

Leg leg yank suck arm arm zip. Takes forty seven seconds for me to get into my wetsuit and just over a minute to wax, lock, and paddle out to surf. Think about that the next time you're at the beach staring down heavy waves, thumbing your phone like a schoolgirl. Look I ain't Kelly Slater out there, but I'll tell you this: sitting and watching heavy swell only does two things for you: one, it racks up fear and doubt in your guts, and two, it lets *everyone know* you're racking up fear and doubt in your fucking guts.

Surf is all about routine. It's the rules that help you navigate the water, especially when the waves get hairy. And there are *a lot* of lessons to learn:

About tides, winds, coastlines. Sure, they matter, especially at my home break, Ocean Beach, San Francisco. Mess up here and you lose your board, your dignity, a shoulder, knee. Life.

About patience, persistence, respecting nature—yeah fine, I mean if you got the head to think about all that when you're paddling through fifty degree water, balls cinched up inside you like they've been shrink-wrapped at *Home Depot*.

But most of all, I'm talking ABOUT RULES. Shit you learn over time. Like:

(1) Waiting for waves, sit *in* the lineup and not outside it, and *not* in front of other guys. Nothing worse than a beginner on the water all smiley, blocking the view.

(2) *Do* bail on a wave when someone else already has it. But in the process, do NOT NOT F'ING NOT just high dive off your board. If you do, your board becomes a crackhead of angles looking for someone to hit. This scar on my cheek? Yeah.

(3) When someone else catches a decent ride, don't hoot, whistle, or flap your chops like a NASCAR fan hopped up on bologna sandwiches. I know it's easy to feel all giddy-up and shit on the water. But control your joy super-fan. Just zip your lips, and act like you've been there before.

Look. I'm not a toughie out on the water. I'm not. And I'm damn sure not surf-policing people who want to live out their hang-ten fantasy. But I'm also not one of those beach bum, nature boys who doesn't care about how things are done.

First I'm twenty seven with a job, not a punk-ass basement kook (the played-out term for idiots on the water). And I'm not some surf-hole from L.A. or San Diego or some other sun-peachy place. You tell those guys to ring me when they're ready to labor out into double overhead Ocean Beach surf. Where the wind stings like electricity, fog thicks like fiberglass, face feels like freezer burnt meat. Because at a break with all this shit going on, the routine is all you've got.

"Flinkets?" I say.

"No."

"Spoonsuckers?"

"What?"

"Chabbies."

Ito turns to me. He rests the wood panels we're carrying on his thigh. When he thinks, he blinks his eyes like plastic flapping off the back of a truck. He opens the door to my garage.

"Chabbies," he says, a grin between weeds on his chin and upper lip. "That ain't bad." Ito leads us into the garage, we set the wood down.

"Out the fucking way chabbies!" I flip off imaginary surfers dropping in on me.

"What's wrong with kooks again?" Ito asks.

"Shit's offensive, real close to gook. Besides, everybody calls everybody kook," I say.

Ito laughs a snort. Fuck if anyone calls us gook or kook on the water. Not like we're macho-muscles out there, but a couple of Asian dudes, surf-built, six o'clock shadows—people think we're island transplants and stay the hell away.

I stack the balsa panels on the floor. They're for the next board I'm building; thruster, 6' 8" tri-fin. It'll be the fifth I've made, and the first one I'm keeping for myself. I gave Ito the first board I built, a ratty fish. And he never stops telling me how shitty it is when he takes it out.

"Caps, scope out 702 Vicente yet?" Ito's not only my best friend (much as I have friends), he's the guy I get most of my wood-work jobs from. He renovates homes, brings me in for custom molds. It's surprisingly steady, if you can stomach the talk-radio from new homeowners. Mid-lifers squawking about their dream homes but not willing to paying full freight.

"Going this afternoon," I say.

"Be cool, right? Get the specs, listen to what she wants." Ito cocks his beer in his hand like he's going to punch me with it. "Fucking flinket," he says.

Fog spits at my truck along Great Highway, four miles of road that lines Ocean Beach.

