

Ocean Surf

by Rome Reginelli

I met Christina on the beach.

She was with some other boys, playing in the surf, throwing themselves into the miniature surface waves as they crashed. My brother Tony and I joined them. To be fair, I was following his initiative. I'd probably have just been content to stay where I was, digging my hole in the sand, the coarse grains forcing their way under my fingernails as I strove to reach water. Even as a kid, deep down, I must have understood this act as an eternal struggle, a fight for life against distance and erosion. My brother bypassed the effort and threw himself into the water; but, as he was the elder, I followed suit. I guess, in a way, I owe it to him that I met her in the first place.

She was beautiful even then, a gorgeous little fourth grader with a smile that melted adults' hearts and that radiant, untouched quality that only children can have. Her golden brown hair glittered in the afternoon sunlight. I don't think I noticed it, at least consciously, at the time. Ten-year-old me was more excited by the fascination we shared in everything around us, from tiny, sun-bleached fragments of sand dollars to the way the ocean spray felt on our faces. By coincidence, we went to the same elementary school. I guess it wasn't a *big* coincidence: there are only so many places to go to school in Santa Cruz, and you can only go to the beach so many times before you run into the other locals. In any case, we became fast friends, Christina and I, and some of the other boys who were playing in the waves. We would spend our lunch periods together, accidentally hitting each other in the face with well-worn school property tetherballs, or collecting pine needles and making forts from them. With a steady group

of friends and a freedom from the constraints of challenging schoolwork, it remains one of the happiest times in my memory.

All things come to an end, and this one happened to meet its end at the start of middle school, when my family moved over the hill to Los Gatos, because my dad was sick of commuting over the hill to the store. Later on, after I learned how to drive, I realized just how stressful the commute was, over winding, no-shoulder Highway 17, but as a kid, I couldn't understand. I liked the forest scenery on the way over and I was never the type to get carsick, so I patiently waited out the forty-five minute trip. Once we settled on the other side, I was crushed that I couldn't go to the beach as often; now I had to convince my parents to drive me, and that meant no conflicts with Tony's soccer games or school dances. We still went to the Boardwalk a few times each summer, where I diligently rode the Giant Dipper and the Log Ride each time, but that was it. I lost touch with Christina and my other elementary school friends.

Our second meeting was much later, by coincidence. I was back in Santa Cruz, then; I didn't know what I was doing with my life. Of course, I never did, but this was an exceptionally bad moment. I had dropped out of college. Academia was not for me. I couldn't stand the way everyone spent all their time speaking nonsense to each other and pretending they were smart enough to understand. I needed something relevant to the real world.

I became a surf instructor.

It wasn't that big of a step. I learned to surf in high school, becoming an expert during my short stint at the University of California, San Diego. When I finally gave up and returned to Santa Cruz, the job practically fell into my lap. It seemed as good a choice as any, given the situation. I

mean, I was working a part-time at Pizza My Heart over in Capitola, and staying with some friends from high school, but I could still use a little spending money, and why not do what I liked? My friend at the surf shop hooked me up.

So it happened that I was out at the Hook with a couple of kids from the suburbs, sending them on their first waves. They had been patient, staring into the horizon hopefully awaiting the swells that would lift them towards the narrow beach, watching the rising through the kelp beds, getting on the board ready to paddle just as I had shown them, feeling the backwards pull of the swell and the disappointment as it fizzled out. "Don't worry," I told the curly-haired older brother. "They come in sets. You'll wait, and wait, and then there'll be so many you can't miss 'em."

