

WIPEOUT

HOW TO CATCH A BREAK.

WORDS *Elle Glass*

I ALWAYS WANTED to be a surfer. So badly. The odds, though, were against me. At school, I was the girl who flinched every time a ball was thrown my way, the one routinely relegated to the back row at ballet recitals. Still, pre-teens, I begged and begged and was eventually booked into a school holiday surf camp. Every day for a week, my pop drove me to Maroubra Beach in his Toyota Corona – there and back – velour seats in the hot sun. I was skinny and gangly and shy and insisted on wearing goggles and an all-over UV rash suit. There, every day would end in tears. The waves were too big. My goggles leaked. There were bluebottles. I couldn't do it. I was scared.

So I lied. I told people I could. I would carry my sister's board in the hope people would mistake it for my own. I wanted them to believe it. I thought maybe – just maybe – if I said it enough times, it would come true. And, last summer, it did at Anna Bay – a long stretch of beach two-and-a-half hours north of Sydney. I was there with a group of friends, Rachael among them. Rach is the kind of friend who makes you believe anything is possible, the kind you turn to and, all of a sudden, it's 4am, the kind you can get to go surfing with you even though neither of you know how. We booked a private lesson and laughed so hard we almost drowned. We were crap but we didn't care: we were SURFING.

Back in Bondi, every morning at six, Rach and I would run to the beach barefoot, with borrowed boards under our arms and T-shirts knotted behind our backs. For us, surfing – even just the promise of it – was about the untapped. We were ready to do what we'd never been brave enough to. It was a chance to loosen up and embrace something brazen, bold and honest. And that, for me, was something I'd never been able to do. Surfing opened doors, started conversations, founded friendships. Rach went OS, to surf the Costa Rican coast, and I found new surfing partners. An ex I was keen to keep as a friend, an old classmate I'd bumped into after a decade in absentia, a former flatmate. Anyone, everyone. Soon, I found myself at a Quicksilver lunch with four-times ASP world champion Stephanie Gilmore. Gilmore has got a touch of the gypsy about her: she picks up and takes off, and when I caught up with her again, she was fresh-returned from Mexico's Huatulco with Kelly Slater and others.

"The experience in Mexico is like no other," she told me. "It's hot, you're sweating in the water; the landscape is insanely beautiful, vast and secluded. Magical." There, they'd wake around 6am to a florescent sky, and jump in the 4WD, tracing through the little Mexican towns to the beach. "One beach we went to was a 30-minute walk along desolate coastline to reach the actual wave. There was stray cattle cruising along the beach, waves rolling in perfectly for as far as we could see and no one around. We'd post up for the day, surf, rest, talk stories, take photos, trade boards, and drink a million litres of water to stay alive." Surfing, says Gilmore, inspired her to see the world and "experience the wonderful feeling of achieving a dream". "Riding a wave is a rare and humbling experience," she says. "The ocean is a very calming place."

Humbling indeed. Surfing is simple. All you need is a board. And, unless you are crazy-brave, a wetsuit. It's the place of car keys resting on front tyres and one-syllable names. But just because something is simple doesn't make it easy. "Elle ... Can you shorten that?" asks Manly Surf

School's Shane Conwell when we are waist-deep in an Easterly mess at Collaroy. Honesty – and there's that word again – is key for Conwell: there is no point lying about your abilities. He's going to know them the minute you trip yourself up on your leg rope, panic in a rip, attempt to catch a wave. Today, the conditions – and my ability – relegate us to the white wash. It turns out I've been doing it all wrong since November. I need to push up from my board, not hold onto the rails; I need to turn my body, keep my eyes on the shore, keep low with my weight on the centre of the board. I need to not jump to my knees, wave my arms around and be so damn excited about being able to stay afloat. That's not, he says, how it's done. I battle through the whitewash to try it again and again and again. Still, the knees. Still, the getting too excited and waving the arms. Still, the hands on the rails. He takes me back to basics. "OK, nothing else. Just hands in the centre of your board and push up." I do. Kind of. At least, though, I know what I'm doing wrong. Eventually – almost – I get it right.

Getting it right isn't so much about skill as it is about commitment. You go every morning. No matter the conditions. You don't allow yourself an excuse for fear you will find them everywhere. Through surfing, I've found there are things you can only learn by doing them wrong, by learning from those who know better. Hold your leg rope so you don't trip over it. Lean back to pull off a wave. Paddle around people, never in front of them. Wait for two, maybe three sets before getting in. If you can get out past the breakers, you can get back in again. But it's not just a commitment to surf. Yes, to perpetual split ends, aching arms and the struggle to peel off a wetsuit that's soaked through to your bone. But also a commitment to do something for you and only you. It's a commitment to walk sans shoes down the street, to spend time by yourself between sets, to get dumped and come up smiling. To love what you are doing, to tone up and to feel that saltwater stripping your skin of all congestion.

There are those who have made surfing their life. Janine Hall, founder of Surf Haven Bali, threw in a perfectly good corporate career to it. And only now do I get why. "I love being able to share this passion," Hall tells me. Her Haven is a luxury surf spa retreat in Bali's Seminyak offering a tailored week-long wellbeing program including yoga, surf and nutrition. Here, there's a staff-to-guest ratio of one-to-one; her guests, Hall says, "come so they can lay down their roles and just get back to the essence of who they are". "Surfing," she says, "teaches us to focus on the here and now and to let go of our cares and concerns."

"Surfing," says Gilmore, "is a healer. I think in an overall way it helps me to be present. As lame as it may sound, it helps purify your thoughts and bring you a little peace. The ocean and Mother Nature hold such power that us humans will never match. I guess for people who are in offices and working all the time, surfing is a beautiful escape."

And her advice to a rookie? "Be patient," says Gilmore. "Enjoy the ocean and all its moods. Use more buoyant boards to help you get up. Know your limits but don't be scared, just go with whatever the waves may bring. Every day, every wave is completely different!"

"Take it slowly," Hall advises beginners. "Let go and have fun. Remember the best surfer is not the one that looks good but the one that is having the most fun and sporting the biggest smile!" 🐬