Water was calmer in the morning when I was out. I like surfing early because there's less of things—less wind, less crowd, less hassle. (And some say less safety in numbers when a great white decides to rage on someone's ass. I mean. If you're afraid of that kind of thing.)

I head away from the beach, towards the midline of the city. If you ask (and people always fucking ask), I don't know why I surf. I mean it's not like I'm trying to pro it up out there. I once thought it was about being in nature, hanging with sea animals and shit, which is cool, but I'm not trying to be Doc Cousteau or anything. Sometimes, I think it's the attitude that I'm allowed

to have because people expect surfers to have attitude. Or maybe it's the idea of doing something around other people, but not necessarily *with* other people. Yeah. Maybe.

I pull to a whitening house stuck in scaffolding, paint flecking off of it like shaved ice. I head to the front stoop, knock the door frame.

There's no response.

I wait. Move to knock again when the door repels.

There's a woman posted there. Younger than I expected. Matted brown hair, t-shirt, jeans. Natural grin forming a 'v' on the bottom of her face.

"The wood guy? Cap?" she asks.

I nod. Put out a standard hand. She takes, shakes.

"Mia," she says.

She invites me in with a step back. For some reason I duck my head to get through the doorway even though it's more than high enough. She turns to me, brushes a lock of hair from her face. High drum of cheekbones, battery-coil hair. Her whole vibe a mix of sharp angles, pliant curves.

"Cap. It's pretty high on you. Ready to make magic up in here?" she asks.

I half-heart a grin, pull crumpled pages from my bag. Not that I write shit down, but I know people want to see that I put effort into it.

"Ito said it's going to be a small job," I say like I'm reading. "Columns, staircase. Kitchen, dining room crown." I give it a moment, lay it on heavy. Peer at her like I wear bifocals. "That everything?"

"Sounds right," she says. "Got any numbers I can see?" She offers a hand for the pages.

I accelerate a fold. Stash them in my bag. “All up here,” I say, tapping the side of my head.

“I design clothes,” she says. “Keep a lot there too,” she taps her head in the same spot.

I laugh, weak. We stand for a second. Two. Three. And I’m not a self-conscious kind of guy, but fuck, she breezes on me like weather. I tip weight left to right. Pick at a piece of cloth in my pocket. Finally, Mia hands me a key with a gold dollar-sign hooked to it. Like it was a spare to P Diddy’s mansion or something.

“Come and go as you please,” she says. “Finish on time, leave the key when you’re done. That’s all I ask.” She turns, walks into her place. I get that I’m supposed to follow.

Before you get any ideas. If you think I’m shitty towards women, I’m not. In fact I’m good with them. Just, maybe one. I mean, if you knew her, you would—well. Loretta. Fuck it. And you know what—who gives a damn about Lo?

And fuck city bus stops too. People could save themselves a lot of bullshit by not getting down with anyone they meet in a place that they go to all the time. But I wasn’t thinking about that when I was waiting for the 5 Fulton last year.

Ten in the morning, late to help Ito move furniture out of a place South of Market. Hungover, just off my couch, and stank of beer, body odor, and a stale mint I found in my pocket.

And there was Loretta. Staring at the digital display on the stop’s alcove: *5 Fulton, Arriving in: 7 minutes*. And though I was fine with pressing my ass to the plastic seats and removing conversation from the lineup, Loretta wasn’t. No. She just had to talk.

“Hey yo. How is this down to the minute, you think?”

See? She sparked on me, not the other way around.

“It’s an estimate. From their schedules,” I say, blunt as wood. Loretta lands in the seat next to me. Blonde hair, body soothed in a clean white button-down, khaki pants. Both of which fit her like control.

“Who’s they?” she asks.

“I didn’t say they.”

“You said *their* schedules, implying a they.”

Fuck if I was in a mood to bicker, relate. But this girl, she didn’t pick up on any of that. She just–fucking Lo.

“Well if I’m late to my interview, I’m writing *they* a very special note.” She sauces me with her eyes. “Where you headed?”

“Job.”

“You a hit man?”

