

17/7/07

Malley

As fourteen year old Mary O'Brien was being raped by the Bos'un, the stubborn English oak hull of HMS Winchester was ripped open by an unseen reef that would one day be called Wincho's by wary fishermen and even more wary surfers.

In moments, the black sea invaded the crippled Winchester and was licking viciously within, seeking its prey with murderous intent. All the girls aboard had felt the massive blow and the screams from the crew sent them into panic. In the madness and confusion, some of the weaker orphans were trampled down and sucked away by the liquid intruder in the lower holds. Screams filled the tight timber corridors and an icy gale snapped at the ears of the lucky few who managed to fight their way up and out, onto the deck. There wasn't enough time to cut the lifeboats free. There wasn't even enough time to shed any of the heavy clothing that, once waterlogged, would claim the remaining souls who managed to leap blindly into the void.

A hundred and fifty seven years, six months and fourteen days later, Malley's F150 rolls into the carpark near the point, a sweaty left leg catching on vinyl as it punches through the clutch. The stiff offshore lifts a cloud of dust over the bonnet of the ute as it pulls up alongside Matt Thompson's rust gilded EH wagon.

Thompson's board cover is doubled over in the back, so the waves are obviously good. Thommo rarely goes out here unless it's on. Malley steps up onto the bubbling forequarter guard of the Ford and squints at the horizon. If it's good, there's time for a couple of waves before sundown. A freight train right-hander breaks the silvery arc of the world, the plumes of spray from the offshore and the clean takeoff lines of a lone surfer unmistakable even at this distance. Malley fixes on the graceful dance of the boardrider, a black speck on a stringy tendon of ocean. Thompson judges the speed perfectly, fades into the power pocket of the wave and adjusts his line into a steep, tubing section. He disappears for a moment behind a curtain of water before cruising out safely and sliding over the shoulder of the wave. Malley's sphincter pulls tight and he goes scrambling for the dunny roll in the glove box.

Malley stands at the suckup rock inside the point waiting for the sets to subside. His wetsuit is perishing around the shoulders. It's three seasons past its use-by date - just like its owner around this part of the coast. The faded cracks in the rubber have exposed the stringy lining at the seam and a whiff

of stale piss is exhumed by the hot wind. Malley breathes it deep with the same satisfaction of pulling in one of his meaty farts.

In the late afternoon sunlight, the bombora half a kilometre out to sea looks far from haunted. Malley has never bought that shit. Figured it was just grog talk at the local. Standing here now, it looks like it would be a happy escape to paddle over there and lay among the seals. He imagines nestling up against one of Wincho's smooth boulders, the cloak of the sun's warmth out of the wind, his feet dangling in a cool rockpool. A million miles away from this town.

He leaps forward onto his board and is embraced by the backwash from the suckup rock, his heavy shoulders begin their work, falling quickly into the rhythm of the stroke. Leathery tongues of kelp lust at his arms, but he pushes past into deeper water and experiences a fleeting desire to paddle out past the point and keep going. Across that dark channel where you wouldn't dare look down. Make those mysterious rocks his new home. Just him and the seals. And whatever else they reckon is out there. Anything— imagined or otherwise - has gotta be a shitload better than the pricks he works for - the memories he deals with.

'G'ay mate,' mumbles Malley, slapping the water with each lazy stroke as he edges up to Thompson.

Thompson greets him with a flick of the eyebrows.

'Big hole on that last one. How many those y'had?'

'Couple. That section's quick but. Took a pounding earlier.'

'How long y'been out?'

'Forty-five maybe. Gettin' better I reckon.'

Malley sits outside Thompson, like he has for what seems like their whole lives. Thompson has had priority over almost everything Malley can remember. He was even first to have Meg. Malley never managed to extinguish that thought. Not even after ten years of marriage.

A dark line of swell rears up and in unison, they push forward on their boards and thrust urgently out to meet it. Malley knows not to turn and paddle for this one. Thompson is perfectly positioned, swinging around, stroking evenly and confidently. As the momentum catches, he places his hands on the rails of his board and arches his back, teasing the wave for a few delicious moments before easing up and slipping his feet quickly into position. Malley sits high on the crest of the breaking wave, craning his neck for a glimpse of his companion slicing a white swathe at the trough, the water draining viciously from the reef just a couple of feet below the surface. Thompson's heavy body from this high angle virtually eclipses the board. It's the only wave in the set and Malley turns again to see the nose of Thompson's board flash momentarily above the back of the wave in a powerful top turn that sends a rooster tail of spray up high in the late afternoon sunlight.

It takes Thompson several minutes to return to the takeoff point. Malley sits up on his board facing Thompson with a posture that clearly stakes claim over priority. Thompson pulls up a few feet away and levers himself up, astride his board.

