

## Very Alive

The surf was big that night. The moon, a mere sliver, hung halfway over the Pacific Ocean. The scarcity of light made it hard for Gerry to tell *how* big the surf was. The forecast said eight foot waves tomorrow—twelve foot faces or so. The crash as the waves galloped to shore wasn't thunderous, but a solid roar.

Gerry had his board with him. He would have probably been better off without it. The board was kind of a lifeline. A successful suicide should never involve a lifeline, but surfing was the only time Gerry felt free. He was gonna die free. Gerry sucked in a deep breath of the ocean air, closed his eyes and exhaled. He sprinted into the ocean and leapt over the white water, diving onto his board. *I paddle out here to escape this world every chance I get*, he thought and dived his board under the three feet of white water rushing at him. Mother Ocean felt powerful. The cold water took his breath—January, no wetsuit. He emerged from the icy, roaring froth and sucked in another breath of cool ocean air. He looked back at the shore behind him. *This is my final escape from your torture.*

Gerry's body warmed to the cold water from the effort it took to paddle through the waves. He was crying. The ocean surged against him. Violent foam turning like a Pacific Ocean sized washing machine. He thought about letting go of his board every time a wave struck him. *Go limp. Become one with the violent, turning foam. Breathe it in.*

He kept paddling. *That's how I'll do it though.* He was past the break. In the lineup as the surfers call it. Except there was no lineup. Just Gerry. Alone in a black, starless night with a steady traffic of saltwater freight trains crashing into California.

"I'll drop in on one of these mountains of ocean and become one with you. Become one with Mother..." He was going to say Mother Ocean, but stopped. It was the word that stopped him.

Mother. He hunched over and started sobbing. Buried his face in his hands. Taking deep breaths in between, he wailed into the night. Offered his own river of saltwater.

The swell caused him to rise and fall. His eyes gushed and his body heaved until he felt empty. Gerry raised his head to see the shadow of another wave coming at him. He turned and paddled. He felt the wave's energy behind him. He paddled harder. With the wave on him, lifting, lifting, he paddled as fast as he could. He got it—or it got him. The wave crested and launched Gerry down its face. He stood. Legs squatted, tense and flexing. He couldn't see anything in the night. He adjusted his feet to keep balance. Saltwater stung at his eyes. It felt like he was nearing the bottom. It felt like he was going 100 mph.

He leaned forward and shot up the face of the wave. At the top, he leaned back and flew down the wave again—an easy fifteen foot plus drop. The biggest wave he had ever encountered. The wave opened its mouth wide, the great yawn of a waking giant. Gerry lowered his head and leaned forward, pushing his board to maximum speed. The water giant's mouth closed around him. He and the biggest wave of his life were one. At 100 mph they were one. Gerry has been barreled before, but always in the sun. In the dark, he was like a train blasting through a tunnel—if this tunnel had an end Gerry couldn't see it. The tunnel collapsed. Gerry was engulfed and then spat. The sound of the wave was explosive. The feel of it was also explosive. Gerry a slug blasted from the barrel of a gun, launched into the night.

The night was still. His heart raced. He started laughing with hysteria. The roar of the next crashing behemoth drowned his laughter. Gerry floated on his back and continued to laugh. The white water engulfed him. Round and round Gerry went. He was in the washing machine. He let his body go limp. His lungs started to tire. He thought about taking a deep underwater breath.

*This is what you're here for.*

He hit the bottom of the ocean floor. Violently he rolled and then it was gone. He was again between the ocean's floor and its surface, turning about. He felt his arm break the surface of the water. He kicked his legs so that his head emerged.

He was being pulled toward the shore leg first. Dragged by the leash. Gerry grabbed his leash to yank his board back to him. He climbed on and paddled back into the ocean. "I'll just do it again," he said. Couldn't catch too many monsters like that in the pitch dark and survive. Shivering, he called to the ocean. "Here I am Big Blue. Take me. I'm yours."

Gerry dropped into another giant wave, this one bigger than the first. He survived the new ride of his life. Again and again he survived the new ride of his life. Surfing like...well, like he was on a suicide mission. He was alive. Very alive.