I laugh without meaning to because how the hell are you going to take me hungover waiting for the 5 Fulton on Wednesday and connect it to killing someone. Loretta laughs too. The first time I hear it. Comes out in spills un-contained. But as a group, complete.

“Not a *job* job,” I say.

“What type of non-job job do you do?”

“Wood. Construction and...for homes mostly,” I say. Her eyes pull mine. “What are you interviewing for?”

“You were listening, good,” she says. “Public relations. Just an associate, but I need it.” She wobbles me with her smile. And I can’t reach out fast enough to grip the edge of the plastic seat, the bus stop, or anything else. “My name’s Loretta. Lo for short.”

(4) When you first start surfing, you'll think you have to paddle hard as fuck to catch rides. Every beginner works their arms off trying to paddle into waves. Funny shit is, until you're going after waves six foot or bigger, you aren't so much paddling to catch, as paddling to *match*. You watch the real surfers work; they don't do any of that shit. They know the pace from the size, and they just turn. Stroke, stroke. And they're in.

"Road trip. Try to sell my designs," Mia says.

"Okay."

"Here in the states, then—" she crosses her forearms like it's going to bring her more luck than crossing her fingers. "—maybe Europe."

"Okay," I say.

"That all okay with you?" She says it as a joke and I wish I had more to say about clothing design, road trips, Europe. I stay quiet. "At least, that's the plan," she says.

I've been full-time at Mia's house a few weeks now. She and I've gotten along better than most, even if she's around more too. She doesn't talk a lot, and when she does, it's at least different than the moneymaker-shit I'm used to hearing.

"I know I'm hovering too much," she says, using our water cooler to fill up her bottle.

"I'm just happy not to have to hear Ito blow wind all day," I run a hand sander down a column mold for her kitchen. Push out a breath, spray dust in the air.

"What do you do to your hands?" she asks.

"What?"

“Noticed Ito’s are kind of worn. Crusty.”

“They reflect his personality.”

“But yours. Like a baby’s ass or something.”

I laugh. Set down the sander. My hands *are* nice.

“Moisturizer, I assume,” Mia lets a grin seep through her water bottle. “*Vaseline? Jergen’s?*”

“Now you’re hovering too much,” I say.

Mia lets her smile linger as she walks out of the kitchen. I brush two more times down the mold, check for faults. She and I decided on a simple, stacked, two-tier deck for her molding. She didn’t go overboard with knobs and shit. Normally I can’t stand what people choose for their house, but Mia nailed hers pretty good.

“Hey.” Mia peers her head back in. She holds up a flyer. “Heard about Ito’s wife’s school auction this weekend. You going?”

“He’s always talking that shit up,” I say as I lay the mold into place. Truth, Ito makes me help with the class’s picture frames, so I go every year as payback. “Yeah probably,” I say.

“Benefits Buena Vista’s art program,” Mia says, reading. “Cash bar.” She pauses. I look up. “Do one with me?”

That stare. I go back to the mold. “We’ll see.”

Mia laughs once. Exits second.

“I’ll burn it all,” Mia says.

She handles pages of hand-drawn sketches to her renovated fireplace. In her hands I see corners of smudged jackets, dresses, fingerprint heads.

We're back at her house. After a few drinks, kid's art, auction, laughs, music. Mia showed up, got me a shot. *Take it off my bill*, she laughed with me and Ito. And in a twist when it was time to leave, she invited me back to her home. Said to stop at a bodega, pick up gin, ice, tonic, limes. Weird, especially when Ito saw us get into a car together. But not that weird, all in.

Leftover two-by-fours burn up the chimney in Mia's new living room. She thrusts the sketches in her hands into the fireplace. Steps back as they smoke to burnt potato chips.

"Could've been some good stuff," I say.

"I'd have known by now," Mia empties her drink. Leftover ingredients sit in a cooler in the corner. Ito hasn't moved her fridge in yet. She swings to me, two vodka drops down her center. "Haven't you ever wanted to get rid of something you know stunk?"

"Guess there's been some, I wish I could wipe out."

"You can bring it over," Mia walks in echo'd pools in her living room. "Purge your pungent projects proper," she uses the mass of p's to get back to me. "By the way, I head out in few weeks," she says. "Fashion trip to Europe."

