

Emily

Who was I kidding? I didn't belong here. I should've taken the hint and jumped back in the car when my wetsuit struggled to contain the post-baby body I loathed. Instead, I focused on why I was doing this.

Walking down the dune, a group of women gathered on a small part of the shoreline with others dotting the surf. I knew they'd be here. I'd looked up their meeting times on their website. My plan was to watch them from afar. I never expected they'd be almost the only ones here – too late for dedicated surfers and too early in the season to draw any crowds other than a solitary beach walker.

“Hi, I'm Connie.” Connie extended her hand after jogging to greet me. “You must be joining us today.”

“I'm Sarah.” What other reason could I have for being here?

Connie stood in the soft sand, her wetsuit peeled down to expose her toned torso, the suit's arms flapping about her legs. The sea had already soaked her short blonde hair. I shook her hand while struggling with the weight of the surfboard digging into my arm pit.

“Little one's with Dad?” she asked.

The seagulls and the screaming children distracted Connie. Five toddlers chased the birds as fast as their chubby little legs could take them. A woman jogged slowly behind. Could that ever be me?

“That one's mine,” Connie pointed. “With the black trucker hat. Just turned two.” She turned back to me. “Why don't you jump in? We can chat after. I remember those early days, rushing to make it back home in time for the next feed.”

“I don’t know, I haven’t surfed in years,” I admitted. The longest sentence I’d muttered all week.

“It’s like riding a bike. Promise. You’ll feel like a new woman after. And you picked the day for it, only clean ones out there.”

Surfing Mums had appeared on the local news while I was pregnant. A group of mothers taking turns in the water and looking after each other’s kids on the beach. It reminded me of how much I had loved surfing before life got busy. Connie was one of the mothers who had been interviewed. I had imagined myself as her friend, as part of this group. I had imagined my daughter playing on the sand with everyone else’s. This is where we would be each week. These mums had looked more like my kind of parenting group than the paranoid, information-obsessed mothers in my antenatal course. I was going to be a Surfing Mum.

The icy water stabbed my feet like tiny needles until they became as numb as the rest of me. The Australian Eastern Current was late in warming up the east coast. Butterflies fluttered inside my stomach, so much like those early pregnancy kicks.

In the interview, Connie had spoken about the feeling of catching that first wave. After eight weeks, I just wanted to feel something.

I slid onto the board, wincing from the pain of my squashed breasts. Despite no longer producing milk, they were still large, sore and tender. I raised my chest and paddled, blinking away the saltwater stinging my eyes. My lower back ached by the time I’d made my way to the back. It wasn’t used to being arched. I’d spent so much time curled up on the couch.

Before any of the Surfing Mums straddling their boards could speak to me, I spun around. I wasn’t here for them; I was here for euphoria. I dug my hands deep into the cold water, my fingers freezing, my shoulders burning. Left, right, left, right. The wave’s crest

formed underneath, and it pulled me along, making each stroke easier. The board was gliding, almost skimming the surface. My breath quickened and then the board slid back, and the wave raced ahead, leaving me behind, the spray climbing into the sky ahead of me.

I'd missed it. I'd paddled too slowly, or not soon enough. I'd rushed into it without thinking. My heartbeat rang in my ears as I returned to the back. I hated the sound of a thumping heart. Bile crawled up the back of my throat at the memory of it.

A Surfing Mum caught a wave perfectly. Her baby was probably on the shore, playing with the others on the laid-out towels.

Again. This time, I planned my move. This time, I would learn from my mistake. I wouldn't let it happen again. The crest was coming, and I paddled. This time I was far enough ahead of the wave to feel it lift the back of the board. The peak formed and I pushed down with tired and weak arms, struggling to lift my torso. The nose of the board plunged straight down, the back flipping me over like I was a pancake in a pan. Before I could gulp any air, water rushed into my mouth. The leg rope yanked my ankle as the board tossed in the whitewash. Somehow, I found the surface. I thrashed my arms and legs around, trying to get my bearings, desperate to stay afloat. My toes banged hard into the sand, and I winced from the pain. Desperate for oxygen, I pulled away the sticky hair blocking my mouth and coughed until my airways were clear, sea water streaming from my nose. Waves slammed into me as I pulled the board to me.

My useless body had let me down. Again. It knew what to do; it was instinctual. And yet, it hadn't. The glare off the water blinded me, just as the hospital lights had as I'd laid in the freezing delivery room.

"You alright?" someone shouted. It was the Surfing Mum from before, paddling back out to catch another wave.

I held back my tears and nodded.

“It takes a few goes. Just try again. You’ll get it next time,” she said as she passed by.

Again. I heaved myself back on the board, aimed for the surf, and paddled. Each wave knocked harder than the one before, taunting me: you can’t make it, you can’t do this. But I did. Exhausted, I lay down on top of the board as it bobbed in the blue ocean.

“You’re new to Surfing Mums? I’m Laura, by the way,” Laura slid alongside me.

“First time back in the water is the hardest.”

I pulled myself up, still struggling to catch my breath. I didn’t want Laura to speak to me. I had enough friends. The ones that didn’t know what to say, the ones that looked at me with pity, or worse, the ones that just cried.

“First-time mum?” Laura asked.

“Yeah.”

“Boy or girl?”

“Girl. Emily.”

“I love that name.”

I had always wanted the name Emily. It had taken months for Greg to concede. There were too many Emilys in the world, he had argued, but I loved the delicate way the -ly rolled off my tongue. When I first cradled her tiny still body, with silence filling the delivery room, I could barely say her name out loud.

“This one, go for it,” Laura said.

I spun the board's nose to the beach. The water passed through my fingers. The sound of the world fell away. All the pain in my body and limbs eased. The wave picked me up from the middle, arms holding strong. I pulled my leg forward, foot landing flat, standing.

And then, I was flying.

I was as light as a feather, as light as Emily had been, and I could feel her little kicks against my belly button and hear her little heartbeat coming from the monitor's speakers and see her cherry red lips and smell her newborn scent. She wasn't ever in my lifeless home, or left behind at the sterile hospital, or alone under mounds of cold dirt. She was here in this feeling of inexplicable lightness and joy and happiness. I'd found her. Tears rolled down my face.

I glided until the wave grew too weak to carry me. I jumped off, grabbed the board, and walked to shore.

"How'd you go?" Connie asked.

"Good." My cheeks hurt. I couldn't remember the last time I had smiled.

"Bring your little one next time," she said.

And the emptiness was back.

I had so wanted Emily and me to be like these mothers with their babies and toddlers covered in sand.