

Surfing Cactus Break  
An *Undercover Blues* story by Laney Cairo

“Why are we here?” Ryan asked, as the ute jolted over yet another pothole, shaking every bone in his body. “Please, tell me there’s a bloody good reason.”

Jason patted Ryan’s knee, and Ryan leaned his head against the back of the car seat. His legs were stuck to the vinyl upholstery, the sun was blasting directly through the open passenger window onto his arm and face, and it was hot enough to fry eggs on the dash. And that was without the dog on his lap, who panted unhappily, nose on the edge of the door.

“Wait until you see the break,” Jason said, swinging hard on the wheel, jerking the ute across the gravel road and around another pothole, skittering the tyres across the corrugated gravel.

Ryan was too hot to care about any surf break; he was too hot to care about anything. Sweat seeped out of every pore of his body, streaking down his back and sides, trickling down his legs, stinging his eyes. It must have been forty-five Celsius out there, and just about the same inside the cab of the ute. A perfect summer day. He swilled down half a bottle of water, and handed the rest over to Jason. They’d have to stop and let the dog, Blackie, re-hydrate soon, too.

He needed a beer, an ice-cold one, with condensation trickling down the glass, preferably from an esky packed with ice. If he rolled in ice, he might manage to cool down enough to survive.

The unsealed road lurched over a sand dune, glaring white sand and clumps of scrub, and the ocean gleamed in front of them, pristine green and turquoise out to the horizon, huge breakers rolling in, perfect curls of blue, breaking into dense white foam, the sky above absolutely cloudless, the sun bleaching the sky white. Ryan took his sunglasses off and squinted through the windscreen as Jason let the car coast down the last stretch of road, to a makeshift camping ground.

“How big is the break?” Ryan asked, awe in his voice. He could see a solitary figure out there, riding the wave, dwarfed by the mountain of water behind them.

“Reckon it’s rolling in at about four metres,” Jason said, sounding smug.

“Four metres,” Ryan repeated, swatting at his knee in attempt to dissuade the march fly that was chewing on his flesh.

“Big left-hander,” Jason said, and the ocean was temporarily out of sight as he rolled the ute to a halt in the camping area, across from the two tents already there.

Ryan undid the car door and hopped out, Blackie under his feet, and with the car engine off, ticking as it cooled, the boom of the surf was loud. The air was cooler, with salt spray blowing in from the sea, and Ryan didn’t wait for Jason, just took off across the scorching hot sand, down the worn path across the dune to the beach.

The beach, pure white sand, small breakers coming in, rips running out, stretched for a couple of kilometres each way, until headlands tumbled down into the ocean. And the break of Ryan’s dreams, empty, huge, a perfect left-hander, was in front of him. Blackie bounded into the foam where the breakers met the sand, barking like mad, and Jason, coming up behind Ryan, flung a sweaty arm around his shoulders, stinging his sunburn.

“Cactus Break,” Jason said with reverence. “The place where Huey lives. Famous for white pointer sharks and surfing, so don’t ever let anyone tell you Huey doesn’t understand irony.”

White pointer sharks? No damned fish was going to keep Ryan away from that break. It would be worth every bone-shaking, sweat-inducing moment of the drive in to surf a break like that one.

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It was a wildly exhilarating feeling, absolutely terrifying, feeling the tonnes of water building up behind him, the swell rising and rising; then came the moment of commitment, when Jason dug his hands and arms into the solid mass of water, driving himself and his board forward.

The wave scooped him up, flung him and his board towards shore, and Jason whooped with delight and bounced himself up onto his feet.

The wax lumps on his board gave his toes something to hang onto as he crouched; he leaned his weight forward, shifted his centre of gravity, and then he was flying, sliding across the face of the wave, hurtling so fast that his outstretched hand hurt where it brushed against the wave.

It was a huge bastard of a wave, coiling over, the biggest wave he'd ever ridden.

He had to stop himself from scanning the sheer wall of water beside him for sharks; there was absolutely nothing he could do, anyway, if he did spot one, except pray to Huey that he looked like a seal in his wetsuit and that that particular shark hated seal meat.

It had to end, after ten... fifteen... twenty seconds, the wave closing out as he rode across the face of the break, churning up sand and reef and seaweed, dropping him down into the morass. He took a deep breath and held it, wrapped his hands over his head to protect himself from his own board, and just let his body relax.

It took too long, being pounded against the hard sand of the seabed, shoulder and hip, feeling his board drag him down by his leg rope, sand in his mouth and eyes, water in his nose, until he was deposited in the shallow foam, ears ringing and breathe gasping.

First thing he heard was Blackie, barking excitedly, then someone—Ryan—grabbed him by the shoulders and lifted his face up out of the water.

“Jase!” Ryan shouted. Jason shook his ears to get some of the sand out, and retched up a mouthful of brine.

“Bugger,” Jason managed to gasp, and Ryan helped him to his feet, the foam surging around their calves, Blackie leaping up at both of them.

His board was a dead weight behind him, being buffeted around by the breakers rolling in, until Ryan picked it up and carried it.

Jason staggered out of the water and flopped onto the sand.

“Bloody hell, mate,” Ryan said, sticking Jason’s board into the sand and squatting down beside him. “You went under and you just stayed there!”

Jason’s breaths were still coming in shuddering gasps, as his body tried to pick up oxygen, so it took him a moment before he could lift his fist and shake it at the ocean.