"Nice. That's what you wanted right?"

"Two weeks, France, Germany." Mia lets out a tongue with her last word. "Ever been there?"

"You inviting me?" I ask.

"No," she says, flat. Smile.

"Couldn't go anyways," I say. "Finishing up work for some pushy-ass woman."

Mia tilts into me. And the way she arcs, I feel like I know what's next. The whole thing that she wants, standing here.

“Better be good,” she says. She leans. Fingers almost stabbing but instead gripping the sides of my waist. She kisses me. I take it.

When Lo and me first started hanging out, we did stuff I would’ve never done myself. Museums, wineries, shit like that. We spent days, nights together. Even slept in the same bed sometimes (no touching allowed). She talked about other guys like they were cards she shuffled as she got ready to play a game with me.

Lo liked to break me down. My likes and un-understanding of things. And she showed me all of her different sides. Her highs when she got promoted, her brother got engaged, she got a raise. Her living down to her name when she was disgusted at work, fights with her mom, rude cabs.

I was chill when it came to sex. Call me a relationship kook if you want—it’s not that I didn’t want to go there. I was just fine with letting it go on its own.

That’s how it went for a couple months. When for some reason on a plain Saturday. After we ordered pizza without meat (Loretta was trying vegetarian), we reduced a bottle of Sailor Jerry’s to empty glass. And she kissed me.

Now we’d kissed before. But on cheeks and not for anything.

But this one. Was bomb. Frantic.

And there was Lo on Cap. Standing in the kitchen. Lying on the couch. Pressing on the bed. Fuck. The smells were Lo, sounds were Lo. Heat was Lo. And the whole thing. Was like something you figure you want not just for days weeks months, but hours minutes seconds. *All* the fucking time. And then, you have it.

Afterwards. Me, dazed and spot-on. Lo talking in spouts, pulling on her jeans. Her skin,

motion and color. We got coffee. Sat in secrets.

From there, I thought things would be different. That *we* might be. And in some ways we were. There was more sex. Like a new surf spot, the first time hitting it's the hardest, but after you do, you're manned-up to go again and again. Like you own the shit.

But it wasn't different when Lo and I walked around. Watched a movie. Hit drinks at the bar. She was sometimes into me, sometimes not. Sometimes tease me, kiss me in public, sometimes look like she didn't give a damn more than the texts on her phone.

It was fine. I didn't see a need to mess with how far we'd come. I took what I got, because it was good and I didn't get upset.

And that's how we lived for a while. Loretta turning. Me following.

(5) Once you're out on the water, you might feel like you *got* to stay out. I get it—surfing takes time especially if you can't get waves because your arms suck, wave-hogging dudes are in effect, or you realize you have to take a crap *after* you've put on your wetsuit and paddled out (big fucking no-no). The lesson here is simple. If you find yourself having a suck-ass time, no matter the reason or how short it's been, back off. Head in, save your shoulders for another day. Remind yourself that waves don't stop. Especially at Ocean Beach, it's almost enough that you even made it out.

“Fucking ass Cap,” Ito dogs me the second I paddle into earshot.

I can see from his blinking, looking-around self that he's got ideas. I stop my paddle, sit up on my board, sling my head. Sea water jogs out my ears. Ocean Beach is calm, a summer swell lines in. Four foot at its best.

"You can't be kicking it with the homeowners," Ito says. He flings a mesh of seaweed at me.

"Mia's cool."

"I work for her, you work for me."

"Best reference you'll get," I slap two palms on water like cymbals. "Her house is done anyways. I'm pretty much—"

An unexpected wave boils in front of us. I cut conversation short (never rude if it's for a ride), and one motion spin and arc on my board. Two jabs at water. Left right. Wave gets fat underneath me. I push to a stand, feel a trampolining rebound. Drive down, up, around. Tear a hard cut into ocean. Almost lose footing in the curve. Lever up from my waist, knees tight. Down again, up again. Another rip.

I take a vertical line and speed up over the wave. I bail, lock to my board, fall back to water. Stroke to Ito, who's been watching from behind.

