



**It took letting go—  
and a lot of gnarly tumbles—  
for one man to learn to  
ride the waves of life and love.**

BY PETER HELLER

ILLUSTRATION BY YUTA ONODA

# *Pipeline Dreams*

WAS THIS FUN? The 2-foot waves at Bolsa Chica State Beach were turning me into Play-Doh. On the fifth wave, I managed to crawl up and stand and just as fast flew through the air like a catapulted cow. We didn't stand a chance. I didn't know how far away from

the other surfers was safe to sit, and I must have gotten it wrong because a dude collided with me and asked me if I was born on Planet Kook. Kook means "beginner surfer," but it is not a neutral term: It carries a slug of derision, a brand for the clueless, for those

without hope, without grace. That really hurt my feelings.

Once, in sheer frustration, I rode the board in on my belly, just to feel some speed. I got off it in ankle-deep water, and turned and lifted the heavy longboard. I carried it back into the white foam in front of me and across my body and got slammed by the next sweep of whitewater and the board leveled me like a snowplow. I unpeeled myself

***I was such a kook. In surf slang kook doesn't just mean beginner; it means outrageous, awkward, clueless novice.***

from the sand inch by inch the way Wile E. Coyote detaches himself from the pavement after Road Runner drives over him with a cement mixer.

At breakfast, at a surfer café called the Sugar Shack, Andy burst the yolk of his egg over his single piece of butterless bread. He'd always been afraid of dying of a heart attack. We were both in our mid-40s, and he'd been one of my best friends since college. Recently transferred here to Huntington Beach with his family, Andy had asked if I wanted to come out from Denver and learn to surf. Perfect timing. I'd just finished my third book, about an extreme expedition; I was dating a wonderful woman named Kim, but, ultimately, was single and free because of a congenital inability to commit; and I had no idea what to do with the rest of my life. Maybe getting schooled by the sea was the ticket.

I drained my coffee. "I love surfing," I confided.

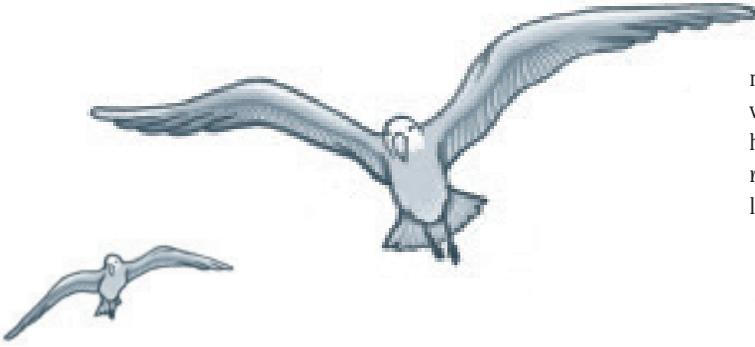
Andy sipped his and studied me over his cup, through round, gold-wire rims. "How do you know?" he said, smiling. "Maybe tomorrow we should try Seal Beach. It'll probably be an easier wave."

That night, covered with bruises, aching everywhere, I lay on Andy's fold-out couch in the library. I revisited the last two days and winced. I was such a kook. In surf slang kook doesn't just mean beginner; it means outrageous, awkward, clueless novice who cuts people off on waves, thrashes around speaking to other surfers like it's a cocktail party, hollers rebel yells when he does manage to stand up for a split second, has no tact, no respect for the finely tuned protocol of surf, and is dangerous to boot, because when he drops in on a wave without looking, boards and bodies collide. That was me. I had called my girlfriend Kim and she was sympathetic to a point. She was getting sick of me being away all the time. She did not demand that I change, but she pointed out that it was hard to stay close. Ouch. It dawned on me that kook also perfectly described my aptitude with women.

I was unwilling to turn out the light and let sleep claim me before I had salvaged something of the day. Andy's old shepherd Cody lay on my legs and watched me with a concerned expression. I had known him for years. Now he seemed to sense that I was wrestling with powerful forces: vanity, pride, surf.