“Is that all you’ve got to offer?” he croaked. “Next time, I want a real ride!”

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The cans of baked beans, lids prised off, were perched in the embers, bubbling evilly. Blackie, far too interested in the baked beans, had to be kept away by a stick waved in her direction.

“Go eat your dog food,” Ryan said sternly. “Let us eat ours.”

“Are we eating dog food?” Jason said, stepping into the light of the campfire and squatting down beside Ryan.

“Not really,” Ryan said. “We’re out of tinned braised steak and onions.”

Jason sat down beside Ryan and slid an arm around his waist, and Ryan had to smile at him.

They were both knackered, completely exhausted, from fighting the surf that afternoon. It was dark, the moon a thin sliver, and the Southern Cross hung shining in the black of the night sky, the Milky Way an extravagant blaze of stars overhead.

The surf boomed in, a wave every three or four seconds, making the air smell of salt, and Ryan could feel the impact of each wave as a faint tremor through his arse and legs.

He rubbed at his salt-encrusted hair with one hand and bopped Blackie on the nose with the stick with the other. Both men were sunburned, a little dehydrated, and caked in salt, but there was no running water; they were just going to have to stay salty, at least until they made the seventy-kilometre trek back out on the dirt track, to the Eyre Highway and a roadhouse.

“What you thinking?” Jason asked, sprawling back on the dune, arms stretched above his head.

Blackie leapt on Jason, licking his face, and he fended her off.

Ryan said, “You really want to know? I’m wondering how much of an issue the salt is going to be tonight.”

“Pity.”

They had their tent set up, a flimsy two-man tent, but there was the matter of the four other people at the campsite.

“Think you can be quiet?” Ryan asked.

“Of course,” Jason said. “Aren’t I always?”

One of the tins of baked beans spat into the embers, the beans heaving and bubbling.

“Sure,” Ryan said. “Dinner’s ready.”

He had barbecue tongs to lift the cans out of the embers with, which was a good thing since they were far too hot to touch.

They ate in silence, using plastic forks to eat the beans out of the tins, then Jason dug the bottle of whiskey out of the back of the ute.

“Water? Whiskey?” he said, waving a two-litre bottle of water at Ryan. “Wanna go to bed?”

Ryan stood up and kicked some sand onto the embers, damping them down.

“You’ve got dirty hands,” he pointed out. “You might want to use some of that water to wash them in.”

Jason lifted the flap of their tent, and Blackie dived in.

“What’s a little soot between friends?” Jason asked, wiping one hand on his windcheater.

Ryan shook his head as he stooped and crawled into the tent. His whole body ached from being pummelled by the surf, and he was far too tired to argue with Jason over personal hygiene.

Jason followed him in and zipped the tent up, and they had a confused moment of fumbling in the darkness before Ryan found their torch and switched it on.

The torch gave enough light to get the sleeping bag undone and remove Blackie from it, then Ryan scrambled out of his track pants and windcheater and slid into the sleeping bag. It would be full of sand, but that was just one of those things.

Jason dropped his clothes, which Blackie pounced on, and clambered in beside Ryan, then switched the torch off.

“Hands aren’t dirty in the dark,” he said, his stubble brushing against Ryan’s neck.

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The part of Jason’s life where Ryan got covered in bruises was supposed to be over, but at least Ryan wasn’t whining.

“How bad is it?” Ryan asked, while Jason emptied a bottle of drinking water over his back.

“You’re turning purple already,” Jason said, wiping at Ryan’s back with the edge of the cleanest t-shirt he could find. “How’re the ribs?”

Ryan moved his arms and took a couple of deep breaths. “Dull pain only,” he said. “No breaks.”

He turned around carefully, peeling his wetsuit off his arms with Jason’s help, then Jason touched Ryan’s cheek, checking his colour under his thick layer of zinc cream and sunscreen.

“Do you want to go?” Jason asked. “We can drive back out to Ceduna before dark, get you some painkillers, maybe even an x-ray at the hospital there.”

“No way,” Ryan said. “I’m not leaving here until we run out of food or water.”

It was hot on the sand of the beach, with a full-length wetsuit on, and Ryan’s exposed skin would be burning instantly. Other places had ozone layers, but this far south, there was nothing over them stopping the sun from ripping their skin to pieces.

“What do you think of this?” Jason said. “We hang out here for the rest of the day. The sea breeze will be in soon, and even with a two-metre swell, it’s going to take the tops off the waves, flatten things out a little. We surf a bit more, perhaps without you getting pounded into a pulp again, then knock off early.”

“Sounds good so far,” Ryan said. “So how come you’re grinning?”

Jason’s cheeks creased further, cracking his own layer of sand-embedded zinc cream.

“I had a word with the other blokes from the campsite earlier, while I was queuing up with them. They said they were going to go try Spoggies Break this afternoon, when the sea breeze came in, see if the waves were holding their curl there. We could find some shade, make some noise.”

“Noise?” Ryan said speculatively, screwing up his zinc cream-coated lips. “That kind of noise?”

“That kind of noise,” Jason said, holding his hand out to Ryan to help him to his feet.

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Shade was non-existent, so they wound up in their tent, just in case anyone else drove down the dirt road to Cactus; they left flap open to catch the sea breeze.

Jason was sore from surfing, completely encrusted in salt, zinc cream and sand, sunburnt, hungry and deliriously happy.

And Ryan... Ryan was just Ryan.

END

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