"I'm pretty much finished anyway," I say, rubbing hands together. "Mia and I left it all good." Ito doesn't speak, so I keep filling in. "I swear."

"Keep it tight," he says. And then, like a dare. "Don't go all Lo and shit."

Ito eyebrows at me. I pull in a breath. Fucking—get off it.

"Mia's out to Europe," I say, tasting salt water on my lips. "All be done before she's back." I take a handful of water, layer it over my head. Breathe in.

In front of us, another set rises like paint rollers. Ito leans back on his board, splashes down.

Crisp paddles, I hear him:

“Fucking spoonsucker,” he says.

Mia leaves, just like she said. And a week and a half later, I do exactly what I said. Finish the job. Leave her key on the counter.

Look, you might as well know. Things with Lo ended like shit.

Not that I intended them to. It was a happy hour night, downtown, drinks on food on drinks. We fumbled back to my place. Both of us knowing, expecting, our same scene.

But this time, some fucking reason, we’re in it, and—I don’t know.

She feels like gum on me. Her face, I don’t see a thing. Matte’d in dark, blanked by alcohol. Just a fucking mass stoking on me. Three, fifteen, thirty times. I actually feel myself count. More minutes, Lo pushing, clutching. Quickening, baring. And I feel a familiar lock over my legs. Her fingers pin. She burns. Tight, fast, un-obvious. I do too, like I don’t have a choice.

Lo sears in the after. I hear her toss words to air. Laugh into my chest. Quiet and slow, I hear her drop to sleep. Heated breaths hit my skin and blow up like ocean waves beating sand. And in that dark, I unbury myself. From underneath who Loretta is, who she isn’t.

“We got to...stop,” I say real small, like to myself. “This here—” My voice chips.

Lo doesn’t move but I can feel she’s awake. Her eyes blinking. Even drunk and dim.

“You can’t,” I say. “You fucking just.” My head drops. I don’t hear my next words, I only know that they surface out. “You use me.”

The air's glassy. Still.

Until Lo moves off my bed. She plants her feet on my floor. Collects her clothes, definitive and slow, like a drill for evacuation.

"If you want to do something else," Lo grounds into me. "We don't have to. I mean I don't—" she finishes with a shake of her head.

She keeps talking in full as she dresses. *This isn't anything—if I misled you—what difference does it make.* She slides her feet into her shoes, ticks her head. Picks up her bag, just before midnight. She checks her watch.

"Hey yo. If you're just going to bitch about it," she says.

She opens my door. Shuts it calm.

6) Big current at Ocean Beach isn't to be messed with. One second you'll be out, surrounded by other surfers, the next, you'll be paddling like steamboat-willie to try to get back to shore. Fuck, the picture gets bleak real fast: the ocean darkens, your arms jelly, head tweaks. Because the water *can* kill. Fuck, it does—every year some unaware surfer gets swept away, lost. In these moments, you only got one shot. Don't fight—paddle against current and *you will lose*. Instead, keep your head quiet. Try to make the ocean believe you're not worth taking (trust, makes a difference). Then—pick a soft angle. Cut *across* the current. Paddle easy like taking an off-ramp in traffic. Don't get jumpy. Don't stop. And while it'll be hell on your arms—you'll make it out.

"Medium mocha no whip, ee-TOE!"

Ito accepts his coffee amongst the pods lined up at *Philz*. He takes it into afternoon street.

“Sylvie know you spend four dollars on that shit?” I ask, gesturing to Ito’s coffee cup.

“She turned me onto it,” Ito says as he stops to take a sip.

“And you think I waste. What’s the difference between that and *McDonald’s*?”

“What’s the difference between you and the wood department at *Lowe’s*?”

“My shit’s original. Not the same as coffee.”

“The fuck it isn’t,” he says, grinning.

“The fuck you keep hiring me then? You must be—”

“Hey yo.”

Those two words trip me. I turn. I see Loretta in line with another woman. Both of them covered by summer dresses even though it’s fall.

Before I can say a thing, Lo steps to me. Lifts her eyes and gives me a hug without asking.

Without hesitating.

