

Riding The Waves

An alarm booms and I spin around in the surf. Toby and I leap from the water and belt across burning sand to the dunes where we crane our necks looking for sharks. Can't spot any black fins out there, just some kind of drill taking place along Three Mile Beach. We hurtle down a track veering toward the road.

Toby shouts to me, dreadlocks dripping. "Hey Rufus. Watch out for snakes."

I pretend to see one in the spinifex which makes Toby step backwards.

"Aargh." His scream cuts the air. And there's a spurt of red from his right heel.

We should have watched out for broken bottles.

"Where do you live?" I ask.

"Just behind the shops."

Using me as a crutch, he hops across the road. We hobble past the milk bar where a plastic strip curtain flaps about in the breeze. On the jukebox, Elvis sings, 'Don't be Cruel.' Lunchtime, hamburger-onion smells entice the hungry but that's not for us right now, Toby needs help. His blood drips a woozy trail behind us all the way to his back door where he goes in while I wait outside.

This beach shack is similar to the one we're renting for a week but ours has fly screens and straight curtains. Cigarette smoke drifts through a cracked window. I shift away from the stink of it. Weeds are partying in the vegie patch and there's a graveyard of beer bottles near the bin. Toby hops out with a torn tea towel wrapped around his foot. He claims his mum is asleep. That's a lie, I heard them talking to each other. And what about the smoking? Even the tea towel is turning red – it should be with embarrassment – but it's blood seeping through.

The sun is high at this time of day and our shadows are short. I reckon Toby needs a good feed; I would take him home with me but he'd never make it on one leg. Hard luck because Dad should be back by now and Mum's frypan full of sizzling fish.

"You might need stitches." That's my best advice to Toby. He thanks me for helping him. Then I'm off, sprinting along the sandy road towards our shack.

When I arrive, there's no cooking smells. Strange at this time of day. Susan appears, talking like a parent instead of a sibling. "Where've you been?"

"The beach. Where's Mum?"

"At the hospital, Dad collapsed."

"Don't be stupid, he went fishing."

“Rufus. Listen to me. Dad’s tinny tipped over. We hauled him in. Tom did CPR.”

Tom’s a lifeguard she’s just met.

I yell. “I want to see Dad.”

“No. Mum said to wait here.” Her fingers dig into my shoulders. “If you were at the beach. Didn’t you hear the alarm?”

I’m saying nothing.

Dad’s fighting for life.

And I’m not hungry anymore.

I bolt away and hide in the saltbushes, hanging my head. I feel like a dropkick for mucking around with a kid I’d just met while Dad was in trouble. But how was I to know? And is my father alive? Or isn’t he? Cause if he’s not, we’ll never build that go kart together. Never talk about astronomy or host another Star Party. Random thoughts keep orbiting my brain like I’m stuck in some heavy time dilation.

When will Mum be back? My legs are cramping, I need to stretch. Been coiled up here in the dirt too long ignoring my sister’s calls. I feel so bad that if a dung beetle comes along and mistakes me for a pile of poop to be rolled away, I wouldn’t blame it.

CLUNK. Hey, is that Mum? On my knees, I focus like a curious telescope. Yep, it’s our car. I stop snivelling and make a beeline for Mum.

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Hospital smells are inside my nose now. Heart monitor patches are stuck to Dad’s chest and a thick, plastic bag on the side of his bed collects his pee. It is half full – or half empty as he would say. Machines beep. And if they go wild, we’ll need help. Mum is at the bedside; fingers busy with rosary beads. Her hands are always on the go. She’s the one who fires up our wood stove and keeps us all fed. I am meant to top up the wood box the same way Dad tops up his beer glass – when things look half empty. But sometimes I get sick of it and argue the point.

Mum and Susan just went for a break.

Dad’s arm is cool. White, wavy lines on his bedside monitor wriggle like worms but his eyelids don’t even flicker. I’ve got him sussed now. He must have been getting more and more breathless every time he chopped wood, that’s why he needed extra help from a detonator. He brought the explosive home one afternoon so he could split a railway sleeper in half in our backyard. At dinnertime, we took shelter near our sleep out. BANG! Everyone’s louvres rattled - so did Mum’s nerves. When people charged through back doors shouting,

“What was that?” Dad acted so dumb he could have won an Oscar. We scuttled inside, and before Mum stirred the rabbit stew she wagged a finger in Dad’s face. “Harry Dobson, don’t you ever dare pull that stunt again.”

After that he handed me the axe, claiming it would put some muscle on my skinny arms. Dad calls me Splinter which is cool. I think of him as a solid jarrah, something to lean on. It’s a shock to see the mighty jarrah ringbarked like this. Good one, Dad. Why couldn’t you just tell the truth. You couldn’t manage and should have told us. Now look at you.

Those green lines at the top of his monitor. Shouldn’t they be blipping? What’s going on? And is that - a flatline? I press the emergency buzzer and yell for help. That made the medicos jump. Mum and Susan rush in too, but a doctor with a serious face and a voice you don’t argue with, asks us to wait in the corridor. So that’s where we are, pacing up and down, on the cold, hard floor.

