

18 NOV CHASING THAT FEELING

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Alison Konecki rides a wave in Oahu, Hawaii. Photo by Keola Kaeo, courtesy of Ohana Surf Project.

“Paddle! Paddle!”

My shoulders were on fire and my stomach, streaked with blooms of board rash, stung. But I obeyed and dug my hands into the water. Myopic in my lovesickness, I focused not on my surfing technique, but rather on eager (and as yet unfruitful) attempts to impress. Equally single-minded—though for completely different reasons—my friend seemed oblivious to my struggles, caught up in his earnest attempts to help me get up and riding.

Whoosh.

The wave knocked me sideways. Hair hung in my face and my bathing suit wedged uncomfortably—and unflatteringly—against my body. Before I could fix either though, another wave began bearing down.

Whoosh.

The board tipped and took me with it.

“Back on the board! Paddle!”

Spluttering salt water, hair still in my eyes, I grabbed at the board and tried to haul myself back up. The waves were simply obstacles to overcome, to conquer.

“Watch out for the other surfers!”

One leg on the board and the other still dangling in the water, I held steady and watched a surfer glide past. Beyond, other surfers bobbed placidly along the North Shore swells, awaiting their wave. But I was not responding to the waves, only the bark of commands.

“Okay—back up! C’mon!”

I looked back at a mounting wave and gritted my teeth.

Whoosh.

“Yeah—lots of people try learning from a friend,” said Matt, balancing his coffee and a cigarette in one hand and pulling out longboards from the back of a converted school bus with the other. “But just because you know how to surf doesn’t mean you can *teach* how to surf.”

No kidding.

Years after my battle with the waves, I was back in Hawaii, ready to fall for the sport this time. I’d always remembered the other surfers I’d seen that first day: While I tumbled, sore and head-over-heels, they seemed to be at ease, accepting—even enjoying—what rolled their way. I wanted to feel that—and this time, I had a proper instructor to help me try.

After the land-portion of the lesson in which I’d been shown step-by-step how to get up and ride, I donned booties and a rash guard (thankfully, as the memory of the pain from my

previous experience still glowed white-hot) and headed toward the beach. The waves were breaking right on shore and as I entered the water I stumbled, buffeted by their force and the awkward heft of my longboard.

“Just keep going past the break, then you can hop on and paddle out,” said Matt as he helped another student into the water.

I charged ahead and dropped the board, flopping on top before the next wave could crest and send me back to shore. Lifting my arms in big, pinwheeling arcs—far more aggressive than was necessary—I paddled and paddled. As instructed, when I saw a building wave I grabbed the sides of the board, lifted my upper body like a snake, and pushed on as it tumbled past.



Surfboards in waiting. Photo by Alison Konecki.

A few minutes later, breathing hard and my shoulders already in need of a break, I spun myself around to face the shore. Off to the right, the brown, scratchy slope of Diamond Head dipped down to the water. To the left, cream and pastel Waikiki high-rises fringed with lanky palms jostled along the beach. I lay on the board a moment, feeling the rise and dip of the waves and absorbing the warmth of the sun.

“Over here!” Matt called, gesturing me back in a bit. He had pulled his long black hair into a low knot and was wearing sunglasses. I pictured my imminent wipeouts and envied the level of skill required to surf in sunglasses.

I paddled over and he caught my board, holding it steady.

“Are you ready?”

“What, right now?”

“Yeah, right now.”

“Uh...”

“Okay... paddle!”

Whoosh! He thrust me forward. My board skimmed the water with a hiss, kicking up salty spray and erasing all memory of what the hell I was supposed to be doing. *Paddle? Stand up?* I made a few messy slaps at the water, my brain shouting *Don't lose this wave!* I was still on the board. I hadn't fallen off! I *wouldn't* lose this wave! Everything a blank—except the metronomic *Don't lose this wave!* circling my head—I grabbed the board, thrust up to swing my legs forward, and...

Whoosh! For a moment, I hung suspended below the water as the wave passed with a muffled gurgle overhead. My board, tethered to the leash around my ankle, gave a gentle tug as it tried to continue on above without me.

I paddled back to Matt, who was bobbing patiently on his board.

“I think I got a bit too excited.”

He grinned. “Happens almost every time.”

For the next half hour Matt lined me up and shot me out into the waves. A few times I was able to teeter into position for a few precious seconds before losing balance and pitching over. Once, I was just starting to slide up my back leg when the wave seemed to boil over. Spitting and spewing, it roared over my board and sent me plowing ear-first into the water. I heard the slap and felt a pressure so incredible that it seemed to have burst through my eardrum and into my brain. Other rides were less dramatic and I simply glided to a gradual halt when a wave prematurely fizzled out. While utterly confounding, there was also something seductive about the capriciousness of the waves—a subtlety I'd missed amidst the bluster and fluster of my first attempt at surfing.

A dozen or so runs in, I grew tired. My formerly wide, ardent strokes had quieted to modest putters. My limbs felt waterlogged. But I headed over to Matt anyway and lined up for another ride.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

Whoosh! The board shot forward. Despite aching arms my strokes were smooth and strong. I felt buoyed by the wave. Lungs full, body light... it was as if I had penetrated a slipstream. Not quite realizing how, I was up and riding, holding steady. I'd synced with the wave's rhythm, my body humming with its invisible current. And then, just ahead of the board, there was a scuttle of leathery fins and a big, blinking eye—a sea turtle! I squealed, fit to burst with the joy of it.

My full-body exuberance—complete with pointing and exclamations of “*A sea turtle! A sea turtle!*”—caused me to wobble. Instantly the magic holding me aloft on the board dissolved, depositing me unceremoniously back into the water with a crash.



Alison Konecki finds rhythm, and a sea turtle. Video by Keola Kaeo, courtesy of Ohana Surf Project.

When I paddled back out to Matt my face was still split in a huge grin. And I wanted to know what made that wave so special. Why hadn't it spat me out like the others, or just flowed along? Why was it different?

Matt smiled. “That’s it—you never know. You can guess, and you get better at guessing, but it’s still a surprise sometimes. And that’s what keeps you going. You’re always chasing that feeling. A good wave will make you happy for a few minutes. A perfect barrel, well, that

might last you the rest of the day. Maybe even a few days. But you'll always be looking for more."

He straightened my board, pointing me toward the shore. "Ready?"

"Ready."

Whoosh.

AUTHOR BIO

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ALISON KONECKI

Alison Konecki is a writer whose curiosity for the world has sent her kayaking with orcas in the San Juan Islands, trekking in Patagonia, herding goats in France, and planting papaya saplings in Costa Rica. She has a graduate degree in Art and Museum Studies from Georgetown University and has held several arts fellowships. Her travel writing has appeared in Transitions Abroad, AFAR, and Hidden Compass. Since becoming a San Francisco transplant she's made it her mission to explore every trail, park, and campground in the West.

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