

New Year's resolution

The current swept to the south, around the headland. The foam surfboard was green and slippery. He'd never been an 'ocean' person, and even the mild temperature of the water, here, was doing little to change his mind. In fact, he often reflected that the solitude of drifting alone in an ocean would be the most extreme, the most hopeless, imaginable. The achievement of Pi in *The Life of...*, he figured, was more significant than Sandra Bullock's in *Gravity*. He didn't like swimming anywhere his feet wouldn't easily touch sand, and this criterion was difficult to judge when lying across an enormous surfboard. There were clouds in the water, white reflections of the sky crossing the whirling browns beneath the surface, and together these stopped him from properly seeing the bottom.

Reaching small waves, he awkwardly pressed into the 8-foot board, letting froth pass beneath his body – copying the technique of someone he'd recently seen on YouTube. He kept paddling, driving his arms, elbow deep, into murky water. When he got sick of these efforts, he'd turn and catch anything that looked compassionate. 'Catch', as in he'd stand gingerly on a craft that was perhaps half the size of a dinghy, taking the wave until it lost power, or patience. Then a splash, his head and thoughts submerged briefly, but he'd be quick to up and look around the water and the beach, trying to find a reaction in anybody nearby. Always nothing. He must've been unremarkable. A consummate novice, perhaps.

The sun was well past the height of a daily career, though insisting it had more to give. As he paddled again, everything came wrapped in the liminal gold between afternoon and evening, then refracted according to his mood. Striped cabanas on the beach: ostentatious. The distant ocean: threatening. A surfer passing on a longboard – the standing bulb of her ass, specifically: glorious, melancholic. The waves were sparse enough for him to note the drone of anonymous bugs on-shore. And thin trees he similarly couldn't name made a canopy above lookouts and caramel rocks, even rising above the Lego-stacks of holiday apartments. He knew, at least, that some were tea-trees, although he couldn't pick which of them exactly. He craned to check a picnic bench beside a footpath that wound around the coast, connecting beaches. It was still empty. For mysterious reasons, he was tethered to its particular spot.

His board was tilted into the current at an angle that kept him clear of other surfers, those who seemed to queue for the deeper waves according to a mystery etiquette. They weren't having 'fun', necessarily, instead were driven by some learned compulsion, playing characters in a mythology. Many were that sort of man who'd also know a thing or three about gardening, could fix kitchen taps, bike tyres, had an easy presence, wore bucket hats

and zinc, barbecued their own kangaroo meat, chewed it hard, liked the taste. At least, that's how they appeared to *him*, who was restless with doubts, was looking for any reason to avoid bridging the hundreds of hours that clearly existed between him and *them* - cold winter mornings, more evenings on YouTube, expeditions to buy lighter boards and thicker wetsuits, and smaller, episodic horrors of getting flipped and dumped, his lungs trapped underwater or his skin torn against rocks or his ears afterwards plugged by more ocean than he could tip and extricate. There'd be so many hours spent *worrying*. But that wouldn't be special to surfing. He worried quite a lot, about many things, all the classic subjects, sure as those non-descript bugs could drone.

His shoulders were already sore beneath a K-Mart rash top. He needed a rest from paddling. Was worried about getting some kind of injury. His feet found the ocean sand and the water came up to his ribs. He dragged the board beside himself, like a pet, lifting and throwing it over any waves that approached. The current brought him close to those other surfers he was nervous to mix with. A dozen of them. They were mostly sitting up, well-balanced, legs dangling as they peered out to sea.

The only other person standing in the deep water was a father, presumably, waiting to guide two kids onto waves. The daughter was older, more confident. She could already shift feet and angle the board against an unbroken arc. She zipped away, and so the focus went to her brother, who was jittery as he watched things below the surface. The boy suddenly screeched, *Leo! Get me out!* An impossible demand, but it turned the father into an uncle, perhaps, or a mother's boyfriend. In any case, it was that man's responsibility to find the cause of distress, then nudge the boy's tiny surfboard away from it. A jellyfish. Pink and throbbing and tangled up in itself. The sight of it came as a relief for the younger man, the nearby impostor, who'd briefly been frightened, as well. All the same, he slid back across his lime green foamboard, prepping for the next wave and not too concerned that, in going for it, he might've been cheating the queue.

His arms churned hard, straining shoulders, but he forgot his prospects of injury. A strange pause, in which he thought this wave had been lost. Then it seized the fin, the board quickly threatening to tip. He steadied, didn't lift his body until the water had crashed and turned white. He stood like a K-Mart mannequin, modelling cheap shorts and a rash top. It was a decent ride, but if he welcomed the thought, *Doing alright here...*, he'd surely fall. So he avoided it. Took nothing for granted, continued until he just about fell off on his own terms.

