



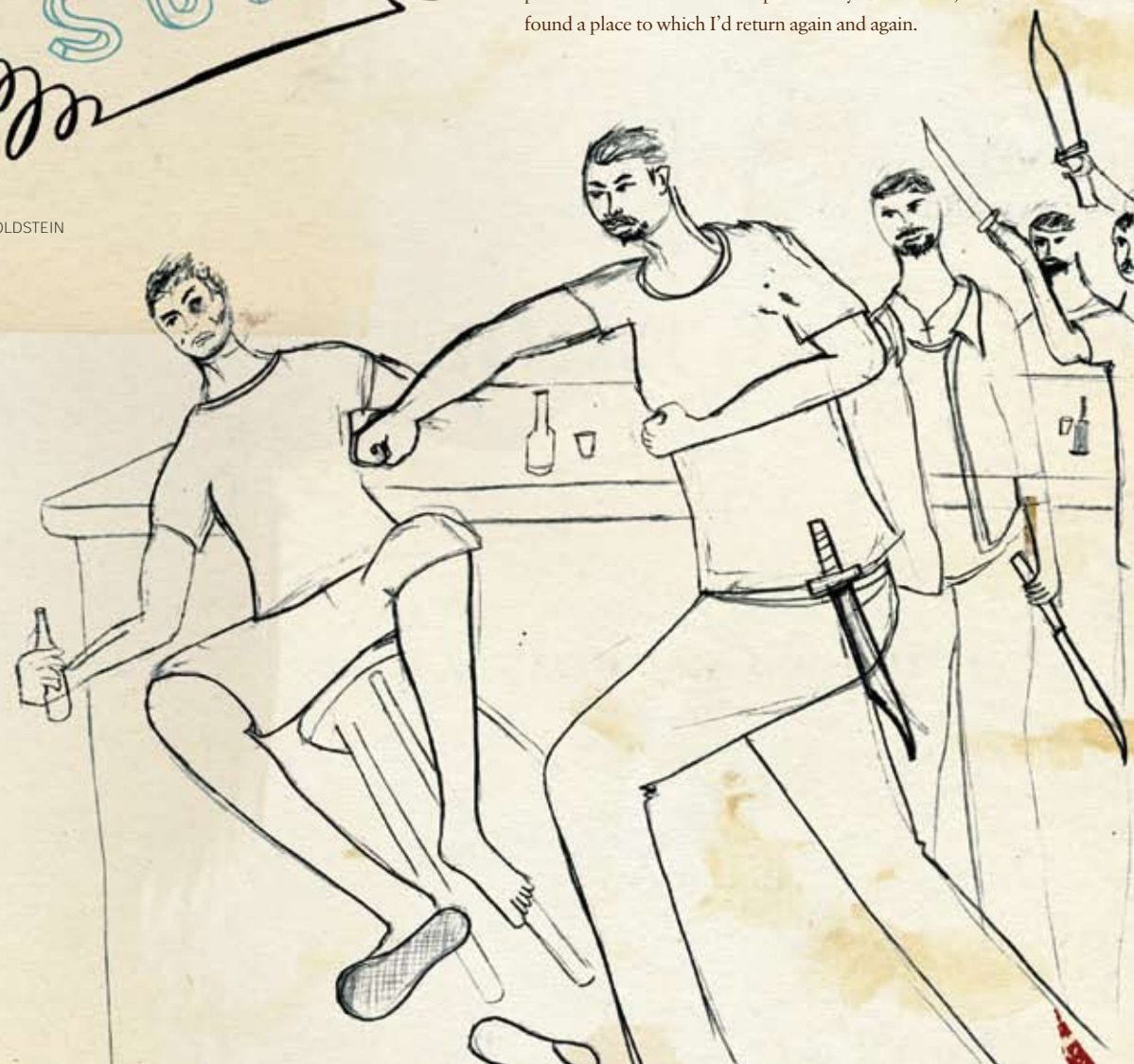
The sleepy town rose from the jungle floor like a mirage after navigating the five hour drive from airport. The dirt road stretched all the way from the capital, winding through mountain passes, jungle, coffee fields, and low-lying plains. There were few signs, lots of potholes, and tons of crazy drivers, but the roughness insured the village's quaint isolation.



Back in '94, it was already a surfer's hangout. The breaks buzzed with decent crowds, yet a mellow vibe still swept through the water and a slow, pure tropical ease blanketed the town. There were two restaurants, as many places to stay, and one bakery that was the starting point of every day. Saltwater crocs roamed the banks of the nearby river, while panthers, boas, and howler monkeys prowled just inside the surrounding jungle brush. It was a beautiful little town nestled between two state parks and an absurdly warm Pacific.

In all, I spent two weeks throughout the area, scoring a variety of reef and beach breaks, rivermouths, and a few modest points. It was the perfection I needed as an escape from my life at home, and I knew I'd found a place to which I'd return again and again.

BLOOD,  
MACHETES,  
SURF



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I spent my free time over the next several years exploring Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the frigid regions of Alaska, Nova Scotia, and Ireland. Each had their own wildness and charm, but none could bounce the idyllic Costa Rican town from my mind. Before long, she was calling me back, and I easily succumbed to her pleas.

