

To Catch a Buzz

It is spring and the time of the afternoon gales. Gusty southwest winds whip down the channel, stirring up the surface of the sea, the cool waters of the deep rising to replace the exiled warm surface waters. The nutrient-rich upwelled waters serve as food for phytoplankton, eaten by small fish, which are consumed by bigger fish, which in turn are devoured by the biggest fish in the sea. The wind heralds change; change in the air and change in the sea and all who live because of it. The ocean is alive with activity. It is a powerful time of year.

“How was work?” asks the lifeguard’s roommate.

“Pretty slow. No rescues and only a few minor medicals. Even though it’s a Saturday people aren’t ready to hit the beach yet. The water’s cooled down a lot with all of this wind.”

The lifeguard walks over to the window of their beachside apartment framing the top of Santa Cruz Island poking through the salt-infused horizon and begins stretching.

“So what are you up to now?” asks the lifeguard’s roommate.

“I’m going to head out for a paddle...there’s a good windswell and the southeast backing wind is filling in...should be primo conditions for an epic workout.”

“You’ve been paddling a lot lately – getting ready for the race season?” asks her roommate.

“Yeah, I’d like to do the Catalina Classic this year.”

“That’s a long one...32 miles, right?”

“Yup, and I’ve got to start upping my distance in preparation. In fact, I think I’m going to head out and spin up and around Platform Holly for the first time,” says the lifeguard.

“Whoa – she’s a ways out there. Are you sure about that? You know that whitey they’ve been seeing lately may still be around.”

“Aw, they’re out there all the time, no worries roomie, I’ll be fine.”

The ocean athlete heads out the door, her paddleboard held under her arm. As she walks along the bluff, her keen eyes evaluate the arena. It is a few hours before sunset, and, as anticipated, the southwest wind has blown itself out and the light southeasterly wind has filled in, creating plumes of spray as the breeze pushes back the top of the peaking windswell. Throughout the bay, pockets of surfers enjoy the fleeting surf in this, the worst time of year for waves.

After a short walk down the stairs to the beach, she puts on a visor for sun and spray protection, slips a dive knife beneath her trunks in the small of her back, and enters the sea. Having it there makes her, and perhaps more importantly, her parents feel more comfortable. She knows it isn’t anything more than a false sense of security; even if she needs it she doubts it would do her much good. Nonetheless, she feels naked without it and so with it she goes.

She starts off slowly, letting her muscles warm up as her hands pull her smoothly across the sea. The water changes from a glassy brown-green to a textured deep blue as she navigates through the swaying tentacles of kelp trying to entangle her board in their slimy grip. The disjointed head-high swell tumbles at her in short intervals as she falls into a steady rhythm.

“Dude, Casey, there goes that crazy paddler again,” said the slightly drunk UCSB student to his somewhat drunker roommate as he tossed his empty beer can amongst the other empties littering the deck.

“Yeah, she’s a stud. Some days I’ll see her head out as I’m leaving for class and then when I come back a few hours later she’s just returning. We get to see some pretty cool things from our oceanside balcony – I’m stoked we got this place, Curley.”

“Yeah, me too. Hey, grab me another Natty Light, dude.”

“Aye, you betcha, my friend.”

The lifeguard slips along the outside of the thinning kelp bed towards Coal Oil Point, making good time and psyching herself up for the fast-approaching left-hand turn that will direct her to Holly. Just how far offshore the rig is, she isn’t sure. Perhaps two miles, maybe more. She makes a mental note to measure it on the nautical chart she keeps on the wall in her room. Sitting only inches above the deep sea, she’s nervous but confident. She can do this.

She hasn’t been out so far since last summer’s race season; on her training paddles, she usually stays abreast of the shoreline, at times darting out to circle the odd crab pot or navigation buoy. But today she needs a challenge, to once again push her horizons and feel uncomfortable. Only by doing so will she grow, both in her confidence and her abilities. Others don’t understand why she takes what they feel are unnecessary risks, but for her, not doing so would rob her of her love of life. Only by pushing her limits does she feel alive. And today, alive is what she needs to feel.