Eventually the set came, and their chance arrived. The brother went for the first one. Paddling quickly, he started to match pace with the little three-foot wave, his blue foam longboard rising up with the swell. The wave caught him, breaking slowly on one side: a perfect beginner's ride. "Remember, front knee first, then stand!" I called out as the wave carried him toward shore. I saw him bring his knee up, board wobbling side to side, before he lost his balance and tipped into the water - not a real wipeout, thank goodness. He was still a kid, no older than fourteen - plenty of time to get good. I looked over my shoulder to check on his sister, a spunky little one who had probably accompanied her brother just to prove she could keep up with him. It was none too soon - her wave was coming up, too. "Straighten out!" I advised, "Don't let the wave turn you sideways!" but with the time it took her to turn the board, I saw she wouldn't have the momentum to catch the wave. I gave the back of her board a push as the wave lifted me up. It crashed in front of me and I lost sight

of her momentarily before a familiar little blond head popped up – she was standing, riding the foam! The little tyke had bested her brother, even if – yep, there she went, ker-splooosh into the water – she had only maintained balance for an instant, and had taken a push to get there.

I looked behind me and ducked under a wave so that I could catch the next one in. I'd give them an example of how it was done and then help them past the break for a second try. My wave was small, barely two feet, but that was fine. Part of why the Hook is a perfect beginners' surf beach is the size of the waves. They come in over a long, shallow stretch of sea-anemone-covered rock, so it's easy to stand up even fifty feet from shore. Not that there's much of a beach – just a few feet of moist sand before the ocean cliffs. That's why I was especially surprised to see her.

I stood up on my board, casually surveying the sea of black wetsuits in front of me, not doing anything fancier than avoiding the people coming my way. It was pretty crowded, of course, since it was Labor Day, and lots of people had taken advantage of the holiday to catch a break, and hopefully a wave or two in the process. Idly, I glanced up at the beach.

That's when it hit me. I squinted, instantly placing that face despite the years added to it, and almost as instantly rejecting the possibility. She was climbing hesitantly over the wet rocks, carrying a pristine straw-woven bag and wearing a white summer dress with soft daffodil print that seemed to move as if the daffodils themselves, not the dress, were swaying in the ocean breeze. She looked seaside again, shading her eyes as if scanning the waves for someone. The unmistakable beauty she possessed struck me like never before; then the water struck me, as I bailed my ride. I had forgotten I was surfing.

“Man, you fell down, too!” announced the brother

when I caught up to him.

“Of course. Even experts wipe out sometimes. The difference is, they go back out and try again, and *then* they get their awesome ride. So, wanna give it a second shot?”

The kid affirmed enthusiastically.

“And this time, don’t stall so much between getting on your knees and making it all the way up. Otherwise, your sister’ll beat you again.”

She stuck her tongue out at him.

o o o

When the lesson was over, I left them with the boards. “You have the rentals all day, so just bring them and the suits back before shop closes at 6, okay? Your parents are going to keep an eye on you from now, right?” The two kids assured me all was right, so I proceeded to catch the next wave all the way in, practically scraping my board on the sand at the end. I was lucky – she hadn’t left yet. She was just perched on a rock, hands resting on one knee like a magazine photograph. Suddenly I had no idea how to approach her.

I got lucky. She saw me getting off the board, and our eyes met. I saw in almost comical relief the way her mouth suddenly opened, a dumbstruck look taking over her face. She recognized me.

“Julian?” she asked.

With an awestruck grin, “Hi, Christina,” was all I could muster.

What followed was much more friendly and far less awkward than I could ever have hoped. Our old friendship reawakened like a dried up stream bed, a conversation springing up against all odds, rediscovering the channels it had long forgotten, washing away the silt of years.

Everything that had been between us, as childhood friends, was still there. She was in college now, University of California, Santa Cruz, studying marine biology. On break for now, living in an apartment near campus because she couldn't deal with her dad any more. Her mom had died of cancer and he'd never been the same since. I expressed my condolences, such a worthlessly obvious gesture, and yet it seemed to reach her nonetheless. She asked about me; I couldn't think of much to say. I let her commiserate with my leaving college, though I wasn't sad about it; she was impressed with my being a surf instructor. Quickly we progressed to a less predetermined conversation. Both of us still loved beaches; apparently she had considered going to college other places, but couldn't bear to pick any place more than a few minutes from the beach, just as I had. She, however, had a better idea of what she wanted to do in life. With that goal in sight, she was able to bypass any obstacles college threw in her way. I expressed my respect as envy.

