

The Three Times I Have Dared to Tango With the Tides

I stood on the beach, looking out onto the gray choppy morning. The waves were roaring this way and that—not too big, not too small, but angry and callous at the hands of the light breeze that washed past us. I tasted sea salt and fear, swallowing them both down in one go.

Dad helped me get into my wetsuit. I don't remember why I had one that fit me, because I sure didn't surf and neither did my brother, and my eleven-year-old body, needless to say, differed from my fifty-year-old father's. Still, I remember squirming through the tight rubber with my arms and legs, wondering how I was supposed to paddle out if I could barely lift up my arms. I felt the blackness stick to the area around my neck like a leech.

Sam, on the other hand, was in his element. He brought his own wetsuit, his own board, and was ready to hit the water at an hour that, before I had discovered life's miracle of coffee, was far too early for me. I had watched him surf in contests before, his blond stringy head suspended in the water—after all, he was my best friend back in seventh grade, and I wanted to support him. Sam was on the Aviara Oaks Middle School surf team, because in a surf town like Carlsbad, middle schools need to have things like that. Why? Sort of for the love of the sport, and sort of so all of the other budding adolescents could discern who the cool kids were: the ones who could surf, obviously.

My dad surfed, and my favorite movie was *Surf's Up*. I figured that might be close enough to get me an “in” with the surf crowd. It was made abundantly clear to me by my peers that no, it wasn't, and I was nothing even close to the middle schooler's dream of being “cool.”

Sam, on the other hand, was absolutely cool. He made funny faces at me in class, he was

friends with a few of the popular kids, and he was actually really smart: we were in the same accelerated math class with Mrs. Pujji (The Puj). All of that was more than enough for me to dub him my best friend. Back then, we were inseparable—that is, until he cut me off because the other kids in our grade spread a rumor that we were dating. I never even liked the kid. He was a foot shorter than me, for Christ’s sake. And he had weird, goofy teeth that stuck out when he smiled. That was all so classic for Aviara Middle, and that was the price we paid just by being eleven-year-olds—getting riddled with shame and embarrassment for no reason at all.

We had tried to make our way out into the water. Sam had already begun paddling with all the grace of Poseidon, god of the sea, while I stayed planted on my tummy atop my board, Dad beside me, helping me up and over every coming cycle of whitewash, gently lifting the nose of the board toward the sun, dancing to the rhythm of the Pacific. I winced at a pain behind my eyes. The steady rocking began to make me feel sick. I remember tossing around the idea of seasickness, which didn’t make sense since I had grown up boating in Lake Havasu. I tried to focus on the waves before me, gulping down any less-than-ideal feelings. This is it, I thought. My chance to be a cool surfer.

That same cool surfer threw up twenty minutes later out of Dad’s car window as we went at least fifty down Pacific Coast Highway.

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The ocean was Dad’s first love. Back in high school, he was just Marco, a curly-haired tan-skinned kid of immigrant parents, living in a house where surfing was an act of rebellion. He watched *Big Wednesday* about a million times, memorizing the one-liners, pondering which of

the characters he would be, bragging to his friends that he'd surfed in the places where they'd surfed in the movie. He'd wake up early before school to go surf with his buddies, who called him "Sharko." He smoked weed, and he hung around the stoner crowd (which was nearly entirely composed of the surfer crowd) much to the dismay of his father—my Opa.

He only went to UC Irvine because that's what Opa said to do, perfectly fitting the stereotypical Persian prophecy of studying hard and achieving high. And that's what he did: he's a successful real estate developer with a Bachelor of Science in mathematics and a master's in business administration from UCI. He owns a house a block away from the beach. He's fifty-five now, and he still surfs almost every single day. He's my biggest role model in the world.

Dad gives me all sorts of classic Dad advice: never leave a bag or purse inside your car, remember to lock your bike, always pay your parking tickets the very next day, and—if you really want to go above and beyond—don't get a parking ticket in the first place. My favorite, though, is what he says to me when I get rejected from my dream school, when I don't get the leadership position I want, when a boy breaks my heart: you may not be on the path that you wanted to be on, but if you stop and look, you'll find little flowers along the way. They're there if you make the effort to look for them.

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The beach was a bit more green than the one I'd known in Carlsbad. Campus Point had bursts of brush and trees in places, with stairs leading up the bluff to a garden-like escape. There were miles of cliffs stretching out along the left side of the horizon, like the walls of an enormous swimming pool. The sun was in the wrong place; it wasn't lowering into the ocean

like I'd been used to—if you were standing on the sand looking out to the sea, it would fall behind you as it set, and it would be visible from the water once you paddled out. The six or seven of us in our wetsuits bobbed in the water like watermelon seeds among the brilliant blue.

