

A woman with long, dark, straight hair is looking down, her face partially obscured by her hair. She is wearing a dark, possibly black, top. The background is a blurred, blue ocean with white-capped waves. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

RAW BLUE

kirsty eagar

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kirsty cavan

江苏工业学院图书馆

藏书章

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1 him.

Coastalwatch

Swell size 1-1.5 metres — Swell direction E

Certainly some surfable waves around today . . .

Friday morning. I'm heading down to the break, feeling antsy because I slept in. I'd meant to surf early, but maybe it's not such a bad thing. Getting there after nine means I'll miss the pre-work crew. Instead, I'll join the old boys, students and shift workers who have rearranged their lives to better suit their surfing. They're more relaxed about things, not jamming waves in. On weekdays people surf the break in shifts: the dawn service, the mid-morning slackers, the lunch-hour rush, the after-school grommet fest and the just-got-off-work party. When guys at the break ask me what I do, what they're really asking is, how is it you can surf mid-morning on a weekday? How are you making it work? That's the big question in surfing: how do you work less and surf more?

As I drive past Car Plus all the flags out front are being blown by a northerly, which is good because the break loves anything from the north and gets nasty in a southerly. It's a relief to know I'll be in the water soon. By the time I pull up in the top car park it feels like my stomach has been scooped out. I always feel like that until I get my first wave. Whether

it's good or not doesn't matter; I'm put back into my body again.

I head over to the lookout spot, twirling the Laser's keys around my finger. It's the forty-ninth time I've paddled out here. In the beginning I was nervous, but now I'm reasonably sure that the whole clump of surfers won't turn around and order me out of the water. Besides, I'm never the only blow-in, there are others. And I'm female, so it's easier for me. Outsider guys have it harder; the local guys drop in on them deliberately, teaching them a lesson. But only if they go to the arrowhead, where the waves peak first and the rides are the longest. If they know their place they're left alone. I try not to look at people. I sit on my board and stare hard at the horizon like the next set is the most important thing in the world. Which it is.

There's a guy standing on the bench seat at the lookout spot. The seat's been bequeathed – it says so on a plaque fixed to its back. It's in memory of someone who was a surfer and a friend. Two nice things.

I want to stand on the seat beside the guy so I can see, but I feel intimidated. Instead, I hover to the side where the grass is patchy from hundreds of surf checks a day. He doesn't give any indication that he knows I'm there, which is unusual because people always look around when you walk up. If they're local, they expect to see someone they know. If they're not, they expect to see a local. They'll usually give you a nod, but this guy stares out at the surf as if it's the only real thing and the rest of the world is just advertising.

I feel like I've interrupted a funeral and now I have to pretend I'm not here. I stand on my tiptoes so I can just see the water over the scrubby vegetation behind the pine railings, then my gaze slides back to him.

The air around him is snap frozen. He's in his mid-twenties, his face so shut off and wary I wonder what's happened to him. His skin is the sort that burns easily. The ridges of his ears are pink and freckled. They stick out a bit through his hair, which is light brown and lank. It's scraggy, seventies style; he hasn't had a cut for a while. He's wearing old jeans, thongs and a white T-shirt, and he wouldn't be out of place in a pub or a TAB.

After he's walked off towards the car park, I take his place on the seat. Finally I have a clear view of the surf and I feel an electric charge. It's a glitter skin day. The ocean is a vivid emerald colour and the wind ruffles the wave faces so that they shatter the sunlight like glass. Seeing that glittering skin always tightens my throat with joy. It's stupid, but that's how I feel: joyous. I forget about the underbelly of things, my secrets, and I feel easy and free. I know that I'm meant to stay on the surface and be happy. Just enjoy being alive.

Glitter skin days are my favourite kind of surf conditions.

On my walk back to the car I pass him. He's pulling a shortboard out of the back of a battered metallic-blue Commodore station wagon and doesn't pay me any attention. I strip down to my bikini and pull on my spring suit. I'm painting my face with zinc cream when I notice he's pulled his T-shirt off and he's wearing a white singlet underneath. I'm surprised by that; it seems old-fashioned and for some reason I like it. I wonder what he smells like then I push the thought away, feeling like I've swallowed a snake.

I make a deal with myself as I walk down to the Alley – where the lagoon empties into the ocean and a rip runs alongside the rocks of the tidal pool, making for an easy paddle out – I can't come in until I've had ten waves.

The water is clean and glassy. I open my eyes while I'm duck diving under the lines of foam and see the white water rolling overhead like storm clouds. There are a lot of bodies in the line-up. I paddle out with no real idea of where to go and somehow end up in the middle of the crows.

'*Faark*, Davo. What'd ya fark it up for?'

'Ya didn't, did ya? *Faark*.'

'*Eeeeeuurgh!* Up it, Bobby! *Go son!*'

'*Faark*. Good one, eh? Wave of the faarken day.'