I rubbed his forehead with my fist and slid a notebook off the side table. I glanced up at the bookcase that occupied the entire wall opposite. A thousand spines, a thousand reverberating names, the best efforts of the truest minds. I scanned across the





## ***My charm and wit would slowly become evident, sort of surprising, like a sprouting potato in the fridge.***

modern cannon and their antecedents. Eliot, Coleridge, Proust, Stein, Dickinson, Brecht, W C Williams, Plato, Faulkner, Homer, Rilke, Cervantes. Waves of their own, waves that broke over reefs of readers and worked their own geologic power. I felt small. What the hell was I doing here? I should be writing a book of my own.

The last title that popped out made me laugh. When I did, Cody lifted and cocked his head.

"It's nothing," I said. "*Don Quixote*. I'd read it to you, but it would drive a dog like you nuts."

I opened the notebook and wrote at the top of a page: *SURFING*, then *What I Learned Today*.

*Do not get the surfboard between you and the wave. Keep it beside or down-wave from you.*

*Set waves are not alone. They come in... sets. Doh!*

Now we were getting somewhere. I folded the journal and went to sleep.

QUAINT LITTLE SEAL BEACH. Palm trees and bungalows. A tall pier, a curve of white beach. Away off to the northwest was the port of Long Beach, derricks and buildings. We pulled into the parking lot with a shirr of tires over sand, cut the engine, and while it ticked and the offshore breeze rattled the palms behind us, we drank our coffee, looked through the windshield at the beach, and tried to get stoked.

I was 45. Andy was a year younger, but he had been a responsible corporate breadwin-

ner and family man for many years and he was almost bald, so naturally I thought of him as a big brother. Also he had those wire-rimmed glasses, which made him seem at least twice as smart.

"Are we having a mid-life crisis?" I said.

"Definitely."

"Is this what we are supposed to do?"

"That's not clear to me."

"It's cheaper than a Ferrari or a divorce, right?"

"You're not married."

"I'm just saying."

"Well, a lot of guys just build a shack in the backyard and then write a book about it. It's a genre of its own. I don't know exactly how much that would cost."

"Hmm."

We watched a pair of lanky teen boys head for the water with shortboards tucked under their arms. Heading for a before-school session. They were loose-jointed and carried the boards with the ease of Masai with their spears. I felt a twinge of envy. What if I had begun surfing when I was just a boy? Instead of the poker games and stoopball of my childhood in Brooklyn. I certainly wouldn't have had to wait until my 17th birthday to get laid.

Never too late, right? Wrong. You can't redo your first anything. Was this surfing thing about going backward or forward? Forward=brave, backward=pathetic.

No, this surfing project would need to be about growth, about connecting with the earth and growing older with grace. I was thinking all this as I was trying to get my foot through the leg of the wetsuit and hopping along the side of the car and feeling every sore muscle.

## **What We Think About When We Think About Surf**

Did you see *Beach Blanket Bingo*?

*The Endless Summer? Step into Liquid? Riding Giants? Point Break? Baywatch?*

When we imagine surfing we probably see images from these classics. Maybe in another dream there are old Woodie station wagons pulled up to the beach and some guys playing ukuleles. Maybe there's a leaned-over surf shack covered in bougainvillea and an empty curve of Mexican

beach with perfect combers breaking white along the bay. A bucket of sweating Corona. Maybe there are three happy-go-lucky Endless Summer kids trading waves and you can hear their whoops on the wind. Maybe there are lifeguard towers every quarter mile and Pamela Anderson is driving a pickup, and maybe the beach is Malibu and there are five surfers hanging ten

all together on one wave. Or maybe we are the rare dreamer and we see one giant mountain of water, some Jaws rogue wave, and there's a lone figure, small as a swallow, arcing down its face.

Either way, scientists and anthropologists agree that for 95 percent of us, our fantasy will involve eight standard components:

1. A beautiful setting, invigorated

by the wild nature of the sea.

2. Beautiful chicks, bikinis, the promise of sex in the air like the smell of hibiscus—hibiscuses—hibisci—

3. Aloha spirit—a generous, blessed-out bonhomie, on the waves and off.

4. Hair-raising prowess on the wave—muscled and graceful.

5. Machismo: The only possible result when combining numbers two and four.

6. A party, lots of booze, and pot.

7. Happy, danceable music in the background.

8. The wave itself. The lead character. However you conceive it. Like God.

What we have just concocted without realizing it is the Garden before the Fall. Maybe surfing was like this once. Maybe, after the red heifer and the anti-Christ and a Great Fire, it will be so again.

