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## Returning to the Water

A MEASURED VOICE on the radio was forecasting storms as I drove west out of Melbourne. Beyond the flat, scrubby farming land on the city's outskirts, an ominous grey fuzz of low cloud blotted out the horizon. On the approach to Geelong, as the dark funnels and flame-lit chimneys of the Corio Bay oil refineries loomed in the distance, rain began lashing the car. If it hadn't been for an appointment I had to keep in Torquay, I would have turned around and driven straight home, mildly disappointed but secretly relieved that my return to the water had been delayed. Much as I wanted to surf again, I was afraid of what I would learn about myself. Ocean-lover James Hamilton-Paterson once wrote that he was almost as obsessed with the idea of the sea as with its actuality. I was afraid that when put to the test after all these years, I would be confronted with a similar but more unpalatable truth: that I was more in love with the idea of surfing than with the surfing itself.

The town of Torquay holds a special place in surfing lore because of its proximity to Bells Beach, one of the world's legendary surf breaks. But Bells is a hidden jewel reachable only through a bush reserve and a hike down a steepish gully to the beach. What hits you as you enter Torquay is the mercantile side of surfing in the form of a commercial estate on the highway into the town: a surreal 'village' of brightly coloured surf showrooms emblazoned with giant billboards of surfers on luridly blue waves. Two of the biggest surf companies in the world, Rip Curl and Quiksilver, began as cottage industries in Torquay in the late 1960s. Their presence, along with the Easter competition at Bells – the longest-running international surf contest – has ensured that the town's identity is now inseparable from its surfing culture.

Those who knew Torquay in the 1950s remember it as a frontier town where a notorious group of wild boys associated with the Surf Life Saving Club

bought cheap land on the outskirts, whacked up some fibro shacks and called it Boot Hill. They were known for their heavy drinking, partying and love of pranks – one particularly memorable joke involved the word 'Fuck' being mowed in giant letters into a crop of oats on a hill facing the town. For surfers from the early sixties acid was the thing. There was much soul-searching among the floating population of surfers and bohemians who hung out at a century old timber house called Springside near Torquay Point.

Anyone who has not been to Torquay but has seen the 1991 American action film *Point Break*, in which the charismatic leader of a gang of Californian surfer-bankrobbers is finally tracked down by the FBI at Bells Beach, could be excused for thinking that Torquay is still a hillbilly, wild west kind of town. In the final scenes, there is a shot of a sleepy main street with wide verandahs and a whistlestop train station with a sign announcing 'Torquay (Bells Beach)'. It's all very quaint and countrified, like something out of 'Northern Exposure', but nothing like Torquay. The real giveaway, for Australians at least, are the scenes on Bells Beach, particularly the foreshore backdrop of firs and the grey shale beach. Not a tea-tree or ochre cliff-face in sight. It was shot, in fact, off the coast of Oregon, in the US.

I hadn't been to Torquay for at least six years and as I drove past the surf showrooms, I felt a pang of nostalgia for the mythical Torquay of *Point Break* that would forever remain unsullied by the forces of big business. Yet even before the appearance of the surf plaza and the recent Ocean View housing estate nearby, the real Torquay – a modest mix of suburban brick veneers, fibro holiday houses, neat weatherboards and brash townhouses with a shopping strip reminiscent of a suburban mall – had never borne much resemblance to its film counterpart. I was on my way to meet local surfer Grayme Galbraith, known as Gally, who grew up in Bell Street, Torquay. The street was named after the Bell family which

owned much of the local land, including the farm of Martha Bell from whom Bells Beach took its name. When Gally was a boy, the town was a haven for hippies, surfers and people wanting to escape the rat race. Living two minutes' walk from the beach, he spent much of his childhood in the water, but didn't take up surfing until he was eighteen. He now lives in the new Ocean View housing estate that has consumed the rolling farmland where that giant 'Fuck' was once emblazoned. He only has to lift his head off his pillow in the mornings to inspect the surf through his bedroom window. Gally has been an Australian champion twice and state champion too many times to mention. Apart from selling surfboards for Rip Curl, he coaches the state surfing squad and gives private lessons. Hence our rendezvous.