There are five of them clumped together in Alley Rights, on the inside of the arrowhead. They're zinc-faced, balding, tanned and wiry, and straight off a beer ad: *A big faarken thirst needs a big faarken beer.*

I float belly down on my board, just to their left. They hassle each other for everything coming through. It's funny. Occasionally two of them get up at the same time and the one on the inside chases the other one across, whooping and hooting. They're loving it, being out here together in their little club. Salty old cods.

There's a big one out the back and it looks like it'll peak towards me. The nearest crow starts heading across and I paddle hard because I don't think he'll be in position to get it. He's only a couple of metres away when the line peaks. I feel the surge of it and I stare across at him. In my head I know he won't have it, but my instinct is to back off and let him take it. But he shouts, 'Go, go, go, go, go,' at me, meaning, I can't make it, it's all yours.

The peak passes us by. We both lean back on our boards, pulling them up short in the wave's wake like galloping horses.

'Shit,' he says, looking across at me. 'Would have been a good one.'

I give him a tight smile and say nothing. I'm no good at talking to people I don't know.

I realise I won't get anything near them and decide to try further over, halfway down the line-up. I tiptoe through the middle, trying not to get in anybody's way, hoping they won't think I'm snaking. Then I sit up, take a look around.

The waves are shifting around more today. Every now and then one breaks further down and closer in, near me. So as long as I'm ready, and prepared to paddle my arse off, I'll be in the clear.

My first wave is awesome. It's mine from the start because there is nobody on my right. It surges beneath me and the lip pitches forward, throwing me on my board. I see the shoulder of the wave on my left, walling up, and in that moment I'm nothing more than the sum of sensations: power, push and speed. I shift weight onto my back foot, driving the board up the wave face and swooping in a turn off the top. A blond guy paddling back out stares down the line at me and gives me a *Ecccuurgh!* I make another turn. The length of the wall rears up, curving like a cupped palm, and I crouch lower, picking up speed before kicking out as it finally closes down, my ride ending pretty much at the sand, in line with the middle of the top car park. I let myself fall into the froth. Oh. Oh, oh, *oh*. This big burbling laugh gets knocked out of me and I give myself a hoot, so full of fizz that I've got to let some of it out. I feel light and free and that there's only this.

And I know it's quicker to get out and run all the way back up to the Alley rip and paddle in there rather than trying to fight the sweep. It's while I'm running, seeing the blur of sand, water, sky, grinning like a goofy kid, that I feel for the first time I'm allowed to be here.

But on my next wave I pass the guy from the lookout spot. He's out wide, paddling back up to the arrowhead. He's watching me as I get to my feet, and he watches me pump across the face, and I see him turn his head to keep watching me as I pass him. I'm sure, then, that he must have noticed me at the lookout spot. He was watching me there too, I'm certain of it.

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Café Parisienne, Manly, Friday night. Orders come in waves. After ten o'clock there is a lull and I start making the Café Parisienne version of hollandaise sauce, reducing some vinegar with peppercorns and a bay leaf, and setting up the food processor on the bench. I wash my hands for a ten-Mississippi count with soap and warm water before I crack eggs into my palms, letting the whites sag through my fingers into a bowl and throwing the yolks into the Moulinex. After I add the reduction to the yolks, I turn the food processor on and watch its twin blades spin a yellow tornado.

Adam comes in while I'm drizzling melted butter through the hole in the lid. He slams his plastic box full of plates, cups and food scraps onto the bench near the washer.

'I hate bussing,' he shouts. 'Bloody Emilio's always got me bussing.'

It's the only way he can stop you eating the contents of the cool room, Adam, I could say, but I don't. I nod and smile and don't take my eyes off the yellow string of butter. Adam likes to talk because when Adam talks he doesn't work. My back's

aching and tired from surfing and it hurts my neck to look sideways. I don't want to talk.

'*Urgh*. I hate it. I hate it, my precious.' He pulls up the top half of the dishwasher so that steam billows into the room and slides the tray of finished plates over onto the bench to his left. While he's waiting for them to cool off, he throws another rack on top of the sink and starts stacking up. Halfway through he loses interest and wanders over to me.

'Yucky poo.' He sticks his finger into the drizzling butter and licks it.

'Adam.'

Adam has some kind of skin condition, which means open sores on his hands, arms, legs and face – all the bits of him that you can see, including the sticky little fingers he likes to touch everything with. He's told me that it's Golden Staph; there was some long, involved story about how he went to hospital to get his wisdom teeth out in his first year at uni. I didn't take it all in. And I don't believe he's got Golden Staph. Adam says a lot of things.

'I'm so bored. *So* bored.'

His glasses are misted up and he looks like a mole. He considers the Moulinex again and I wonder when he last washed his hair.

'Why don't you just slop it in?' he asks. 'The butter.'

'You're the one doing a science degree. You tell me.'