'How the kids?'

‘OK – all things considered,’ says Malley, watching the horizon, waiting for the next question. But it doesn’t come.

‘Ya mum?’

‘Chemo’s killing her faster than the cancer I reckon. Cun’ava thing.’

The men sit in a thick silence. The wind is dropping now as the sun begins to fade. Malley’s mind works its way forward and he opens his mouth before he thinks.

‘Didn’t see you at the service,’ he says, regretting it instantly. He looks around for a response, but nothing. They settle back into silence.

‘You workin’?’ Malley changes the subject, knowing the answer.

‘Been workin’ on my backhand,’ Thompson grins.

‘Lines out the back,’ Malley’s trying to sound calm as a large set looms.

The men scratch at the water as the leading wave in the set rears up. Malley knows he has priority, but it’s his first wave and this one is well outside his comfort zone. He has no choice but to turn and take it. If he paddles over, Thompson will judge him. Just as he had when Malley and Meg got hitched. And just as he had when she topped herself a couple of months back. Maybe catching a wave like this will somehow... temper the judgement.

Malley squares his jaw, bringing the board to an abrupt halt by sitting upright, then pulls the rail around. The powerful ridges that scar the face of the wave are like the lean ribcage of a feline predator. The light offshore cuts at the crest and he lifts to his feet with surprising ease, well beyond the regular take off point. By the time the water is draining off the reef, Malley’s board is quivering with speed and he is well down the line. He leans into the face of the wave, pushes his legs heavily into the leading rail and feels the fins grab, the fragile board triumphing over the wave’s primal strength. Malley experiences sweet weightlessness as he drives up the face of the wave and jams his back foot hard to bring the board around under the lip and drop him perfectly into the next raking section. As he finally peels off the shoulder of the wave, he reflects that he has never surfed this break so far into the channel. He sees Thompson halfway along a wave of similar size. Typical, he thinks to himself. Grandstand full.

Thompson figures that Malley is watching. He stalls the board at the right moment and the wave throws theatrically over, enveloping him perfectly. One second. Two seconds. Almost three, when he drifts too high in the tube and a ridge catches his rail. In a moment, his board is vacuumed from beneath his feet and Malley watches Thompson somersaulting in a white vortex. Malley strokes over the shoulder of this wave and spots a massive set breaking way out. He turns away from the point to paddle wide out to sea, aiming his board straight at Wincho’s. He only just manages to evade the breaking crest of this black mountain of water, its raw power sucking at his feet. He looks back to see the carnage of frothy white water across the bay. Finally Thompson surfaces, flailing arms at the surface, heaving for air, struggling in the mad eddies of the bubbling ocean. Thompson reaches for his board, then smashes his fist in the water. Malley watches as Thompson slides up onto the bottom half of his broken surfboard. Malley has an overwhelming urge to laugh at the comical vision of Thompson paddling out on half a board and waits in the channel.

‘Fuckin’ bitch,’ says Thompson, paddling up to Malley.

‘Good board?’

‘Shit yeah. Can you see the nose?’

Malley sits up high on his board and peers toward shore. Nothing. He turns out to sea and spots the front end of Thompson’s board about sixty metres away, halfway between them and the bombora.

‘Gunna end up shipwrecked at Wincho’s. Fuckin’ ironic eh?’

‘I’m gunna get it.’

‘What? Fix it? Won’t be the same.’

‘Yeah it will. Two hundred bucks - good as new.’

Thompson now has to prove the point. They stare at each other.

For fuck’s sake, Malley thinks, we could be back at school.

‘Sun’s goin’ down quick.’

‘Best board I’ve had. I’m gettin’ it.’

Malley calculates the paddle out and looks back at the spot inside the point where they would need to go in. With the rip like it is, it’s a good forty-five minute return journey ... they wouldn’t get in till just after dark.

‘We better be quick.’

‘We? Nah... you get a couple more. I’ll see y’in there.’

Malley’s halfway back to the takeoff zone near the point when he relents, looking back at the lonely figure of Thompson paddling out to retrieve the nose of his surfboard. Even though he knows that Thompson wouldn’t do it for him if the situation was reversed, he turns and starts paddling out.

After a few minutes of hard paddling, he makes up at least half the distance. His mind is occupied by the briny stench of the sea and the intensity and continuousness of the paddle. The fine muscles in his shoulders are burning and it feels good. Thompson is much closer now and Malley can almost call out to him. As he is about to open his mouth and try, a steel grey body breaks the surface alongside, just metres away from him. At first, Malley thinks it must be a small whale, but the two foot triangular dorsal fin slicing through the glassy surface fills him with dread. Malley has never seen a shark in the water and had hypothesised his response for almost twenty five years. I’d be calm. I’d scare it off. I’d be in control. I’d attack it before it got me. No single theory now matched the massive dose of adrenalin in his system, the impossible pounding in his chest and the mash of thoughts that reeled within his head.