Being tossed about in the white water, Gerry thought maybe he should wait this storm out—El Niño they were calling it. Maybe see what it was like in daylight, live one more day of phenomenal surf. He reached to his ankle, grabbed his leash and yanked his board to him. Spent and shivering, he paddled to shore.

After Gerry got out of the water, he went to his apartment, a one bedroom two blocks from the beach. He drank the half bottle of whiskey on the counter. While Gerry lay comatose, El Niño stirred. He didn't know at the time that El Niño was a repeating occurrence in the Pacific Ocean. It had to do with the water becoming warmer and sea levels rising. Gerry thought it was the name of a storm. They had to come up with a name that started with E and chose El Niño. He didn't know about weather conditions and low pressure and high pressure, barometer, none of that. He only knew huge surf was predicted.

He woke up, slightly hungover and extremely depressed. Was every morning going to be like this? First thought, his dead mom, and because Gerry was a visual kind of guy this waking thought was accompanied by her face. Thinking of his mom's dying face, Gerry glanced over at the nearly empty bottle of J.D. He swallowed the last of it, laid down and looked at his board. He closed his eyes and rubbed his face, trying to rub his mom's image out of his brain. A long exhale, then Gerry hopped out of bed, grabbed his board and headed out to face the 1997 El Niño. The one that brought 1.1 billion dollars in damages to California.

He saw a guy he knew standing at the railing looking at the surf. Gerry tried to stay unnoticed. Sid turned around. Most of his skin was inked and he wore a big shit-eating grin, ear to ear. He stared at Gerry. Gerry looked at the ground. Finally he looked at Sid. "Sid, what's up?"

"Gerry! El Niño's up! Fucking El Niño is fucking mackin."

Gerry looked over the railing and blinked. Fucking mackin seemed an accurate description.

"Anyone out?"

"Two dudes, not sure who they are. Anyway, they made it to the outside, but I don't think they'll get anything. They're down there." He pointed southwest out to the ocean. "See? It's closing out there... I caught one up by Jack in the Box this morning. Biggest wave of my life." After Sid told of his morning session in elaborate detail, he said, "Wanna go down to the Wedge? Heard it's fuckin' insane."

"I bet," said Gerry.

The Wedge was a famous wave south of them, in Newport. It was in the movie *Endless Summer*. The rock jetty on the west side of the Newport Harbor entrance caused two waves to meet and form a "Wedge" that produced one of California's most dangerous shore breaks.

Gerry looked at the surf. It was mackin, but he'd have to work at killing himself here, suck in water on purpose. The Wedge, however, was probably a thirty foot shore break. El Niño, Gerry assumed, was

going to kill someone there anyway, but there would be tons of rescuers, lifeguards, maybe even coast guard.

Sid was looking at the zoning out Gerry, staring blankly at the ocean. "Come on, dude, we can take my truck. I got a joint in the glove box."

"Cool," said Gerry. He put his board in the rusted bed of Sid's little truck, hopped in the passenger seat and opened the glove box.

The joint they shared on the way to Newport did nothing to keep Gerry from thinking of his dead mom. By the time they got there, Gerry was feeling claustrophobic in Sid's little, noisy rust bucket.

"Park here," said Gerry.

"Dude, we're five blocks away."

"Everyone that's not at work is out here," Gerry said. He turned his neck to look up out of the windshield at two helicopters. "Take the spot or drop me off. I don't want to spend all morning looking for parking."

Sid took the spot. Gerry grabbed his wetsuit, got out on the sidewalk, wrapped a towel around himself and dropped his trunks.

"You going in?" Sid asked.

Gerry shoved his foot into the wetsuit. "Yup."

Sid looked in the bed of his truck. "You bring a sponge?"

"I don't body board."

You gonna body surf? You can't surf it."

"Only one way to find out." Gerry looked at the partial twelve pack of beer behind the seat. "You mind if I snag one of those?"

"Na. They're warm."

“Thanks.” Gerry grabbed a beer, shut the doors, twisted off the top, took a big swig grabbed his board and started walking to the coast. After two more slugs of beer, the bottle was empty. Gerry dropped it and glass shattered on the sidewalk. He started to run. Sid jogged after him.

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Two girls in bikinis—Sarah and Angie—were just getting to the sand when Gerry ran by with his board.