"It's not much, really," she insisted. "It's not like I have a guaranteed high-paying career ahead of me. I'm not a pre-med or an engineer."

True enough. But when had I ever valued getting rich? I guess, as a kid, I had wanted to be affluent from time to time, but those sorts of aspirations died down after high school. Faced with the ever-increasing challenges of college courses, I had decided I would rather live an average life, with average effort, than go out on the chance of being rich and famous and miserable. I think I would have higher standards if I were rich, and my ego isn't big enough to handle being famous. I couldn't even handle the egos of my professors and the other students.

"Oh, here comes Colton!" she said suddenly, looking past me to where a particularly crafted surfer was making

his way ashore, the light waves washing around his ankles like some cologne ad.

Let me say something first: I am a surfer, and a pretty good one, for an amateur, so I'm no pale twig. But this guy was on another level entirely. His abs were rippling muscle, his hair a precisely tousled golden mane. Sea-salt-polished dog tags hung on a chest that looked like it got more wax than his surfboard. God knows how he was putting up with the ice-cold northern California Pacific water, but he made it look positively balmy. I began to think he would pick Christina up right there and start posing his plastic smile for the cameras.

Christna began, "Colton, this is my friend Julian from elem-"

- but he cut her off. "Quick, Chrissie, what time is it?"

She reached into her bag and grabbed her phone. "2:50," she judged from the screen.

"Damn! I knew I shouldn't have waited for that last wave. We've gotta go," he announced, starting toward the stairs to the street and gesturing for her to follow. Helpless, she followed her Calvin Klein angel away, waving an awkward goodbye.

Well, crap. I should have known. Someone as mind-numbingly gorgeous and impossibly nice as Christina would have an equally gorgeous boyfriend, kind of a jerk of one at that. Finding myself far more depressed than I had any right to be, I lugged my board up to the surf shop.

o o o

I practically kicked the door to our place open. "Whoa, easy, boy," called Stan from the next room.

"Sorry," I mumbled as I walked past the computer

where he was World-of-Warcraft-ing.

“So check this out, Jule – this idiot I was PvPing with tried to run away after I cast a life drain on him. But life drain’s a dot spell. *You can’t run from dots, man!*”

At this point he was talking to the computer, not to me, so I didn’t dignify his comments with a response. Instead, I headed straight for the shower.

I peeled my wetsuit and hung it on the door next to Stan’s and Euchre’s. Grains of sand tinkled onto the linoleum floor, joining the indoor beach slowly accumulating in our bachelor’s pad of a house.

I tried to wash all the beach away from me, but the salt residue seemed to cling with a conscious power. Finally, having gotten all I could off, I gave up.

“Thought you’d died in there,” commented Stan when I got out. “Something up?”

“Not really,” I said, not ready to explain.

“Just one of those days? Okay. Oh, this is not cool.”

“What?” He’d suddenly changed tone.

“Cat druid stole my kill.”

Oh. He was talking about the game again. I rolled my eyes and left to catch a nap before work.

o o o

Work was packed. Everybody goes to Capitola on Labor Day. They have a band and the beach gets so full of chairs and blankets that you can’t even see the sand. The line for Pizza My Heart stretches halfway down the block. It’s insane.

By that logic it doesn’t seem inconceivable that Christina and Colton would happen upon me during my lunch break. I was sitting on the short wall between the sidewalk and the beach, a slice of pizza in hand (I was not

yet tired of my work's free food) listening to the blues band wail and watching the waves crash. The two of them were weaving their way through the maze of blankets when she looked over and waved to me. I was too grumpy to wave back. I didn't want any more awkward encounters with Colton. I mean, I guess it was kind of petty since we were old friends and I shouldn't have felt entitled to more, but she had given the feeling that there was more at stake. To maintain a semblance of politeness, I pretended I hadn't seen them. Besides, I would be needed back at work. I could get some nice overtime by cutting my break short, and my boss would be happy. I polished off the slice, forcing myself not to look back at Christina again.

o o o

When I woke the next morning, trudging out of bed and pouring a bowl of cereal, Stan was already up, surfing internet. I didn't bother a greeting as I sat down at the table and stared through the window at the morning cloud cover. It would burn off by noon. If only the haze in my mind would go away so easily.