I no longer had friends who surfed and did not welcome the prospect of surfing alone (not a wise thing to do when you're seriously out of practice). So I had asked Gally to give me some lessons. I had deliberately chosen the protected break of Torquay to save myself the kind of pounding I endured when first learning in the unforgiving beach breaks of the Mornington Peninsula. Back then, it never occurred to me to ask someone to teach me. I didn't believe that surfing could be taught. Like writing, it seemed too fluid, too unpredictable an activity; too much a matter of individual talent and temperament. You had to work your way out from the shore break; get used to being dumped and spat out; you had to watch more experienced surfers and figure it out for yourself. In other words, you had to do it the hard way. Twenty years later, the hard way had lost its appeal. Apart from wanting company and advice, somewhere in the back of my mind was the memory of my swimming instructor with his long shepherd's staff ready to haul me clear of the water when I got into trouble.

At Torquay Point, the swell rolled around the headland and peeled off into neat, smallish waves ideal for novices. Intermittently, the sun broke through the pewter clouds making the cliff glow like a freshly baked loaf of bread. It was a weekday and as I gazed out over Bass Strait contemplating the surf, I had a sneaking feeling that I was breaking some unwritten rule about how one should conduct one's life; that I ought be at my office in the inner city or at home looking after my young son. The storm I had brushed with on my way down was now unleashing a flash flood on Melbourne, having passed Torquay by like a travelling show hell-bent on mak-

ing an impression in the big smoke. If I had paid more attention to the weather map and the wind direction I might not have written-off the surf so hastily. But I was out of touch with reading these signs and with contemplating what was going on in the ocean. A hot northerly wind could still have me hallucinating glassy waves but my grasp of pressure systems and their impact on the swell had always been rudimentary. What I did know was that the winter months were the best time along the Victorian coast for powerful groundswells produced by lows in the Southern Ocean. The month of May, I was told, had been classic. Non-stop six-foot waves and offshore winds. Now it was September and the equinoctial winds had begun to blow. As always in the spring, the weather was unsettled and unsettling.

"Just what you want," Gally announced, casting an expert eye over the water. It is no longer *de rigueur* for surfers to have the dishevelled, sun-bleached look, but with his shock of sandy hair almost to his shoulders, freckled tan, laconic manner and playful grin, Gally is unmistakably a surfer. He pointed out the various breaks between Point Danger at the far end of the beach and Torquay Point right in front of us at the creek mouth. The rip that travels out next to the rocky headland – a boon to the surfer but a hazard to swimmers – is known as the escalator. "We'll stay in the shore break for a while, then go out the back a bit further."

After changing into my brand new wetsuit – the old one was too thin for comfort in 14-degree water – I locked up the car. I was wondering what to do with my keys when I remembered a dream I'd had the week before. I was standing out the front of the Doges Palace in Venice looking out across the lagoon towards the white dome of the Salute when I noticed some figures on surfboards in the grey, choppy water. There were no waves, just the wake of vaporette and tiny peaks whipped up by the wind. Some people, I thought, will do anything for a wave. Then, without warning, a perfect, glassy wave began rising slowly out of the lagoon like a rare, exotic beast and I knew I had to get out there. As it happened, there was a nearby kiosk where I could hire a board. I pulled on my wetsuit and was preparing to enter the water when I became concerned about what to do with my keys and wallet. Should I bury them in the pebbles of the small beach in front of St Mark's square? Surely they would get stolen. I spent so much time worrying about what to do with them that I woke up before I had a chance to put a toe in the water.

Feeling a little foolish, I asked Gally what he did with his keys.

