



Sam Bloom



I grew up in a normal Australian family ... at least to the degree that any Australian family can be considered normal.

It might be simple nostalgia – looking back from my forties while stuck in a wheelchair – but I had a truly wonderful childhood. In my mind, I see nothing but sunshine and endless bright-blue Sydney skies.

I honestly can't recall much about going to school – nothing original or meaningful anyway – but I vividly remember playing in our backyard swimming pool, roller-skating, teaching my baby brother how to ride a skateboard, going on bushwalks through the nearby national park, and stuffing our tiny sunburned cheeks with juicy purple mulberries that grew by our back fence every spring.

Then just when I thought my life couldn't possibly get any better, it did. When I was eight, my parents bought the Surfside Pie Shop in Newport, and our family moved to Bilgola Beach. We had all the cake we could eat and were walking distance to the ocean. Surfing soon became a huge part of my life – I went to bed almost every night with sea salt in my eyelashes. It was a child's paradise.

If I close my eyes I see small bare feet running, always running, on grass, down summer-scorched footpaths and across white-gold sand. I focus on that exact moment when the clean dry sand meets the hightide mark, where the chirp-like squeak of each heel-strike becomes a wet-thud-drumming as I race to the water. It's not a soundscape I was conscious of back then. But it is now.

When I say I was a true water baby, I don't mean I was a gifted swimmer or anything like that. I mean that nothing made me happier than to be in the water, paddling my surfboard out into the line-up at any of the beautiful northern Sydney beaches, or sailboarding on nearby Narrabeen Lakes – a vast, sprawling tidal lagoon surrounded by eucalypt forest teeming with wildlife.

I haven't had much luck with therapists myself; most counselling only seems to amplify my horrid feelings, not ease them. But if I was a trauma psychiatrist I'd just tell every patient to go for a splash at a Sydney beach on a warm, sunny day.

There's something powerful yet calming about the ocean. I love the charged silence of the sea once you get past the roar and blast of the breaking waves – suddenly you are in a space with a completely different energy from all that which you left behind. Nothing that troubled you on land has any hold over you any more. External chaos and internal turmoil yield to breeze and swell. You are physically and emotionally weightless. You are free.



I was barely a teenager when I bought my first surfboard from a local surfer on the beach for fifty dollars – almost everything that I had saved working in the family bakery and babysitting in the evenings. The Malibu board – a red-and-yellow aircraft carrier with an enormous green fin – was nearly twice my height, and I would carry it balanced on my head like a traditional West African porter, as I trudged slowly and carefully down the sand.

My surfing buddies from school would run as fast as they could into the shore break, launching their bodies onto their boards mid-air, then skimming across the water till they were slapped in the face by a wall of whitewash. But that wasn't me. I would take my time, gently dipping my board into the water as if baptising a baby, then slowly paddling out. It wasn't because I was the only girl in the group; it was because I was never in a hurry in the ocean. I wanted this feeling to last forever.

It was out in the water where I was always my true self, or at least my best self. Surfing meant more to me than simply decompressing from a bad day at school. It was more important than just being my favourite sport. It was soothing and invigorating, and somehow healing. It gave me time to think; it gave me a chance to empty my crowded mind. Head raised, eyes alert, body relaxed, I was no longer undersized, because we are all utterly insignificant nothings out there in the big blue. The ocean dwarfs every living thing, even whales, so therefore I was at least equal to all humanity. This is where I belonged.





Once I got out behind the break, I would sit up, catch my breath and read the swell. I loved this moment, bobbing like a gull, watching light dance on the water, getting in sync with the sea. I wasn't chasing the biggest waves; I didn't have any need to show off. I was always waiting for the right wave for me. I loved the smaller, smoother waves, like a ripple of glass. When my perfect wave eventually appeared on the horizon, rushing straight toward me from the belly of the Pacific, I'd heave around my red-and-yellow behemoth and start paddling, slowly at first, and then faster and faster, until my hands were clawing through the water with ferocious purpose to reach that exquisite tipping point, just in front of the wave's foaming lip, when the ocean reclaimed control. In one motion, I would jump to my feet as I was dropping down the sheer blue-green face – a split second of zero gravity – and then my fin would bite into the curling base of the crystal wall. I could feel the ocean's limitless energy surging up through my legs and I would make it my own.

How I ache for that sensation today.

There is a time for stillness, and I cherish quiet hours with nature, a good book and, above all, those I love, but on a planet that is spinning at one thousand miles per hour, much of what makes life worth living is velocity, or at least the memory of it. The salt spray in your face, the wind in your hair, your heartbeat quickening. It's why dogs stick their heads out of car windows, and why rollercoasters exist. When you love the ocean as I do, every wave feels as exhilarating as a first kiss.

One aspect of surfing that I especially appreciate now is how forgiving it is. Don't get me wrong, surfing can be a dangerous sport and surfers are injured every day, especially at the highest level. But for most of us, the water is strangely generous, a soft landing that encourages playfulness. Even when I made a silly mistake that resulted in a spectacular face-first wipeout, it was just a momentary setback. I knew that when I was held underwater by a billion gallons of churning foam for what felt like eternity, it was really just a matter of seconds. By the time I resurfaced, my small explosion of white spray had settled, the water smoothed over. All evidence of my undignified impact was erased, my humiliation likewise washed away. I would smile as I paddled out for more.

The ocean has no memory of our pain.