"Dude, what's the deal? You're spaced out again," was Stan's morning greeting.

"Ever have your hopes raised up just a little so they can be smashed moments later?"

"Yeah, happens every time a wave fizzles out." He paused for a moment, considering. "But you're talking about girls, aren't you?"

"Yeah, you got me. Ran into the cutest girl I ever met and she was really friendly until her hunk of a boyfriend showed up and dragged her off. I knew her a long time ago."

"You gotta watch out of the hot ones. Either they're

sleeping around or they've got a jerk of a boyfriend. Maybe both. Is that really it, though?"

"I guess."

"Well, all we gotta do is wait for it to wear off. No status effect lasts forever."

"What?"

"Life's a game. I'm sure the experience will help you level up."

I always thought Stan took that saying a little too literally.

"In any case," he continued, "a little mindless grinding wouldn't be a bad thing right about now. Wanna hit the beach? I'll see if I can get Euchre up. He was pretty smashed when he came home last night."

o o o

The beach was not nearly as crowded as it'd been the day before. Labor Day's magic had run out at the stroke of midnight, and all the suburban sport utility vehicles had turned back into pumpkins. All that remained was broken glass – Dos Equis, Heineken, Sierra Nevada. It'd been a real ball. The ocean was as clean and cold as ever. I had no students, so the three of us were just going to catch a few waves. Time heals all wounds, I hear, but you need something to do in the meantime. Surfing is how I cope. It has its exciting moments, but there's also the part where you're sitting out there in the midst of the water, away from any sounds but the gulls squawking and the waves roaring. The ocean swells rake the rains of sand back and forth; the leaves on the cliffs rustle in the breeze. A pelican swoops slowly, dives into the water. Sometimes, you'll even be greeted by a sea otter who's taking his

afternoon nap in the beds of kelp. I can wait and wait for the waves and think about nothing at all.

Nature isn't all calm and peace, though. Sometimes it decides to smack you upside the head. It's no wonder to me the ancient Greeks saw the ocean entity as a thinking entity and made offerings for safe passage. If only I had been so wise. I'd been riding all over it all day, tearing up the waves, and nary an offering had been made. Neptune must have decided to get even with me. I hadn't spent enough quarters in his arcade down the block. Out of nowhere, a huge wave came up from behind and tackled me.

It wasn't the nice kind of wipeout. My head shot forward, my mouth and nose unprepared for the torrent of brine that would be forced through them. My foot wasn't ready to be yanked up, either, tugged by my board leash through a circling wash of seaweed. I was under, over, under again, and finally I reclaimed my place on the surface, behind the brunt of the wave, coughing and sputtering. I grabbed my board so that the next wave wouldn't smash it over my head. I stood up, the water not actually that deep at this point anyway, and decided that this would be a good opportunity to take a break. Stan, hopping off the wave in front of me, said he'd tried to warn me but I didn't hear him. When I started toward shore, neither him nor Euchre tried to go after me. They saw that I needed time to sulk, and left it at that. I crawled onto the beach like a chastised puppy, to sit and think.

I take pleasure in routine, and I take pleasure in variety. I don't know how it works, but it does. I live my life on the cusp of nothingness; there is no such thing as planning ahead. There is only sitting out there, clutching my board while the kelp tangling around my feet, wondering: Do I take this wave? Or wait for the next one?

Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. There's no predicting it. I think if God had wanted me to plan ahead he'd have given me a better decision-making ability. Some people weigh the pros and cons in advance and then carefully pick a choice to maximize the outcome. For me, the cost of making the decision ahead of time outweighs the benefits of planning ahead. I think this knowledge alone is utterly profound. You probably think it's dumb.