My classmates were eager to start catching waves. We'd practiced popping up on the sand a few dozen times, trying to get our form exactly right for when we found the perfect wave.

One of our instructors, Bella, told us what to do: First, you paddle out. You want to go pretty far, but not so far that you pass the waves. It'll be hard on your upper body at first, all that paddling, but it'll get easier. Next, you spot a wave. I don't remember what Bella said about which waves are good and which ones aren't; she always spotted the waves for us and told us when to start paddling like crazy. That was the next step: If you're straddling your surfboard, sit back, tilt the nose upward, and move your legs around like an eggbeater until you're facing the shore. Then sit forward and paddle with all the fury you've got inside of you. Remember to keep the nose above the water so it doesn't get caught, but not too far above the water or you won't catch the wave. Stay balanced. Stay focused. Keep paddling. Then—after all of that—you pop up; you go from lying belly-down on the board to the closest you'll ever get to walking on water in less than a second.

A couple of my classmates caught stumbly, imperfect waves, usually ending with wipeouts and a call from our instructors to applaud. We'd “woooo” and clap for a bit, some gathering the courage to catch a wave in the next set. For someone who had paid upwards of a hundred dollars to take a surfing class, I shocked myself with how apathetic I felt toward the act

of actually surfing. I was more than content to put on my wetsuit, paddle out, and just... sit there on that big yellow block of plexiglass. I think it was named “Banana” or something good-humored like that. All the rentable surfboards had those sorts of names.

I would stare at all that surrounded me: the shades of blue, the sparkling glass reflection of the sky, the coast that gradually shrank into the distance as it was swallowed by the marine layer of fog. Way out in the blur, I could see the 101, the highway that led home to Carlsbad. I took a big breath of the salty air and let it extend through my fingertips. I used the window of time during the surfing class for meditation. It was a time of peace for me: a time to be with the ocean, a peaceful, quiet, salty solitude, where nothing and nobody could touch me. I’d flop off my board and completely submerge myself in the ocean, hanging onto Banana for support, my toes unable to reach the sandy ocean floor. Then I’d rise again, my body baptized and my eyes just a little bit clearer than before.

“Hey! You okay?” one of my instructors yelled from a few meters away, probably struck by how little surfing I was doing in a class intended for surfing.

As I sat there that day, skin washed anew, hair slicked back, and lungs just ever-so-slightly out of breath, I thought about home. I thought about Dad—what he’d say if he could see me now. Though it was something I’d always known, it struck me that I’d never lived away from the ocean.

“Yep! Doing awesome!” I yelled back.

I think I caught one wave throughout the entire six-week class.

Mountains of cold kept pressing against, up, and over my back, nearly swallowing me each time, as I began to rethink my decision to give into Dad's wish to take me surfing. "You took that class, didn't you? You'll be fine! C'mon, Leetal!"

Dad and the rest of my family have called me Leetal—a mispronunciation of "little"—for as long as I've been alive, I think. I'm the littlest one of the whole family, even among cousins. I've always been the baby of the family: last one to get my driver's license, last one to graduate high school, last one to reach the legal drinking age (I politely decline when offered mimosas at family functions).

"Just catch the whitewash! It's *super* easy! C'mon, you got this! Go, Leetal, go!" I half-giggled, half-screamed no after tumultuous no, hoping I could just give Dad the board and swim back. But he insisted. He stood with me, not letting me go to shore unless I caught a wave in.

It had been decades since Dad was that rebellious curly-haired kid. His hair had grayed and his face had softened a bit, but you could tell from his old college photos that that same antsy kid was inside of him somewhere. Even as a forty-or-fifty-something-year-old, he always made the same funny face he'd made when he was drunk in his twenties. He had the same spunk and spirit of a young adult stoner with all the candor and care of a father.

After all that fighting, I decided to let the ocean carry me in. I used Dad's foam board like a giant boogie board, not even bothering to pop up—I knew it would just be more salt water up the sinuses. The nose of the board almost sunk beneath the water, causing me to "pearl" or flip forward, as it had a million times before when I'd tried to learn. But it didn't, and I kept my head

above the water. I got the “woooo”s and hollers from my mom and brother on the shore, and Dad gave me a thumbs up from out in the water as I got off the board and waded the final steps to the sand.