

OUT THERE
GUESS I'M ALREADY THERE

||||| BY MARA WOLFORD |||||

It had been an ugly year, spent in the throes of divorce from a person I cannot today fathom why I ever married, a failed business that entailed huge losses, the loss of loved ones and all that other stuff that life's so great at throwing at you in one shitheap. Faced with all of this, I decided that if nothing worked, the best thing I could do was do nothing but surf.

After 20 years in France, it was time to leave. Why not Indo? I've spent half the year there for more than 20 years, it only seemed logical. Onward, with a seven-year-old Joson in tow. Kiddo needs French school, according to Dad, so the choice is reduced to Bali.

I've always hated surfing in Bali. Really. Hated. It's for punters unconvinced that the world is a good and safe place, and prefer remaining in their comfort zone, all the while convincing themselves they've lived an "Indo Adventure", with Mexican food, air con, drivers, pedicures and Bintang singlies.

However, when one decides that one will do nothing but surf, and one is limited to where one can surf based on the location of a school that insists on instruction in a useless, archaic Latin language that is relevant to making babies, but not especially useful for raising them, one will find surf in Bali.

There is a constant compromise between wanting to get out there (with certain acquired tastes and expectations of quality in waves) and attempting to be an acceptable parent. It's a battle between desires and duties that I'm not sure ever quite get resolved in most parents' lifetimes. Especially if they surf.

I check bloody Sri Lanka for the umpteenth time. I hate the place: It's a mushy, section-y, shitty reef until it hits eight feet, with relatively clean water in the rainy season, far from where the cursed, aforementioned French school has decided to found itself. I have to grind an hour via Kuta purgatory to get there from *la Sacrée Ecole Française*. The

lagoons on the east coast are safe for my Joson to swim and fish in when I ditch him on the beach and get out there for a few. He and I have an understanding that mum is a better person after she gets out for a surf. I'm aware that this is bad mothering and probably illegal in other parts of the world, but he finds a gaggle of friends each time I abandon him: Guys who are already dads who will knot his line, lend him bait, swim and joke around.

Inspid Sri Lanka does nothing for me on this day. Bali does little for me, surfwise: Filthy water during rainy season closes half the island's beaches, and on a personal level, I'm sick of feeling that because I'm a mum, I should be stuck playing it safe. I'm feeling like my mojo was taken from me, along with the placenta, having forgotten or shelved all that I may have known.

I watch the mundane two-foot sets roll in and tell myself, "It's a confidence game, Darlin', a short while back, you knew better. How long are you going to let this go on?" I feel a call for an executive decision on the future direction my surfing will take. It's now or never, Bébé. Your kid is seven years old, almost an adult! He makes you crepes for breakfast now! Get over it, already and get back out there!

Doris (Tony Eltherington - ed) and others have told me to get out there and surf this other spot down the way. I've looked at the set-up and it scared me: 900 metres offshore, never small except when it's flat. I never want to surf with 300 others, so flat is out. This gig requires guns the moment that the clowns have been washed in, and unlike every other spot that holds size, there is no channel. Channel is a surfer girl's best friend. Heaven on the half-shell, hell in a handbasket, so I've heard said of this place. I've been warned.

Destiny would have it that as I head for the spot, I come across a periwinkle Katana with a very long pintail thruster on the roof. Smiley, handsome blond guy behind the wheel. I know where he's headed and I know what he's up to: He's equipped. I follow him into the parking lot and ask him if I can jump

the boat with him. He hesitantly says yes. He asks me how big I think it is. I answer two to three times overhead on sets. He understands that I get it. I promise him I can get myself in if I can't stick it. I've only got my 6'6". I ditch my kid on the beach in a flash, telling him to go fish or something. Bad Mummy Moment. Guilt and fear gnaw at my stomach. Unbeknowst to me, Nyoman takes over where I was incapable of being a responsible adult parent. We jump the last boat at the last minute. Greg and I don't realise we know each other already until we're in the boat: Days at the Terrigal Haven and nights at the Terrigal pub link us from decades ago. I see his stress level diminish.

As we get around to the outside peak and into heavy water, Greg shoots me one last look that allows me to go in on the boat if required. I shake my head and throw myself overboard with him into what looks mostly to me like huge, warbly Sunset West peaks. I can feel how very deep, then how quickly shallow this water becomes, and the accelerating speed in which the wave gets there. I tell myself that I can always just watch, then catch one in across the reef.

There are two guys out. I vaguely recognise them from decades prior: Guys I've seen at Sunset, Haleiwa, Lani's, Uluwatu, G-Land, Honolua or some other clear water, godforesaken, heaven-blessed, nasty deep-water-shallow-reef upon this Earth's surface... those rounds that we make because we think they are necessary, and maybe they are. They're all gunned up, too. They see me and they're not sure what to think.

As we are taught - where I come from - for each metre of swell, you watch for 15 minutes or one set. Even more importantly so when it's a spot that you don't know, so I decide to watch four sets. I paddle over to the pseudo-channel and do exactly that. For 40 minutes or so. I can almost hear these guys thinking out loud: *Oh shit, she's freaked, we're going to have to get her in, dark's coming soon, what the hell was Greg thinking?* etc. etc. etc.

I'm amazed as I watch these old guys charge it like the underground masters they are - backdooring, pulling in, going sideways and inside out like teenagers, not 50-year-old men. Completely unseen to the world, just like they like it. They shoot old big-wave surfers, don't they? No, darling, they just go off and become mysto-chargers, hiding out to sea on the furthest corner of a far-flung island in the middle of a foreign and treacherous ocean, far from prying eyes. After having watched enough sets roll through and enough bombs ripped to shreds, I spot and mark the boil I need to work from in order to drop the beast that won't dry-reef me on the inside.

My heart pounds as the horizon becomes ominous with the next set. I know what I've got to do, but I'm not too sure I can do it, but I have to. I paddle over to my designated boil, let the first one go as I was taught, and paddle in for the second one.

I paddle a lot more than I would have thought necessary, because I really need a gun. Greg yells, "GO!" I think I'm caught in the lip for a moment before I drop that bugger. Hoots from the very small crowd ensue. Two hundred metres down the line I cut out on the reef and know I've found the place I need to be. Didn't David Byrne write a song about that? It is resounding in my mind.

I paddle back out and ask the guys if I can surf with them. Greg is proud to be out there with me. Another one flashes me a promising smile. I like his smile, but I'd like to get a second one even more at that moment. I do get the second one, but I was a little too daring and it angled in on to the reef. I punch under 14 death bowls backed on to the slab before I decide that it may be time to go see if the kid I ditched on the beach is OK. I chuck Barry a peace sign and high-tail it in.

Now I can't leave this joint.

I came back to stay, with my guns and my son. Greg yells "GO!" and I do. Other times, I sit and watch, then get one in across the reef. □