But for now, let's review and correct.

1. The raw power of the sea *is* beautiful. Even at Orange County river mouths where you are sitting on your board and look down and see what can only be undissolved toilet paper floating by your vulnerable toes. Even off of beaches where there used to be mackerel and tuna runs and now there are none because they have all been fished out. Even then, the ocean heaves with her inexorable breath and you feel humbled and renewed.

2. Sometimes there are foxy chicks. They sit on a towel with a camera with a huge honking lens and take pictures of their semi-pro man who has been snaking your waves all morning—because he can. Lucky if they even nod as you walk by.

3. Which brings us to aloha spirit, the greatest draw and the greatest misconception about surfing.

Surfing is one of the fastest growing sports in the world. Thousands

of neophytes join the ranks of new American surfers every year. Worldwide, including surfwear and fashion, surfing is a billion-dollar industry. The cachet, the attraction, seems to be all about youth, strength, and that generous aloha spirit. The idea is that surfers have an easy going, hang-loose relationship with violent hydraulic power and other people. Nothing much ruffles the laid-back surfer.

The problem is that the aloha spirit is generally a myth—surfers have always been aggressive, driven, and territorial. You have to be, temperamentally, to deal with waves of any size and to jostle for position with others. All the eager new surfers crowding the waves are exacerbating tensions and shortening fuses. Some California counties have actually enacted anti-surf-rage ordinances that ban aggressors from their local waves as part of the punishment for surf-related assaults.

4. The prowess and grace are real. I wanted some of that.

5. The machismo is real, too. As you shall see.

6. Party—well, yeah. Not like beach blankets and campfires and volleyball, though that happens in rare fits of collective nostalgia, especially at big competitions. Especially in Mexico. Usually, though, it's a quick joint in the front seat of the car before bailing out into the dawn chill.

7. Happy music—of course. Sometimes it's just in your head. One of the things I love most about surfing is all the time you have to yourself—long paddle-outs with the schooling fish and birds and breaking sets; sitting your board away from the others with the whole ocean in front of you, looking for your own peak; catching that one long ride, when the music is acceleration, speed, thunder, and glide.

8. The wave itself. It is the one thing that no one can exaggerate. As

poetic as you wax, as thick as you lay it on, as much as you magnify, you can never, ever encompass or describe the greatness of the wave. The wave that can be named is not the real Wave.

The week with Andy had become fun. We got the bright idea of joining a surfing school and actually learned to ride waves. I was totally

hooked. When I got back to Denver, I found myself thinking about the sea all the time. Not just the waves or the whales or the fish, but the whole heaving expanse. As if she were a being, alive and entire. I longed to be rocked by the swell. To surf, to be buoyed and surrounded and engulfed.

I got this idea that maybe, with total devotion, I could go from kook

to riding a big, hollow wave in six months. I sensed intuitively that learning to surf could make me a better person. I thought that if I could take a solid chunk of time on the coast, head down the length of Mexico where there would be fewer crowds than in California, I'd have a real chance of learning, of making surfing a true path. Was it too late to learn something this hard? It felt like the only thing to do. Just in case, I answered an ad in the *Denver Post* and bought an '85 VW Vanagon camper I quickly named The Beast.

And then I invited Kim. It was time to really give this woman a shot.

## Love Medicine

Meet Kim.

Tall, long of limb, Chinese American, eyes of jet, and rosebud lips. Thirty-something years old and pretty. Strong, too. Broad shouldered. Trained as a ninja. Pretty good with twin short swords. Born in Denver to

parents who spoke only Cantonese. Learned English from television, hence says "purchase" instead of "buy."

One of my friends calls her the Goddess of Stillness because she is slow and patient, very hard to ruffle. Wholesome in that she is cheerful, expects the best of people, and does not waste a lot of time in the past or the future. Stolidly present, she fears little on Earth except mosquitoes.

I really didn't want to mess this one up. I figured that the surf trip would bring us closer, help us to get to know each other or—I couldn't think about what else might happen.