But even if it is dumb, things work their way out somehow. Even that day, when I came slogging to shore after the wipeout. I had no idea where I was going. I didn't even see her as I walked practically into Christina's arms, and I didn't believe her when she called my name. Yet there she stood, radiant face focused on no one else. "Christa?" I asked, warily. "Is Colton here again or something?"

"Colton? No, I came by myself today."

"Do you surf?" I asked, looking around. There wasn't even room for a beach chair between the tide and the rocks. But neither was she carrying a board. But I couldn't pretend not to see her this time.

She was being awkwardly polite. "No, I've only ever been boogieboarding. But I love to watch. Colton says these waves are boring compared to Hawaii, where he's from, but I still think there's something magical about the way people ride them in. You caught some excellent rides today."

I managed a shy, "Thanks," and left it at that for a moment. I stared into her face, still captivated by that beauty no matter how many times I tried to tell myself she could never be mine. She stared back, intensely, green eyes and pursed lips pausing as if she was working up the effort to say something. After a couple seconds, I couldn't take it any more. I had to ask. "Christina... why are you here?"

She nearly broke out in tears. "Julian... I missed you. I

want to be friends again. I know Colton was rude to you and, dammit, I know he's going to be even more rude to you, but you and I go back so far, he doesn't have any right to interfere, even if he is my boyfriend. He'll just have to keep his stupid jealousy under control."

I didn't know how to respond. I'm not built to make snap decisions about what kind of cheese I want on my sandwich, let alone the impossible choice Christina left me. I could leave her again, divide a togetherness that felt natural and perfect; or I could stay by her side, even as the man by her side rankled me by his very presence. I stumbled over my reply, but eventually my will outed itself. I couldn't disappoint her. I needed her.

Just then, Stan and Euchre came upon us, dragging their surfboards. Euchre called my name; I turned around and saw in Stan's face that he had a inkling of what I was going through.

"Euchre, Stan, this is my good friend Christina from elementary school. Christina, these are my roommates, Euchre and Stan." They exchanged pleasantries, and Christina silently gave me the warmest smile I have ever seen.

"Hey, Euchre just suggested that we hit up the Boardwalk today, since they've got the Tuesday discount and it'll be empty 'cause everyone went yesterday," Stan said out of the blue. "Do you wanna come?" he asked, inviting Christina too.

"Can I bring some friends?" she asked, sounding excited already.

"Of course. We'll make a day of it," said Euchre with that slight British accent of his.

She immediately started dialing numbers.

o o o

There are eight of us gathered, all told. Euchre, Stan, and I make up the first group; Christina wavers constantly between me and Colton, who stares daggers into my back. Three other friends of hers from college elected to come along. We wait in line at the Giant Dipper for ten, twenty, maybe thirty minutes, watching little kids hyped up on cotton candy bouncing on the handrails, the oil of the track wafting over past the faded TV screens advertising Neptune's Arcade Laser Tag. My flip-flops, the sand of the beach washed half out of them, stick to the Pepsi stains on the floor. Every thirty seconds, so precisely that I can predict it perfectly by the time we hit front of the line, the whole building rumbles and shakes as the train rattles by. We make small talk.

"I still think this coaster is for noobs," Stan complains.

"Well, it's at least superior to the Hurricane," Euchre adds. "Most boring metal coaster I've ever ridden."

"What? I like the Hurricane!" one of Christina's friends shouts from the back of the group.

It continues mindlessly like that, opinions and anecdotes flowing without purpose, laughing at nothing, until we reach the front of the line. There's always that debate: which part of the train to sit in? The very front car is the best: you get the wind in your face, the best view, the smoothest ride. But the line takes at least a whole ride longer if you want to wait for it. The back car is great, too. It gets whipped around, the most exciting ride. But my back is always sore by the time it's over. Well, it's not as bad as the Grizzly in Great America. The Grizzly is so bumpy, it's a wonder my spinal cord doesn't crumble to pieces from the motion. But the Grizzly doesn't compare to the Giant Dipper.