The shark cruises effortlessly past Malley and begins to slide into the ocean like a submarine in an old war movie. It’s heading straight for Wincho’s. Straight for Thompson.

Malley sits up on his board and musters all his energy, but the shock of the moment has stripped him of strength.

‘Shark!’ he calls out weakly. Thompson continues forward oblivious, lifting one arm after another.

‘Fuck. Fuck. FUCK,’ Malley stammers, paddling faster now.

‘Thommo... THOMMO!’ he calls much louder.

Thompson starts to turn when there’s an explosion beneath that catapults him high in the air. Malley stares at the perfect, pale underbelly of the White Pointer as it leaps up in the afternoon sunlight. It seems to hang in the air, its crazed red gash snapping blindly from side to side, raking for a target. Then it’s gone just as quick. And so is Thompson.

Malley paddles fast now, but something in the back of his mind tells him it’s all over. *And what will I do when I get there? Wait for it to get me? Fuck. Fuck.*

He sees an arm push through the surface and Thompson’s head appears, his eyes wild.

‘SHAARK, SHAAAAARK,’ he screams through gurgles. He starts to swim, but is suddenly jerked forward like a waterskier being pulled by a speedboat into a water start. Just as randomly, he is ripped under the surface, a few metres away from Malley. Then nothing. Nothing. The wind picks up for a moment, and dies away. Nothing. Finally Thompson splutters to the surface alongside Malley. Two or three metres away, the mangled remainder of Thompson’s board pops up, splinters of twisted fibreglass glitter in the sunlight.

Malley grabs Thompson and pulls him halfway up onto his board. Thompson’s face is white and disbelieving at seeing Malley. Malley looks down into the water. Two legs. Two feet. Intact. Thompson’s leash is still velcroed to his leg, but the neoprene cord has been razored neatly. Malley realises the shark has focused its rage on Thompson’s board.

And now I’ve arrived. On a bigger board. Fuck.

‘Quick,’ Malley says low and serious, ‘get onto my back.’

‘Won’t make it in,’ Thompson says blankly.

‘We’re not goin’ in. We’re paddlin’ to Wincho’s.’

Thompson struggles to lift himself up onto Malley’s back and there’s virtually nothing Malley can do to help him. There’s no purchase. Thompson splashes about, kicking at the surface to push up onto Malley’s board.

Splashing. That’s all we need. Fuck’s sake... we’re sitting ducks.

He’s waiting for the hit. The shark should have been back by now. As if on cue, a heavily scarred triangular head lifts several feet out of the water alongside the remains of Thompson’s board. There is a moment when Malley looks into a black, prehistoric eye that goes on and on forever.

I see it. It sees me.

Slowly, the creature splits open its head and engulfs the remainder of Thompson’s board. As Thompson struggles onto Malley’s back, Malley can do nothing but lie there and watch this unnatural orifice, like a fat hand in a sock puppet, as it crushes through foam, thrashing from side to side just a few feet away. Malley’s brain is feasting on a wild short film of rancid gums and mangled teeth shot beautifully in the low light of an arthouse cinematographer.

This is insane, some kind of fucking joke. Why doesn’t it go us? We’re like meat on a stick. Here for the taking.

Malley doesn’t ask Thompson if he’s right to go. He just starts to paddle. It’s awkward and it’s slow, but it’s better than sitting there waiting until the beast has finished with Thommo’s board. He suddenly has a vision of the kids back in that same crusty church. Weeping again for another lost

parent. What a tragedy, people will say, first her, then him. It's cruel, they will say. Then they'll all go on with their lives and pass his kids in the street with not much more than a nod.

It can't happen.

It seems like an eternity before Wincho's is tantalisingly close. Malley can't work out whether that bit of white water back there was a fin or just chop. Whatever. The shark must be circling them beneath. He's seen the documentaries. That's what they do. The fact that it hasn't attacked yet means nothing. It's a psychopath. There's no rhyme. No reason. It would know these rocks all too well. Where the seals enter the water. Where to corner newborn pups. How to kill quickly and efficiently. If it wants them, it will have them. One arm after another. It's all they can do.

To compensate for Thompson's weight, Malley's neck is arched to keep his head above the level of the water. Wedged there between Thompson and his submerged board, he feels pinned down and vulnerable. In the half-light, he looks down at the stark white nose of his surfboard and sees a cloud of dark fluid drift over it. Blood.