And so the time for the sweep to the left comes. With a hoot to the surfers at the point, she changes her course and heads for the horizon and Holly.

The large white shark departs the warm inshore waters and cruises stealthily through the kelp into the cool dark waters of the California Current. Several rusty fishhooks dot the sides of her cavernous mouth, like medals on an officer’s chest, testament to the battles she’s won. Her powerful tail propels her across the bottom and through the few kelp fronds that reach toward her in an intricate swinging motion. Having not killed in days, she’s ravenous.

She’s halfway to Holly and the buzz that is life begins to spread through her body. She’s making good time and her stroke remains strong. Three pelicans glide gracefully ahead and to her right, seemingly leading her toward her mark. The water is no longer a deep blue, but more gray now, and the swells are a bit bigger, the water a bit colder. A fisherman in his craft passes across her course. She waves at him; the fisherman waves back and flashes her a thumbs up, which she returns. The fisherman continues on.

An angry whir accompanied by a stream of bubbles passes disturbingly close overhead, sending the shark deeper and away from the intrusion. After a spell, the intrusion fades away and she ascends to the surface to hunt.

The lifeguard approaches Holly – so close now she can read the signs warning inquisitive boaters away. There’s no sign of any workers. Given that it’s nearing dinner time, she figures they must be inside, eating their dinner. She’s buzzing with excitement and paddling fast. Her adrenaline-infused heart pounds a rapid rhythm throughout her board, not in apprehension, but rather anticipation.

“Hey Casey, did you see where that paddler went? I lost sight of her.”

“Um...no, last I saw she was headed out off the point.”

“Yeah, she probably went around the corner toward Sands.”

“Or maybe she made a turn for Platform Holly; I’m going to grab my binos and see if I can spot her.”

“Cool. Hey Gaucho, while you’re in there, grab me another beer, eh?”

The lifeguard circles Holly and heads for the beach, emotion surging through her body. She shouts in glee at the indolent seals lounging on the base of Holly, but they ignore her. A few in the water do turn and snort in her direction before splashing off in search of an unsuspecting fish for dinner. The windswell fills in behind her and she flies across the sea.

Attracted to movement on the surface, the shark quickly alters her course to investigate.

The lifeguard is having the time of her life. Each swell propels her with such force that she stops paddling and surfs down the face, the swell surging her forward dozens of feet at a spell. When the swell passes her by, she takes a few strokes to get back up to speed before the next swell arrives to send her skimming across the surface yet again. Swell after swell, stroke after stroke, her entire body resonates with bliss as she glides majestically across Poseidon’s deep. She’s in her element and loving life.

The shark moves in, stealthily stalking her prey in ever-tightening circles. Her target continues to move across the surface, unaware of death lurking below. Her body, taken over by instinct, torpedoes towards a sure kill.

“Holy shit!”

“What, Casey, what do you see?”

“Out there by Holly, I swear I just saw a huge shark attack something!”

“No way, kook, you’re buzzed and seeing things.”

“The hell I am – check it!”

It’s an awesome display of power. A flash of teeth, a scream of surprise, and a violent explosion as the ocean erupts in a bloody froth. But it’s over quickly as the shark makes short work of her hapless prey and tears off huge chunks of flesh. It’s her first kill in many days and the meal will provide her with sufficient fuel to last several more. Alerted to the kill, several gulls appear and eagerly vie for castoffs.

“Jesus, that is a shark! Underneath the gulls, right?”

“Yeah - What did it hit? Can you tell...Wait, shit, where’s the paddleboarder?”

“Goddam! I don’t see her...you don’t think...?”

She’s back inside the kelp now, fully satiated after realizing her target. Her strong muscles quiver from fatigue as she enters the warmer waters of the shallows. As her heart rate returns to normal, a warm buzz of satisfaction envelops her body.

The lifeguard reaches the beach and turns and faces the sea and the setting sun. She notices a few gulls flocking to a spot out past the kelp, obviously excited about something, but she can’t tell what it is. She whispers a goodbye and thank you to her three grandparents long since returned to the sea, and heads for home and a hot shower, the buzz that is life lighting her soul.