“People are surfing this?” asked Sarah.

“Not many, but I heard Kelly Slater was going to be here with a couple other pros. They supposedly drove up from San Diego last night,” said Angie.

“Who’s that dude?” asked Sarah.

“He looks familiar, huh? I think he’s from Huntington.”

“Hey, Angie,” said Sid, jogging up.

“Oh, hey, Sid, what’s up?”

“Not much. Just came to check it out. Look at all the TV cameras and helicopters.”

“I know. It’s fucking crazy, huh?” said Angie. “Do you know Sarah?”

Sid said, “I think so,” at the same time that Sarah said, “no.” They laughed awkwardly and shook hands.

“Did you come here with anyone?” asked Angie.

“Yeah, I brought Gerry.” Sid pointed at Gerry, who stood at the water’s edge.

“Gerry, I remember him. I didn’t think he was a pro surfer or anything,” said Angie.

“He’s not. I thought we were just coming to watch, but Gerry suited up as soon as we got here and took off. I think he’s lost it or is still drunk from last night or something. I’m gonna go try to talk some sense into him.”

Just then Gerry ran into the Pacific, hopped on his board and started paddling.

“Or not,” said Sid. “Maybe he just really wants to be on the news. He’s an okay surfer, but this is way over his head. Let’s go over by the jetty and watch.”

They went to the jetty and sat down.

“That’s Kelly Slater right there.” Sid pointed out Slater as a huge wave exploded on the shore.

“Told you he’d be here,” Angie told Sarah.

“It looks like he’s gonna try to take that wave,” Sarah said and started chewing on her nails.

Kelly Slater caught a wave, headed about a quarter of the way down the face of it and bailed out the back. The crowd ohhed and awed.

“Holy shit, Gerry’s paddling for that bomber,” Sid said.

They all stood up. Sarah continued to chew her nails, Angie held her breath, and Sid moved his body and bent his knees, like when you try to hit a brake pedal from the passenger’s seat.

Gerry screamed down the face of the wave, made a bottom turn, then another turn across the face of the wave before kicking out safely at the shoulder of the wave.

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He paddle back out. Kelly Slater was looking at him. “Good shit,” said Slater.

“You taking this?” Gerry nodded at another monster wave rushing to the coast.

“It’s all you, Big Dog,” said the pro.

Gerry turned his board to face shore, paddled three paddles and got the wave. He headed straight down the face. He imagined himself careening face first into the bottom of the ocean. The wave jacked up and casted a shadow over Gerry. The entire beach seemed to be shadowed by the roaring mountain of water. As the wave crested, Gerry sunk the rail of his board and turned into the wave. The wave spat its white water. It hit Gerry and almost knocked him off the board. He stayed on and flew across the face of the wave, then over the crest.

Gerry paddled back out and did it again and then again. "You got this place wired," said Kelly Slater. "Is this the best day of your life or what?"

"Yeah," said Gerry. "And one of the worst."

He paddled into another wave. It looked like he wasn't killing himself at the Wedge today. Instead he put together a nice series of turns. He had the place wired.

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"I thought you said he wasn't that good," said Angie to Sid over the cheers of the crowd.

"He's crazy," said Sarah.

"Crazy fucking hot," said Angie. Gerry got out of the water and Angie said, "Let's go welcome him back to shore." She ran up to Gerry. "That was insane. I can't believe you were charging that."

"Yeah," he glanced over Angie's shoulder at Sarah. Her green eyes stared right at him.

His face looked blank. His eyes distant, but behind, way back...something, some emotion wanted to show. A hidden smile, Sarah thought...or something. She didn't know what it was. What was behind that intense face that looked at her? Through her. She didn't know, but she wanted to. She didn't want to stop looking, but it was getting to be awkward, this long stare. She crossed her arms over her chest and looked at the sand. She looked up again—because she had to. He had turned to look back at the waves.

"I got to know those eyes. I'm meant to know her," Gerry whispered to himself. "That girl—that angel—behind me. I think I'm supposed to stay here. Supposed to live."

Gerry turned around. He looked at Sarah, her soft face, soft hair gently blowing, and those eyes, emerald green eyes of an angel. Gerry smiled. He felt alive. Very alive.