I had met her in a coffee shop near my house in Denver. I had just been through a terrible breakup. When I finally got up off the floor, I borrowed my buddy Sascha's electric clippers, popped on an eighth-inch jig, and shaved my head.

Some guys look fine bald. Not me. I've hit my head too many times. It

was mid-winter and I swore I would never date again, and I almost guaranteed it with my lumpy scalp. When summer came, I felt a little more like myself and began to write in the local café. One August Sunday morning I was there early working on a magazine story. I was unshaven, in an old T-shirt, had a cap pulled down over my eyes, and was not paying attention to anything but the screen on my laptop. I was at a small table facing the front door with my back tucked against the counter where people lined up to get their drinks. In my reverie I heard the little bell on the front door jingle and the hinges yaw, and I glanced up.

She was standing tall, just inside the café, looking over the tables to find her friend. It was as if there were lights playing around her. She had this energy, sort of wholesome and pure. Happy. Clear. I felt a stab of desire. More than that, I felt a sudden kinship, I'm not sure why. I knew right

then that more than anything in the world I wanted to take this woman on a date.

I am not smooth. I have never been able to pick up a girl. My girlfriends always got to know me because they were forced to be in close proximity over long periods, like in college seminars or extended field trips when my great charm and wit would slowly become evident, sort of surprising like the sprouting of potatoes in the fridge.

Now, after nine months of not even talking to a woman, I knew that I was way beyond Not Smooth. I knew that if I walked up to her table and tried to introduce myself in some suave way I would twitch, look at my feet, say some gratuitously stupid thing, and go home and weep.

I thought, *Get it together, Pedro. Do what you do best.*

I pulled the clean napkin from under my cup, dug a pen out of my pocket, and wrote,

*Hi,  
I'm an adventure writer. I write for a lot of top magazines. I have a lot of great stories, but I'm kind of shy, though. I would love to take you to dinner. If you think that's a good idea, you can just give me a thumbs up.  
Peter*

It's true, I wrote that. I folded up the napkin and when she got up and passed me on the way to the counter to order her coffee, I said in what was barely a whisper, "Excuse me, I have a note for you."

She paused, cocked her lovely oval face, looked down at me, smiled. "Oh, my very own note."

She got her coffee and returned to her table and opened the napkin. She leaned over it. Then I saw a furrow form in her brow. She frowned. She passed the note to her friend who read it, glanced at me, read it again with an equally puzzled look, and passed it back. Oh, man. My

heart hammered.

In a flash I realized that they couldn't read the thing! I write like a doctor, in a fast careless scrawl, and they couldn't read it.

There was still a chance. Don't blow this. Crisis made me bold. There was another square napkin on my table. I slid it to me. I looked at her again. So beautiful. Clearly Asian. Okay, okay. Asian genre,

Asian motif. For once in my life I did not ponder. I wrote:

*EXTENDED HAIKU*

*Sudden Sunday invitation*

*How should I answer?*

*Beauty caught breathless*

*like a blossom blown off a limb.*

I wrote it in all caps, the kind architects use, and I stood and brought it to her table and set it down in front

of her. The two women, startled now, watched me as if it were some kind of weird pageant. I went back to my table and sat down, tall and straight. She picked it up in her long, tapered fingers and read, and then turned to me and smiled and gave me a thumbs up.

## **The Seal Beach Lineup**

Kim and I drove from Denver to Southern California in late July and took classes from the M&M Surfing School at Seal Beach, just north of Huntington. There's a time in every beginner surfer's career when he has to paddle out and join the real lineup. In my second week I swallowed hard and headed for the group.

At Seal Beach, this is how they were strung out from the pier:

*Jack Hill.* Something like 6'2", 190, square-jawed, hair almost to his shoulders. Ex-con, but the kind with a golden heart—jailed for something like beating the pulp out of a guy who offended his girlfriend. Nice to me for some reason when I paddle up. Borrowed my longboard, said, "Just a sec," caught the next wave and rode it in on his head.

*Circus Man.* Looked exactly like the strong man in a freak show. Sinewy legs, brick s---house torso, handlebar moustache. Wore a Speedo. All tatted up, naked ladies and mermaids. Whizzed down a long wave with a cryptic half smile, Mona Lisa meets Ajax. Never said a word.

