

Wave Rider

I once knew a surfer called Richard. A native Hawaiian, his coffee-dark skin appeared where his wetsuit ended at the sleeves. At Newport beach where I first learned to surf, Richard knew where the clams were. He pointed out their tube holes and grabbed the ribbed shells with his fingers as shovels. He made it look easy. When I stuck my fingers down those holes, all I grabbed was sand.

I was nine years old then, with my mom on February vacation. Richard ran ALOHA SURF INSTRUCTION, and we were the tourists from Syracuse, New York. He dragged from his truck a cerulean “foamie” board and an O-NEIL suit with sleeves that creased like rolls of fat.

Holding a stub of wax, Richard drew two ovals on the board where I was supposed to put my feet. Then, he drew a circle near the tapered front and added a smiley face. My face goes there when I’m paddling, he said. *Now, let’s see your standing stance.* So Richard moved my neoprene-skinned legs into position on the ovals and told me how to stick my arms out like a “T” for balance. My knees dusty with sand, I practiced standing up on the beach, rising from the board and sinking my feet into position.

Ten minutes later, we were heading out to sea. I was hugging the sides of the board and staring at that face drawn with three slashes of white. Richard guided the board from its upturned nose. With every roll of water that slapped onto its underside, my teeth chattered more and more, and my heart danced against that tight suit. *Woah, that’s a big wave,* I said, laughing because that’s the only thing I could do.

Nab Max, that’s a baby wave. A baby wave. And Richard was right. The water rode barely up to his hips. He trudged on, bringing us further away from the beach. But as every wave splattered over my back, my teeth would chatter once more and I would say again, *woah, that’s a big wave.* Richard, not looking back, would say the same thing. *That’s a baby wave. A baby wave.* So it went on. Every few seconds, a fear, a reassurance.

One week before I start my Junior year in college, I find myself down in La Jolla, San Diego. I walk into Surf Diva and ask the guy for a wetsuit and board for the afternoon. He throws me an all-black suit and drags a turquoise foamie from the racks. *An eight-footer is right for you,* he says. *Usually I give people a nine-footer, but you’ve got a surfer’s build.*

The board is wide and I can’t wrap my arms around it, so I grab it with one hand on each side and shuffle sideways to the beach. I don’t know how real surfers carry their boards. Before now, I’ve only surfed four times in my life. Twice was in Newport, same surf instructor, one year apart.

Richard still lives in the photo-books we used to give the elementary school teachers for Christmas. He’s on the cover, all three of us standing in front of his foamie with a misspelled Calibri caption, “*abola.*” Flip through the pages and you’ll find me surfing a baby wave, body balanced on the waxy ovals and arms out in a “T.” Look again in these books and you’ll see Shamu the killer whale and Mickey Mouse and Legoland driving school, but you won’t find a picture of my first surfing wipeout. I don’t think that any such picture was taken. But even if it existed, it wouldn’t have remade that pulse of time I spent underwater after a double wave hit from behind.

I remember falling into the water on my back and the board shooting away, the leash yanking at my leg. I would eventually paddle my way to the surface and Richard would slosh his way over, calling my name. But in that moment, my eyes were open and I remember no pain. It was like looking through one of those fountains with water trickling down a pane of glass. Everything’s there, but everything’s dancing. Above me were the shapes of palm trees, their fronds wavering against the sky.

I kept thinking about this moment for years and years. In the bathtub, I sometimes leaned back, blowing bubbles through my nose and opening my eyes again, but the freshwater felt like acid in my eyes. When I started swimming competitively, the chlorine-water made my eyes red around the rims. I never saw through water like I did in Newport. *But this is freshwater,* I told myself. *That moment was in the ocean.*

But in the La Jolla surf, there’s no waxy smiley face to tell me where I should lay down. I’m too far

forward, and as the board digs into the water, I'm thrown below. I realize that saltwater stings the eyes too. The sand chafes my cheeks, and the salt stays bitter on the edges of my tongue. I spit the grit from my mouth and drag the surfboard out to sea again like Richard had, one hand on its upturned nose. I walk deeper and deeper, until there's no more sand below me and I'm swimming. Right in front, I see the water rise again in a massive swell. *These are baby waves*, I think. *Baby waves*.