Finally, the doctor appears and asks Mum to sit down. Susan is beside her, and I duck back into Dad’s room and lean over him begging him to get out of the black hole he’s disappeared into. I say I’m sorry I didn’t get up early and go fishing with him. I reckon he wanted me to. I mention Toby and how we met on the beach. And when I say he doesn’t have a dad, the shock of that silences me. I can’t imagine life without Dad. I want us all back home in suburbia where four canisters with large green letters, sit in a row on our kitchen shelf, sloping down like a family. They are there every morning when I wake up and if the big one went missing, it would never be the same.

Now I’m sobbing like a sook on the blanket near Dad’s elbow . . . Hey, did something just nudge me? And did I imagine a voice? No, there it is again. It is very croaky.

“Why’re you crying, Splinter?”

It must be Dad, no one else on the planet calls me that. I reach in and hug him then pelt into the corridor. Everyone needs to know about this.

After a doctor checks the vitals, a nurse fetches an extra pillow to prop Dad up on. He tries to speak but it’s not easy with the oxygen mask distorting every sound he makes. The doctor removes the mask - just for a moment. Dad sips water, gives us the thumbs up – and Mum crosses herself. Then Dad cracks a joke about myocardial infarction which Mum says is a fancy name for heart attack. I must remember that, it’s bound to impress the kids at school next week.

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Dad comes home with stents in his arteries, talks about doing Cardiac rehab. He has a helper too, seeing as someone gives us a puppy. A bit of a blessing because Barkley worships at Dad's feet – and takes Dad for daily walks. And this continues into cooler weather. But when umbrellas pop up like mushrooms, even Barkley wants to stay inside, warming his fat belly by the wood stove. So we need a constant supply of wood. Which means I'm the one always at the chopping block, swinging like a lumberjack. And I'm smack in the middle of my thirteen-year-old stretch phase. The best fix for aching muscles is Epsom Salts in the bath. So every night I soak in water warmed by the chip heater, fuelled by the very wood my axing delivers. It's a revolving door.

When I slice off yet another chunk of teenage skin, Mum slams the lid on the first aid kit and says she's sick of my AXE-IDENTS. So now a decision has been made. We are going to move. We all miss life at the beach. It is true that when I was there, I wanted to be here. But now I know that home is where my family is – it's not this tin-roofed building.

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Some neighbours call us crazy for shifting to Three Mile Beach, the very spot that nearly killed Dad. But Mum responds with a smile and invites them to drop in. "Anytime," she says. "You'll find us right on the waterfront. The house with the green porch."

It's our first night.

Susan likes it here: She's bought an itsy-bitsy bikini - and her lifeguard, Tom, lives nearby.

Dad likes it here: So does Barkley, especially the dog beach.

Mum likes it, full stop. "An electric stove, gas water heater and shower," she keeps repeating, like she's won the lottery. "It's sheer bliss." She's leaning on the porch rail watching the horizon swallow the sun - and whispering words like, "Saffron, vermillion." Mum wants to try things she never had time for before. Her filleting knife is on the back burner, a palette knife on her agenda. Dad's left arm is hooked around her waist and he's cuddling a beer can in his right hand, half strength these days. He cracks a joke and Mum clutches her chest like she's in the grip of a myocardial infarction.

I like it here too; dusk seems different and the sky feels closer. Dad and I are going to build that go-kart soon. I'm telling him to look at the earthshine on the crescent moon and asking if he's unpacked the telescope when I spot someone moving near the blocks at the end of the jetty. Everything's in silhouette but there's no mistaking those dreadlocks dangling like seaweed.

Truth is jabbing at my awareness now. It's something that people stretch or turn inside out to suit their circumstances. Dad never told us his truth when he should have. And Toby avoided truth. Trying to protect his Mum? Well, can't say I blame him, she's all the family he's got. The thing is, I like that kid. And now he's popped up again right in front of me. I tell my folks I am going for a walk.

The jetty boards bounce beneath my feet, I'm doing it on purpose to make Toby swing around. When he does, I say hi - and he peers at me, then nods in recognition. He is taller now, like me. Toby stifles a yawn then chomps on a last bit of burger. I ask about his mum.

"She's in rehab," he says, tossing the wrapper in a bin.

We go to my house, to the kitchen, where Mum pours Coke from a bottle into glasses. Cold bubbles fizz and slide down throats. Under the bright fluorescent light, I notice the scar near Toby's right heel. It is white against his tanned skin and it points towards his toes like an arrowhead. We all know the story of how he stepped backwards onto broken glass, which prompts Dad to say, "That there is one important scar, Toby. To remind you to keep going forwards, son."

I arrange to meet Toby at the beach tomorrow so we can catch up where we left off last summer. He's been doing a big clean up and is hungry for some down time. I have so much to tell him. And with any luck, soon, he will relax his boundaries and share his stuff with me, all the raw realities.

We're not so different Toby and I, life is teaching us both - how to ride the waves.

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