He sniffs. Then he reaches for the plastic sauce bottle of old hollandaise on the shelf to his right. He squeezes some into his palm and licks it up. My stomach clenches.

'If I put it in too quickly it'll separate. The sauce will curdle,' I say in a tight voice.

'*Ooh . . . Rrrr-ight . . .*' Adam likes drawing words out.

‘So are you like one of those high school drop-outs?’ he shouts.

I mouth like a fish, suddenly winded. ‘I started a degree in business communications.’

‘Oh?’ He says it in doubt. ‘But you don’t go to uni now, do you?’

How does he know? How can he tell? ‘No. I stopped.’

‘Why’d you defer?’

I don’t correct him. I don’t tell him I dropped out, not deferred. Don’t tell him how I got in my car to hand in an assignment, eyes grainy from cramming all night, and I just couldn’t bring myself to start the motor. I sat there for thirty minutes, maybe more, frozen. Then before I knew it I was heading for home, driving up the F3 in a car packed with gear from the place I was sharing in Surry Hills. I hated Surry Hills. Even the leaves on the trees were dirty. In the beginning I was okay with my flatmates, Karen and Matt the pothead, but over time I could hardly talk to them. Sometimes I’d go into the kitchen and the two of them would shut up and I’d know they’d been talking about me. And I hated being away from the ocean. Without it, I felt like I was shrivelling up.

‘I just wanted to think,’ I say.

I finish funnelling the hollandaise into a plastic bottle. Then I rip off some masking tape and stick it on the front of the bottle and write: *Carly, 05/11*. I can feel Adam’s scorn.

Later, I open the door of the cool room and startle Adam in there. He’s standing in front of the cooked-meat shelf with one of the containers open. I can see the masking-tape label fixed to the front of it: *Thai curry, Kylie, 03/11*. He’s been scooping it into his mouth, using his hand like a spoon. My stomach turns over.

‘Shouldn’t you be out front, Adam? Bussing?’

I flatten against the cool-room door but his bulk still brushes me on his way past. He’s left the lid off the container and I shut it thinking that if I’ve got time I’ll tip the curry out and make a fresh batch, free from 8s. But I probably won’t get time. There are fifteen boxes of pre-made pastry and bread dough in the freezer room that need to be emptied.

I use a box of frozen croissants to wedge open the freezer door. I get the heebie-jeebies when I’m in there with it closed, a horror of being locked in somehow. The freezer is nested inside the cool room so it’s not like you get much of a break from the cold with the door open – the cool room’s temperature is 4°C. If someone blocks the door to the cool room I’m still screwed, but I will get a slower death.

Whoever took delivery of the frozen stuff was supposed to unpack it. Instead, they’ve stacked the boxes up inside the freezer doorway, completely blocking access to the shelves. I look up at that tower of boxes and I start to cry, big wet snotty sobs. I don’t know what I’m doing. I should have stayed at uni like a normal person, like everybody else. Then I’d be nice and clean and safe, doing nice, clean, safe things. What I can’t get over is how quickly it happened, me falling out of my own life.

I close the kitchen at eleven-thirty. I’ve just finished putting the chopping boards and fryer baskets through the wash when Georgina’s perky face appears in the window.

She dings the bell even though she knows I’ve seen her.

‘Nachos, wedges and a steak sandwich, lovey. Ta.’

I open my mouth to tell her that the kitchen is closed but she’s disappeared already. Deep male voices reverberate

through the window from the front and I can hear her giggle. I ding the bell back and wait.

‘The kitchen’s closed,’ I tell her.

Her blue eyes look incredulous and I wonder why she cannot seem to see the clean, wiped spaces and the cover that’s been placed over the deep fryer.

‘Can you do it for these guys? I know them from school.’

‘I turned the grill and fryer off half an hour ago. I told you, remember? The oil’s cold. It’ll take ages to heat up again. And my shift’s finished. I’m off now.’

She tilts her head at me, tweaking her short black hair as though she’d like to say something more. Georgina makes me feel uncomfortable. Early on she toted me up and decided I was short of whatever it is that she thinks is important. She’s studying marketing or something.

I’m trying to bristle up so I don’t apologise. The kitchen shift always finishes at twelve. The fryer is always turned off about half an hour before. Same as it ever was. I shouldn’t have to tell her the news.

She disappears from view. A moment later I hear her low muttering and one of the male voices saying, ‘Well, tell her to turn it back on.’

I scuff out to the office. The roster is open on Emilio’s desk. Emilio himself is long gone, he slunk out at ten. He had no reason to slink, he’d been in here since seven in the morning. But he’s a bit of a martyr, old Emilio.

I take off my apron and cap, pull the elastic out of my ponytail and scrabble my fingers through my hair. It’s lank and oily from the cap and my scalp feels tight and sore. Then I hunt around on the desk for a pen to sign off with, spotting the yellow sticky note that Emilio’s pressed to the roster.