. The pus burned on his fingers, and where it dribbled on his body, new sores broke out. *The nurses in the room were looking at him like he was being taken over by aliens!* There was a conversation outside the fish curtain. The handlebar doctor glanced at his chest and arms. He could feel the sores breaking out on his face. He must have gotten the pus on his face with his fingers. A nurse, the cop, and four orderlies dragged him from the bedside of Catalina. Down a hall and through double steel doors into a quiet baby-blue room. There

was a huge stuffed giraffe in the corner. The nurse came back in wearing a plastic body suit, a face mask, and gloves, *like he had anthrax!* Now the sores were all over his legs and ass. He could not sit down or lie down, and she cut off his clothes with giant steel scissors.

Under the plastic, the nurse wore scrubs with pretty flowers, and she was dabbing wildly at his sores with Epsom salt solution. Every time she broke one, two more popped out. Then she dropped a cotton ball and ran from the room. He looked in the mirror. He no longer had a neck. His face was a featureless skin bag covered with oozing sores like the pox. His whole body was now in flames. It was as if he'd been dipped in a pool of molten lead. He could see the cover of a book Catalina used to read to his nephews: *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. The doctors were swarming him now, and he was gasping spasmodically as his throat was closing. He was flat on the hospital bed, and they were jamming a plastic tube down his throat. It wasn't working, so they gave him a tracheotomy. He was breathing now from a hole in his throat. They were all masked, but he could see handlebar doctor. They took blood samples. A doctor raced in and said, "He's lit up with bacteria like a Christmas tree."

He started to gag. His baby was dead. His friend was dead. His girl was dead to him. Bile was climbing out of his blocked throat. He heard handlebar doctor say, "I've shot him with enough prednisone to kill a horse." He was gagging up some black bile now. He was bent over the side of the bed and puking on the floor. There were hunks of crud in his puke like asphalt raisins. He had no idea how much time had passed. A doctor ran in, a specialist who said it looked like mycoplasma pneumonia. *Then he left!* An allergist came in and glanced at his sores and said they looked like scabies, *and then he left too!* He heard the allergist yelling in the hall how he wasn't going to get called into court for the next twenty years! A screwdriver of a headache hit him, and he started to shiver so badly his jaw was clacking open and shut. Plague. The swellings in his groin were the size of ping-pong balls. His lungs were filled with fluid. They drained them with a big needle. His breathing was labored, and he started to sweat. It was like every pore in his body was leaking at once. But he had no temperature! You can't sweat buckets without a spike in temp! He was coming back

negative—*negative negative negative*—on all the tests. He saw another needle, and they popped him the biggest antibacterial shot you can get . . . and then the biggest dose of antiviral! But he was still sweating like a marathoner in the Mojave. The sheets were swimming. It was like all the salt water in his body was fleeing his body at once. He was losing so much water they had to put in four IVs. Water was dripping out of his nose, and a new doctor said: “He has a temperature of 97.8 and is expelling water so fast he’s going to be dead from dehydration in an hour even with the IVs. His white blood cells are crazily low, and his red blood cell count is crashing. This is some sort of brand new illness. It’s time to call the CDC.” He heard another doctor say, “I’ve got four autopsies already of people who went swimming today. I’ve seen dissolved esophagus, enlarged hearts, and we’ve got samples of ethylbenzene, m-xylene, hexane-2, 3-methylpentane, and isooctane in their blood.” And later handlebar doc says, “This guy’s body is full of things you wouldn’t believe. He’s got a negative-style bacterium, and the only match I can find is a microbe that eats oil.”

He raised his head to look down at his naked body strapped to the hospital bed, and he was *totally gray, like a zombie!* And what was oozing from all his dozens of sores was nothing he’d call blood. It was dark, maybe black. His hands were now waving spastically, and he was calling in his mind: *Catalina! Catalina!* He clobbered two nurses, and they got orderlies and strapped his arms and legs to the bed and juiced him in both arms with happy drugs. He was flying over ten or eleven shrimp trawlers. There was a rendezvous off Grand Isle at the solstice sunset. They had rafted their trawlers together. Their outrigger booms were all up as if in surrender. He came out of his cabin and shot off his gun a few times directly at the sunset, drank two beers, and collapsed on the aft deck. He smoked some pot, and the nausea retreated, and then he took visitors as they clambered over the side to clasp his limp hand. A lot of these guys had been his sworn enemies. Jesus! They were going to miss him! They were terrified for themselves and for the shrimp and their families too, scared of what got him, what was in the water. He saw the new look on their faces as they watched their kids leaping off his cockpit into the Gulf of Mexico. His son would have jumped too in five years! He stumbled below with his gun and dragged out the clerk

from the Best Western. The one who said it was safe to swim. And he ordered one of the outrigger booms lowered, and pulled a line tight around the clerk's neck. He pointed to his father to throw the switch, and with a hydraulic grind, the boom rose slowly, the clerk kicking a few last times over the now tranquil sea.