He slammed the hatch of his station wagon and picked up his board. "Hide them somewhere on the beach or under the car." He was once so eager to get in the water, he said, that he left the keys in the ignition and the doors unlocked.

Still anxious about abandoning my keys, I rolled them in my towel, picked up the training board Gally had brought for me and headed for the beach. The symbolism of the dream was obvious enough. The keys represented my secure, predictable life; the life I was throwing open to risk and uncertainty by returning to the water.

I DID NOT NOTICE the cold at first. I was too bent on navigating my way through the whitewater that snapped at my heels like a pack of hungry terriers. When I was deep enough into the breaking waves, I turned to face the shore and started to paddle. A foaming wave picked up my board sending it skidding forward as I seized the rails and scrapped to my knees before rising clumsily to my feet. In my late teens and early twenties, I would have been mortified to be seen mucking about in the shore break. Real surfers caught unbroken waves. Desperate to prove myself to the world, I took to paddling out the back with the experienced surfers before I knew what I was doing and not infrequently found myself in situations that I did not have the skills to handle. I have no doubt that this made me more fearful than I would otherwise have been. While I was lucky not to have any truly hair-raising experiences, was never dumped so badly I lost my nerve, I spent a lot of time avoiding waves when I should have been trying to catch them. If I had settled for smaller breaks closer to shore, I suspect my memories would not be so fraught with ambivalence.

Two things had changed. Firstly, I was older and didn't care about looking foolish or being uncool, didn't feel compelled to show that I could mix it with the boys. Here I was on this great big, spongy plank of a training board – the kind of thing I would never have been seen dead on twenty years ago – happy to take things slowly, to get it right. And secondly, surfing was no longer the distinct, tribal subculture it had once been. When I was younger I was acutely conscious of the exclusiveness of the surfing scene and of its hostility to newcomers, especially women. Ironically, now that surfing had been absorbed into mainstream culture and lost its anti-establishment

edginess, this 'them' and 'us' mood had largely evaporated. While it made life easier for me now, I did not want to forsake what surfing had represented to me as a young woman – its mood of rebellion, its defiant existentialism, its rejection of the routines of mainstream life, its celebration of the uncontrollable power of the sea. For all the folly of revisiting the romantic dreams of my youth, at least I knew that the fundamentals had not changed. The steps might have become more flashy but the dance on the wave remained the same.

With each successive wave, I was able to get to my feet more smoothly, catching nice little reforming waves that appeared out of the whitewater like a descending staircase materialising from nothing. My stance, Gally warned, was too squat, feet too far apart. I'd never be able to manoeuvre the board if I didn't stand tall. It was time, he said, to go out a bit further, beyond the break. I paddled out, pushing against an invisible membrane of resistance. If anything, the years out of the water had sharpened and augmented my fear, not dulled it. When I was a child I loved being dumped and churned and flung about like a rag doll, loved being at the mercy of the wave. As an adult I seemed to have lost the art of abandon, of giving myself up to the ocean. I had my life so tightly under rein that I had forgotten the mad joy of letting go.

A little peak was looming. "This one," Gally yelled and as I paddled for it, he gave the board a shove to help launch me onto the wave. The nose of my board plummeted and the shoulder of the wave felt too steep but somehow I got to my feet and quickly slid down the green face, then rode the broken wave all the way to the shore. After catching a few more like this one, I was so awash with adrenalin I could barely think straight. All I could do was smile. Why on earth had I waited fifteen years?

During a brief lull between sets, Gally told me that I didn't need lessons every week. He said I should go out myself for a few weeks and then come back and see him so that he could correct any bad habits I'd picked up. I tried to hide my dismay as I told him that I didn't feel ready, that I needed the lessons to build up my confidence, that I had a problem with fear. "It's only water," he grinned. "If you want to surf, you have to pay the rent." And this was the very lesson he couldn't teach me.

After an hour in the water my feet and lips were numb. Back in the carpark getting changed, I asked Gally if he had surfed Corsair. I told him that I had

written a novel about a young man who surfed there at night.