But my planning quickly unveiled that the Tamarindo I'd known no longer existed. The mere six years that'd passed transformed her from a town of unspoiled beauty to one that boasted of 40 restaurants, a beauty spa, jungle boat rides, two supermarkets, two hairdressers, several bakeries, ATV tours, vacation home rentals, scores of hotels, honeymoon packages, craft stores, theatres, museums, and even an art gallery. I couldn't imagine what she had become and had no desire to see. The only thing to do was to leave her to the masses and let her go.

A friend and I scoured remote areas of Central America, finding ourselves looking deeper into places we'd never before considered. It didn't take long before we settled on Terciopelo. While we'd heard that the town had a bloody past, we chalked it up to hype borne on the desire to protect one of the longest waves in the world—a left point that reeled for over a mile.

We flew for five hours, then drove for eight—the last three consisting of river crossings, 2x4 bridges and ditch laden dirt roads. A sense of helplessness grew within us both throughout the trek, and we began to wonder about the stories we'd heard. If even partially true, we knew we needed to be careful and smart. We limped into town with the last light of dusk, found a place to stay and wandered into the only bar to end our long day with a beer. An open structure on three sides, it had a palm frond roof, a pool table and a view of the left. We nodded at one another, clanged bottles, and melted into the corner of the bar, trying to blend in.

Suddenly, as if on cue, shouting rose from the opposite wall as a group of locals surrounded a gringo. At first, his mates stepped in, but then machetes were drawn and warnings given. Even the bravest backed down and watched in horror as punches rained down on their friend. My buddy and I immediately made a move to leave, but a worn down villager waved an unsteady hand at us and said, "Americano loco..." scrunching his face, searching for the word in English, "...kiss mi amigo hermana. No bueno. Si?"

"Si," I said.

"Esta bien. No kiss las chicas," he said, smiling.

After a couple of minutes, the mob swayed from the sinner rolled up on the floor to his mates bracing themselves against the railing. While more shouting ensued, the fight was over. The punishment had been delivered to the deserved, and the message had been handed to his compatriots. All now knew the rules. Some from the mob resumed their drinking at the pool table, while others disappeared down the wooden steps into the night.

We hardly slept that evening, wondering if we'd made a stupid mistake coming here at all. The next two days barely felt any better, particularly with not a ripple on the ocean, but we tried to shape our fate. We smiled at those we passed and spoke only Spanish to anyone remotely resembling a villager. We gave wax and t-shirts to the local ninos we saw ripping the small waves in the cove and prayed that the little things would make a difference.

There were no problems, and many of the villagers were warm. But a tension still hung in the air; a fear of getting lumped in with those who possessed a dangerous lack of judgment.

Finally, on the fourth day, a swell started to fill-in on the point. Needing a lot more size, the 3- to 4-foot waves were broken up in four sections—still each a hundred yards long—with a crosswind. It wasn't the stuff of magazines, but you'd hardly know from the crowd swarming the line-up like gnats. Locals, Aussies, Americans, French, and intensely aggressive Brazilians hassled for every scrap of swell that made it onto the cobblestone shore. I sat on my board amidst it all, a bit shocked at the size of the crowd and the game it forced to catch waves. I'd expected paradise, somewhat empty seclusion and perfection, not L.A. in the middle of the jungle. I got a couple of decent waves, then called it quits in the late afternoon, hoping to score some early the next morning.

The next day dawned with 6- to 8-foot perfection, endlessly peeling down the point. I laughed like a ten-year-old looking at a nudie mag, while watching the best waves I'd ever seen spiral past us into the cove. A large crowd was already on it, but nothing could hold me back from trying to snag a few.

I paddled out to the line-up, amazed at the flawless waves pouring in, and made a mental note of the luck I had in scoring this fickle beauty. But after managing to only wrestle three waves in as many hours, I became frustrated and thought seriously about hitting the road. My buddy felt the same, craving some room to move in an empty line-up and no worries about machetes or the transgressions of the ignorant.

But then, magic happened. I noticed that each member of the surrounding pack had paddled away—some further up the point, some down—all trying to find their own pocket of space. I wondered if I'd drifted into a familiar dead spot, but noted from my landmarks on shore that I hadn't moved. Annoyed from the hassling and too tired to care, I decided to hang out. Within a minute, one wave appeared on the horizon, seemingly focused on my position. It swung too far down the point for those up top to even consider and too high for those below me to have a chance. I sat on my board as though nothing were coming, keeping one eye on the crowd and one on my approaching jewel, just for added insurance. She seemed to want me, bending her shoulders towards my position. I smiled in disbelief. Only when she feathered did I lie down and paddle with every ounce of energy I could muster.

I sprung to my feet, taking the late drop with my toes, until I reached the bottom, set my rail and drove hard for the shoulder stretching ahead of me. As fast as I could pump my 6'8", it was barely enough to keep up with the lip and forced me to trim higher than I'd ever thought possible. The shoreline and those paddling up the face blurred through my periphery, except for the image of a rare, blonde flower looking back at me from down the line. I pumped as hard as I could, squeezing in only a couple of turns, until the wave discarded me onto the hot sands of the beach six hundred yards later. I laughed with abandon to no one in particular and looked back towards the top of the point to marvel at the distance covered.

All the fury, fear, and worry of the week didn't mean a thing against the one singular moment of that ride, because it alone contained the unspoiled perfection for which I'd been searching.

While Mike Reynolds digs long lefts in tropical places, his affections still lean towards the northern climes. When he's not surfing, he's writing and has also been published in *The Surfer's Path*.