*Eva.* Supermodel. Swedish. So thin even her size zero wetsuit hung off her butt. Surfed between photo shoots to Italy and Brazil. Painfully shy. Whenever we chatted, I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to make love to her—like hugging a fragile sculpture of sticks and leaves. Surprisingly strong, though—paddling out, she left me in the dust.

*The Seal Beach Sistas.* Actually a young mothers' club, very upscale,

lot of pearl earrings and perfect coifs, even when wet. They surfed after dropping the kids off at school. This was not family at the beach time; this was sitting out on their longboards, rising and falling easily on the swell, away from every tentacle of obligation, and talking trash. *Desperate Housewives* stuff. And laughing. And peeling off mid-sentence to catch a wave.

## ***With one sentence, and one sweeping glance over the lineup, he made a proclamation to the tribe: Back off, new kid gets the wave.***

*Bill Cartwright.* Former CEO. Ran three multi-billion dollar health-care companies. Made the mistake of taking a weeklong surf class so he could be closer to his troubled son

who surfs. Became, like me, dazzled by the sea. Quit his job, found God, surfed every day.

*Rogue's Gallery.* Assorted young hot heads on shortboards, who should have been over at Huntington pier and not terrorizing me. Why didn't they answer when I said, "Hi! How's it going?!" One of them was French. He had a heavy accent, and long, vain, curly locks. He hogged the waves. What was he doing here anyway? Go back to France.

*Tykester.* Tiny 8-year-old on the smallest shortboard on Earth. Looked like a frigging skateboard. But the kid could rip. He was all freckles and confidence. On my second day in the lineup he was sitting inside of me by 10 feet. I was just at the peak, and as the swell came in he turned to me and said earnestly, confiding, as if I'd be crazy to doubt him: "I got it." And then he took off. On my wave. I blinked at his diminutive retreating figure. "OK," I said to the back of the wave.

It was a typical California crowd. Every segment of society now surfed. The culture used to be edgy and rebellious, and still thrived on that myth. Plenty of surfers still lived for almost nothing else, and they tended to be a breed apart. But most had families and a boss and drew a paycheck.

I had been talking to Jack Hill, the ex-con, on the beach. He operated heavy equipment when he wasn't surfing or shaping boards or seeing his parole officer. He liked the idea of our project of trying to go from kook to big wave in six months, and he sold me a short spring wetsuit very cheap. When I paddled up to the dozen surfers at the pier, they slid their eyes over

me in a way I would later learn to recognize—it meant: "F---ing Kook. Not gonna let him get a single wave. If he gets in my way, gonna f--- him up. End of conversation." Big Jack called out, "Hey, Pete! Come over here. Cool. You surf here before? OK, this is a left, this is your wave." The rest of the surfers had been waiting for their own wave, many for a quarter of an hour. With one sentence, barely above speaking voice, and one sweeping glance over the lineup, he had made a proclamation to the tribe: Back Off, new kid gets the wave.

"Thanks," I murmured, catching a quick glimpse of 10 stony faces. "Hi guys." I actually waved like a Miss America contestant. And then I prayed. *Pete, you better not, no way, kook out and miss this frigging wave.* Or wipe out once you catch it. I must have been living right. God granted me a reprieve from total Kookiness. I paddled as hard as I could, angled left, and caught the wave. I stood up and rode it left. I rode it as far as I could. I almost fell to my knees in the foam and thanked heaven.

### **Gale Forces**

After a month in Orange County, Kim and I climbed into the Beast and drove down into Baja. The plan was to stop at every surf break and apprentice with the local hotshots. The rough, remote country, the wild characters, the dangerous currents, all challenged our relationship to the limit. When things got really hairy, Kim would remind me that I was carrying precious cargo: Her. But we got stronger, and our surfing skills improved. We found that the farther south we got into Mexico, the stranger, the more surreal our experience became. It was almost as if we had to give up any expectation of normalcy to really learn to surf. And then we took a jarring 35-mile dirt road out to a famous break

called Scorpion Bay. We hadn't been there more than a day when we heard rumors about a hurricane tracking right for our camp. ...