By a coincidence of the line, Stan and Euchre get on in front of me and then only the back car is left. I think it's going to be just me, but Christina climbs into the seat next to me, despite Colton's protests. She'll pay it back to him later, she promises, and before he can object further, all conversation is cut off because the coaster has started to move. It's a quick little motion, but some girls a few cars ahead scream anyway. A few overenthusiastic parents put up their hands, training their children in time-honored roller coaster riding traditions. We foray through a couple seconds of darkness as the coaster descends into the tunnel, and then it hits the chain lift. It's loud, uncomfortably so. CLACK CLACK CLACK CLACK CLACK. I feel my stomach preparing itself, retreating into the safe confines of my ribcage. No matter how many times I ride the roller coaster, no matter how jaded I try to act about the whole thing, it still gets me. It's the buildup of the upward movement that does it. It takes a little bit too long, so my mind eventually ends up wandering. I can see the kids playing the fairway games off to one side, hitting the hammer to the target so that the lights go up halfway and don't make the bell ring. There's just too much time to prepare for the drop, the drop I know is coming but deep down have really forgotten. That's why I ride the roller coaster again and again: I've forgotten what it feels like to drop, to really do it. Maybe if I were a test rider, going around the track every day, I'd eventually have it ingrained in me so much that I couldn't help but remember. But I don't think so. My mind wanders. Christina is next to me, her hands gripping the bar so tight her knuckles are white. She gives me a nervous smile and I put my hand on hers to soothe her. She takes well to it, and her expression softens.

In the next moment, everything changes. The coaster is released from the ratcheting lift, and we're at the crest of

the coaster track, looking past the other riders at the Giant Dipper's giant dip. The sudden silence is almost spiritual. On our left, a sea of cars glitters in the parking lot, the Santa Cruz Mountains in the background, a sleeping panther, dark and powerful, ready to pounce. To the right, the beach is empty, no matter how many people are on it: all I know is that the waves are crashing on the sand in a gentle roar, reassuring me that even though the world is constantly in motion, some things can be counted on. In my peripheral vision, almost behind us, is the wharf, the pier sticking out where weekday visitors gather to buy snacks and watch the sea lions lazing themselves on the weathered wood. In this moment, the calm before the storm, we are free.

And then gravity snaps me back into my body, back into the yellow-and-black interior of the little metal car, and we're plunging down the dip, my hair going every which way, and my hands now also clinging tightly to the padded metal bar. The shivering rush releases the adrenaline, illuminating my mind with that pure ecstatic rush of thinking so fast I'm barely thinking at all. The first turn is the biggest. It goes left; I go right. I try not to smash Christina against the side of the car. It's a good thing the sides are padded, or she'd have a sore elbow now. The sides weren't always so padded, and riding the roller coaster was a more daring experience then. The red-painted tracks and the huge whitewashed lattice of the coaster blow by on both sides. After the turn, a couple smaller humps, there's a slow in the rhythm, as the coaster crests the back 180 degrees of the track. The giant dip is on our right, now, and we're in the belly of the beast. More sharp dips, side-to-side wobbles, up, down, I'm practically flying out of my seat and going to hit my head on the crossbeams above but of course I don't. I've lost track of what's happening at this point, just reveling in the sensation of speed and motion.

Our hands have parted well in advance of the coaster screeching to a halt. The entire ride has been less than two whole minutes, less than a flicker in the film of my life, and it's over. The bar lifts up. Christina first, then I, stand up, wobbly, and we each catch our breath while shooting a wicked grin to Stan and Euchre. The blood that's rushed to my head drains back to where it was before and we gather up to head out the exit.

Colton and Christina's friends were on the other train, which left right as ours pulled into the stop. We headed back to the fairway, through the photo booth where children were shouting and the attendants - polo-wearing, bored-looking college students - were busy asking people to please not take photos of the screens. It was short, but I savored that moment. Pepsi stains and all.