The rush of self-congratulations only came once he'd resurfaced. Amazing how well he seemed to have been served by YouTube and improbable memories from a high-school

camp. He was either a natural or the waves, on this day, were piss easy. In fact, couldn't it be both? Those hours between himself and the bucket hat brigade seemed to shrink. Perhaps with his gift, his innate ability, it would only take a few concerted Saturdays to qualify him for their group. He knew to distrust such optimism, but there was suddenly enough of it that he spent another clear-headed hour in the moderate surf, catching other people's scraps, trying to give them regrets. Probably, he never quite managed this. Although no doubt things were going well, he was enjoying himself.

Soon, the sun was falling and tracking toward a distant inlet. It drifted behind a cloud, a colander, and as the light burst through it would've made anyone with half a brain think about God, whether He/She/They exist, how they might work. Colour drained from those apartments and forest trees. On the beach, it was long past sunbathing hours and the cabanas had blessedly been packed away. Those who remained were sitting pensively, exposed. A few surfers were paddling to a cleaner break around the point. Others had simply disappeared, like they'd never been there in the first place, he'd only imagined them. Thoughts of 'one last wave' had been in his head for a while, and by the time he properly agreed, the sea had gone flat. Maybe it was closing down, as well. Or reloading. He sat up on the board, legs dangling, peering like a meerkat, hardly showing-off by taking this posture because there wasn't anyone else around. He felt quite happy. Had grand imaginings about 'the search'. Saw himself lying on a sandy mattress in the back of a surf van, eating carrots, hummus, listening to the guitar or ukulele of a girl with drying hair, gold skin, all her songs ripped from Eddie Vedder's *Into the Wild* soundtrack. He smiled at her in the daydream and outside of it. He was calm, not lonely. And he looked again to the distant picnic bench on the headland, which throbbed with significance, even though its table and seat remained unoccupied and now were cast in shadow, too. He was watching that bench at the very moment he heard a surge in the water. Wasn't a wave.

The shark, dark grey, came out of brown, clutched his leg, ripped it. There was enough time before full pain to jolt the board away – teeth had razored some of that, as well – and to punch the attacker's flank with an arm. Unclear whether that had worked, or if the fish had already chosen to retreat, tasting K-Mart, preferring Ripcurl. His blood was blue-purple in the broken water.

In fact, the shark, two metres, aggressive, seemed about to come back. He shouted. Got no reaction from the shore because he didn't look for one. All of his energy went into an escape. Sticking to the board, his arms whirled fast, and he kept his mangled leg out of the water, trying not to move it because he didn't really want to know if it no longer worked. He

focused on his head, the opposite end. He crossed a little peak, a partial wave, and it pushed him over the sandbar. He didn't look back to check if he was being pursued. No time. He wished, of course, that he'd paid more attention to Channel 7 fear-mongering, prime-time current affairs segments that might've told him exactly what to do in this situation. He'd always found such explainers silly and uncomfortable. Now, there wasn't any point thinking about confronting the shark – he only had to get away with as much of him unbitten as possible. He reached the proper shallows, leaking. He fell off the board, stumbling, slippery, and he knew that the shark had gone, he'd been pointlessly damaged. He heard the low sloshing of other people getting close, coming to rescue him, so that if he was indeed about to fade it could happen in a more comfortable spot.

This is what he'd do, if necessary: he'd imagine other people who'd similarly met a shark, and died from it. He'd feel less sorry for himself, this way. And then he'd loosen his grip, taking his body, his view, as merely a sensor on the plane of the universe, shutting down, pieces soon to disassemble and go toward making other things. A cloud, a fish, a future Bells winner, a guitar, a tea-tree, a picnic bench.

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That story had been scrawled into a notebook with rabid handwriting. He kept going, beyond the terror of a promising surfing audition being ruined by a bull shark. As he wrote, his legs, in board shorts, shook at a frightened rhythm. The question: whether describing a possible event, seeming to get *ahead* of it, made it less likely to happen. He assumed the future couldn't be forecast. All shark attacks were unlucky, according to environmentalists' statistics, but he wanted to diminish the risk as much as possible. Sharks were what scared him most about this upcoming pastime - by a street. He hoped to make himself too obvious a prize, someone that Fate (in shark costume) would have to step right into the spotlight to claim. If the story, this latest addition to a particularly erratic notebook, was found inside his beach towel after his succumbing to a *real* shark attack, then it might just be held as proof of something extraordinary, mistaken as evidence of the divine, His/Her/Their mysterious ways.

And yet, the more he wrote, the more he accepted that he wasn't doing anything to change probability. If Spielberg were pinched off Santa Monica, *Jaws* wouldn't have made him especially unlucky, just the event more ironic. Yes, that was it. All this time, he'd only been writing himself into the realm of irony. Realising this, he looked out from the vantage of the picnic bench on the point, seeing the beach and the rocks and the forest and the apartments

and the waves cast in that liminal glow of late afternoon. Briny aromas. Breeze tousling his hair. For some time, a lime green foamboard had been waiting for him to finish. And despite the twisted logic, he did, in fact, feel a trace of reassurance, amongst trepidation, in the moment before he downed his pencil.