That night, the open-air restaurant was crowded. Most of the surfers congregated there in the evenings to drink Coronas and eat overstuffed burritos. And check e-mails; the house had two laptops they kept on the bar and rented out, two bucks for 15 minutes of wireless time. Tonight, a group crowded around a tall, dark girl who expertly worked the keyboard and brought up screen after screen of satellite images. She sat on the stool in a bikini with an Indian Sari wrapped diagonally across her torso. She wore black rectangular glasses. She sat very tall, not pretty in the sum of her parts, but she gave off an air of insupportable languor, in the way of very successful models. She traced her finger on the map. Kim and I got a table, ordered Sprites, and I wandered over. I could hear flies hitting the blue zipper behind the bar.

"How close, bro?" said a boy in nothing but board shorts and a Dos Equis.

"Yeah," said his buddy. "Ground Zero or what?" They held their beers to their stomachs and craned over the group.

She turned her head slowly, chin high and looked at the guys like they were two bugs who were interrupting her lecture and should sit in the back of the class. That was all. She didn't deign to answer. She actually cleared her throat. "As I was saying, the path projected here is simply an aggregate of wind-speed probabilities for any quadrant at predetermined distances from the center of the storm's current position. That's what these different colors represent. Right now we have a 45 percent probability of hurricane force winds early on the day after tomorrow. That is, 75 to 95 miles per hour."

"Yeah, but is it gonna rain, bro?" said the boy, tenacious. He was a surfer. If you don't keep paddling for the peak of a wave you've ceded it to another guy. "I mean, are we gonna be able to get outta here, cross the rivers and s---?"

Her long fingers came to rest lightly on the keys like a pianist's at the end of a piece. She studied the boys for a moment, raised one mordant eyebrow, unconsciously touched her glasses back to position as she wrinkled her nose, turned back to the screen. Silence. Everybody waited. She spoke to the local fisherman behind the bar in rapid, colloquial Spanish and he nodded, smiled, slid open the ice chest and brought out a dripping Pacifico.

She twisted her head, stretching her slender neck, and let it settle in perfect balance on at the top of her spine. "This is currently a Category Three storm," she said softly, making everybody lean forward. "Rains could be on the order of 10 inches in 24 hours. That would be enough to cut the roads, yes. If the projected track proves out. The storm could deteriorate or shift direction."

"No s---?" The two boys raised and clacked their bottles. "Sick! We better get the f--- out of here tomorrow!"

On the way back to our table I bumped into a young Australian surfer musician I'd talked to the night before. His name was Colin and he had a band called Beerfridge, in Margaretville, wherever that was. "Who is that chick?" I said.

"What? The Profesora? She's been holding court right there all afternoon, mate. She knows words that are only legal at University."

"Yeah, but who is she?"

"Some biologist. Been coming here for a couple of years. Doing a study on manta rays or something out at some island. She knows all the fishermen. They don't charge her for Internet either. That charac-

ter in the corner is her squeeze.” He pointed with his beer. Sitting there with the hooded watchfulness of a bouncer, was a muscle-bound Latino with black braids down over his shoulders, earrings, eyebrow studs, skull rings, black tank top, and nonstop tattoos. He looked like an outlaw biker gang enforcer, like my youngest sister’s high school boyfriend Claudio.

“That guy *surfs*?” I asked, incredulously.

THAT NIGHT, camped in the Beast on the edge of the cliffs above Scorpion Bay, an errant wind slapped the canvas of our pop-top. The gusts were the outriders of the storm, still two days away. We lay in the dark and talked about getting out ahead of the hurricane. I argued for staying put. The waves were too good, we were learning too much. Plus, we could just as easily get pummeled on the way back south.

“What’s the worst that can happen?” Kim said.

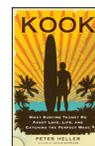
“The hurricane could flip over the Beast, maybe carry it over the edge.”

“C’mon. Do you think it’s dangerous?”

“Yeah, maybe. Tomorrow after surfing we could look for a room in a house.”

She digested that. “Good idea. Remember: Precious cargo.”

We didn’t find a room, but we stayed—perched in that precarious place between fear and faith. And the next morning at dawn, on a wave that ripped as evenly as the tear tab on a Fed Ex pack, I caught my first perfect ride.



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