Fuck, he was hit.

'Thommo? THOMMO?'

Thompson grunts. Any moment Malley's expecting to see the shark burst through the surface of the water and tear at his face at point blank range. He shivers at this thought and refocuses on the rocks just ahead. The swell is breaking heavily on the bombora. There is no easy way to safety. If they can get even closer, the only option is to get smashed up onto the rocks by white water. Right now, it's a wonderful alternative.

Too tired to communicate, Malley scrapes at the surface of the water in the twilight. And then it hits. Malley wonders how it will feel to be chewed alive. But it's not the shark. It's the impact of a dark wall of water that lifts them up and up. Then down. Down. None of it makes sense. The board bumps his arm and he feels Thompson's leg against his back as they hurtle forward into the nest of rocks. Malley cracks his knee on something hard that flips him over and his head crunches into a boulder and then nothing.

Malley comes to in the dark. He's on his back up and out of the water. He feels sick. How long has he been there? He drifts in and out of consciousness. Against his hand he feels the texture of a wetsuit and is dimly aware of a shape. In the moonlight, he can see Thompson, leaning back, eyes closed, breathing deeply. Malley sits up, but it's too much, too quick. He falls sideways onto Thompson's shoulder. He lies there to gather his composure, breathing in and focusing on the air in and out of his throat. His eyes adjust to the moonlight and he sees a large gash in Thompson's thigh, the wetsuit an open smile revealing a slick tongue of muscle and fat. Malley gags, but holds it down.

'Thommo,' Malley slurs, but Thompson says nothing and Malley sinks again into the blackness.

Malley opens his eyes and looks up at the moon, which is neatly replaced by the milky face of a teenage girl.

Startled, Malley sits up and looks across at the girl, now squatting beside Thompson, staring at the gash in this thigh.

‘He’s hurt,’ says Malley blinking, ‘he’s bleeding.’

The girl can’t be much older than fifteen, but even in the moonlight he can see her eyes are glassy and faded. Her long sleeve dress is laced at the hem and is buttoned up to her neck. A dark bonnet keeps locks of hair in position. Her boots are laced all the way up her shins.

‘Whet’s ‘is nairm?’

‘Huh?’ says Malley.

‘Hes *nairm*.’

‘Matt.’

‘En yers?’

‘Brian.’

‘Well Brarn, wirr not for receivin’ vis’tors.’

‘He’ll die if we don’t get help.’

The girl calmly regards Malley for a moment, then turns and places her palm onto Thompson’s chest. Malley sees heavily wrinkled skin and long fingernails.

‘Hes alraidy movin’ on.’

A group of figures emerge from the darkness, all in the same long dresses and lace up boots. They stop further away, peering around the boulders at Malley. The girl sees Malley watching them and turns around. When she turns back, her eyes are alive and Malley sees something in them that snaps inside his head.

‘Had to do it Mall. Just had to,’ she says.

Malley stares at her, trying to make sense of where this new voice is coming from. A voice he knows so well. A voice that rips his mind back in time. He searches her face.

‘It was always him,’ she says, still with her palm on Thompson’s chest, ‘not your fault - shouldn’t blame yourself.’

‘Meg?’

‘I fucked it up Mall. I should have told you years ago.’

‘What is this?’ Malley looks around at the faces in the moonlight, ‘what the fuck is this?’

‘I made you pay for it all the way down the line and they’re not even yours.’

Malley stares at her. Trying to comprehend. Trying to work out if this is real.

‘What?’

‘The kids. I’m sorry Mall. They’re ... not yours,’ she’s says through sobs.

Then Malley sees it. The moments come tumbling in. The times she went away for days on end. The phone calls that went dead if he picked up. Her coldness when the kids were born. He thought it was postnatal depression. She even said that herself. Now his mind is racing. Is that why they never really looked like him? Is that why she couldn’t face his mum?

‘Who...?’

She stares at him. Waiting for the penny to drop. He looks at her face for clues, then his eyes shift down to where her hand lies on the chest of the man that always had priority in his life.

'Mall. I'm sorry Mall,' she says, but Malley is just staring. Staring. Slowly, he pushes himself up to his feet, staggering on the rocks, dealing with the concussion.

'Wirr d'yer think yer gawn? You won't mek it back,' the girl says, the flat, lifeless eyes returning.

Malley clammers over the boulders toward the flickering lights of the town, way off in the distance. He steps into the sea and feels the cold water apply comforting pressure all over his wetsuit. He pushes forward and begins to stroke into the darkness. The ocean sweeps through his mind, the saltwater eroding the layers of his life until only one thought remains.

I'm here. Come get me.