“Cap, damn, how long’s it been?” she says.

My head tears into parts of what to fucking do, fucking say. But I got nothing, except:

“Lo.”

“Dude you look great. How’s the wood business? And the surfboard thing?” Loretta snaps her fingers. Ends it with a point at my chest.

“Both, good.”

“So funny I ran into you,” she puts a palm against my mid-section like we’re old friends.

“Was thinking to give you a text. I mean. I feel like we should talk. You know?”

“More than we did?”

“We were so *close*. Like.” She turns away then back. “Wouldn’t it be good to catch up.”

“Yeah.”

“Usual loquacious Cap,” she says, like I should know what the fuck that word means. I casual out the side of my mouth like I do.

“I’ll give you a text,” Lo volunteers, takes a step back in line. “You’ll be breathless with anticipation, I’m sure.” She presses my palm between her finger and thumb, a button for activation. “Or. I still live where I live,” she says. Like it’s only me and her on this fucking street.

I keep still. Want to flip her off. Give some shitty peace sign, stomp off stage. But I only put up a weak hand. Turn. Head off.

I cross the street. Don’t look around. Don’t look at Ito. Just pace to his truck. I know he’s behind me because I smell his rip-off coffee, hear his judging-ass steps. Doors unlock. I pop the handle, place myself as passenger. Feel Ito pile in. He jerks his cupholder with his coffee, all loud and shit.

“What a d-hole,” he says. His forearm raises to the steering wheel. Ito’s not a big dude, but right now he fills his side of the car. Forces me to look at him.

“That wasn’t anything,” I say.

Ito eyes my words like he’s going to paddle into them. “You going to start this Loretta shit again?”

“What the fuck you care, DAD?”

“I ain’t hearing no more crap about fucking Lo.” He bites his words so tight I think his coffee’s going to spill.

“It wasn’t like—”

He nails a fist against his door. I quiet. “Yeah, it was.”

“Why’s it matter to you what I—”

Ito hits me. Hard. I feel an instant swell in my shoulder. He looks at me like we’re fighting for air in his truck. Like he’s ready to throw. And I want to hit back. I want to.

I see him slow. Take a breath. Ease back down to normal Ito size. He takes another breath.

“Fucking chabby,” he says. His eyes dart to the dash. He pauses.

“Suck shit.”

I yank the handle of the truck. Get out.

“Chabbies is my fucking word,” I say.

I slam his shitty truck. Don’t look up or back as I head off. Don’t give three nuts as I hear his truck engine start and rattle off. You know what? Fuck Ito. Fuck him. I trail to the nearest bus stop, small crowd of people waiting. I stand in place. Check the time on the digital display. Before I forget not to.

Coddamn Lo.

New board’s done. Took a minute for me to sand the glass right, but shit looks good. I pack it into the back of my truck, head out for Sunday dawn patrol. Pretty sure Ito’s going to miss it. Haven’t talked to him in a couple weeks. Not on purpose, but calling or texting just felt tired. And he didn’t text me. And we didn’t run into each other. Whatever. He sucks.

(I didn’t hear from Loretta either.)

I start up my truck, pull off my block. Roll through two intersections and make a left on Great Highway. Nice thing about this drive, the lights are timed so you can keep an even pace of thirty and never have to hit your brakes, long as some knucklehead isn’t riding up your ass. I

drive until I hit Noriega, then ease my foot off the gas.

Pull to the side to check the surf.

I walk dusted asphalt to chilled sand. Scope the ocean. It's empty, but still loud. Waves sound up and down the beach like people yelling then whispering at random times. The overcast sky makes everything look like it's drawn in pencil. All the parts of the beach—birds icing a foot off waves, ocean debris sitting like old pieces of porcelain—come out varying grays. And anything that could be blue or green, is a shade of black.

I kick at the sand. Pick in the wind. Watch surf rise and fall. On routine.

At a door I know, I knock two times. Seconds push past me.

I scuff my feet, clip at the door's frame. I think about knocking again when I hear steps trail inside. There's a sleepy click. The door opens. And a word swells thick around me. Like water.

“Cap,” she says.