"Hah!" he laughed, brushing the sand from his feet. "That would be the end of him." Gally had surfed the Rip a few times but didn't bother anymore because it had become too crowded. It was a great left hander, he admitted, but very tricky.

I didn't dare tell him that it was my dream to surf the Rip. A writer wanting to emulate one of her more reckless characters could easily come across as hare-brained. I could just imagine the look on his face. A few weeks later, as Gally and I grabbed a coffee and muffin at a local cafe after my lesson, I decided to make my confession. It was time to find out whether I was kidding myself about surfing Corsair. Now that Gally had had the chance to observe the progress I was making, perhaps he could gauge whether I would, at some time in the future, have what it took.

Whatever his feelings, he disguised them well enough as I told him what I wanted to do. "It would give you a fright," he said after a pause. He described how the powerful Bass Strait swell came driving through the narrow Heads and wrapped around Point Nepean, executing a sudden right turn. One moment the swell looked as if it were passing you by, and the next moment the wave was coming right at you, hollow and fast. "To be honest, I don't think you could handle it."

What else could I have expected? The week before I had found the Torquay shore break on a bigish day a challenge. That morning when I was dumped by an unexpected wave and the broken water held me down for a fraction longer than usual, I began to panic. Scrambling for the surface, I gulped breathlessly through the foam before the wave was ready to let me go. I was only under the water a matter of seconds. Gally paddled swiftly over. You have to remember, he said, that you can hold your breath for at least a minute and that you'll never be held down for that long. The trick was not to fight the wave. By fighting it you only made things worse.

A small brown wave of coffee slopped over the side of my cup as I pushed it aside. "I don't mean now!" I said, mortified. "What about a year's time?"

He gave the slightest of shrugs. He didn't want to commit himself to something so unforeseeable. The whole idea must have struck him as a little mad. Here I was, a raw recruit fearful of three-foot waves at Torquay Point, and yet I was dreaming of surfing Corsair.

THE NEXT TWO MONTHS were almost unrelentingly grey and rainy, and everyone I knew seemed to have grown sad, as if the low, dark skies had become a state of mind. We all hunkered down, waiting for the miserable weather to pass. There were days, as I made my weekly expedition down the Geelong freeway, that I wondered if it were worth spending three hours driving – an hour and a half each way – for the uncertain pleasure of an hour in the water. (It was too cold to stay out any longer.) While I loved the sense of adventure that came with hitting the road and leaving the city behind, especially on a week day when everyone else was heading for work, my mood was always tempered by anxiety. What if the conditions were no good? Of course I had studied the weather map and the surf reports. But forecasts were not infallible and there was no substitute for being able to see the waves for yourself. Things could change unexpectedly. The wind might turn on shore or the swell might suddenly drop away. I would constantly check the windsocks and lines of bunting along the way, watching for signs of change. If I saw surfboards on cars heading back to the city, I fretted about why they were leaving the surf behind. There was also the guilt that came of leaving my 20-month-old son at childcare while I took off to the surf. If I had not been surfing, I would have been working and he would still be in creche, so what difference did it make? Now that I'd begun writing this book, the two activities had become inseparable. I was writing about surfing and surfing to write. But I could hardly expect anyone who saw me dropping my son at the creche with the surfboard strapped to the car roof to believe that I was 'going to work'.

Once I was in the water, these anxieties fell away. The rough and tumble of the ocean did its work. By the time it came to the drive back home, I was scoured clean like a shell, inside and out. I reeked of the sea. Crystals of salt clung to my eyebrows and my head was wonderfully empty of the fretful static that it had played host to on the way down. I had done what I needed to do. I had spent a long afternoon 'soaking up the outer world'. Now I could return to the city and for a while, I could be content.

*Fiona Capp is a writer and journalist. This is an extract from her forthcoming memoir on surfing called That Oceanic Feeling.*