

Excerpt from
House Inside the Waves: Domesticity, Art and the Surfing Life
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"Reeeef!"

In the predawn blackness of our bedroom I hear thunderous waves churn into the beach. Then I detect another faint whisper. "Reef." Finally there's a chorus of high-pitched voices. "Reeeeeef! Come out and play!"

"They're here already, Rick," my wife Dale says. " Tell them to be quiet or they'll wake the girls." As soon as I pull back the curtain, I spot the Three Amigos - Kiko, Neil and Mihkel, a trio of hopeful, middle-aged fools. Grinning and bleary-eyed in the dawn, they press their faces against the window and chant, " Cookies."

My oatmeal coconut chocolate chip cookies have become famous here in Australia, even with hard-core surfers. At first the Amigos were nervous and suspicious about my househusband program and the whole cookie thing. Then, early one morning, we came in from the surf at Lennox Point and stripped off our wetsuits, our feet bleeding from the reef, the muscles of our upper bodies pumped, ripped and bruised. While leaning against rusty old cars in the parking lot, I pulled out a plastic container of my cookies. After their first hesitant taste, the boys were hooked and I was compelled to produce a steady supply for their addiction. Since then, most of my Aussie surfing buddies have quietly taken me aside to procure the recipe.

Because of my rabid passion for surfing and an overzealous comment I made about the curvaceous, tanned derriere of a tall Reef Girl in a thong bikini ad for Reef Surfwear in a surfing magazine, the Three Amigos have begun calling me Reef. The nickname solidified after a wonderful early morning session at Flat Rock with Neil, another South African who's found sanctuary in Oz. After Neil experienced an abusive stint in the South African army, three years at Durban Art School, the usual number of soul-shrinking jobs, and a stint as a co-owner of a restaurant that went under in Adelaide, he and his wife landed in Lennox. During a serious health crisis that laid him up

in the hospital, Neil became even better friends with Kiko, who paid loyal vigils to his bedside. As a result, Neil has that overwhelming gratitude and hunger for life that hovers over someone who has cheated death. A mature, solid family man with two older boys, Neil also has a boyish streak and a devilish chipmunk grin and can be quite intense and silly in the head.

These days Neil has structured his work so he has Fridays off to surf. In South Africa he surfed Jeffery's Bay, one of the sharkiest places in the world. Out on our reef his annoying respect for deep, dark water means he sometimes dwells on what is almost certainly below the surface of the waves. Whenever Neil says, "Reef, look at all those fish. Hope nothing bigger's eating them," I launch into flights of literary reverie and think of a line from a Herman Melville poem, "The shark glides white through the phosphorous sea," or W.B. Yeats's beautiful sea with its murderous innocence. Neil is getting to the age where he usually pays for his surfing with a stiff neck, pulled back muscles, and banged up knees. He claims Lennox Head is a town where old surfers come to settle and raise their families.

That morning after surfing at Flat Rock where Neil pulled off elegant high-on-the-shoulder 'magazine shot' waves, two Reef Girls came out of the waves, their wetsuits gleaming. Neil was drying his suit and surfboard, fussing around in the trunk of his car, and lecturing me about not getting cookie crumbs on the seats or a single drop of salt water on the paint job of his precious vehicle. The two girls arrived at the car next to us and pulled down their wetsuits, exposing lovely tanned backs. And then, unbelievably, they turned around. Both had long, sun-bleached hair, pretty faces, white teeth, wondrous breasts, and no doubt towering intellects. Dolphins were plying the bay, and the surf was grinding into the beach. Neil was still organizing his toiletries and disentangling bungee cords for the roof rack when I casually tapped him on the shoulder. His pursed lips and dull eyes revealed he was more than a little put out by my interruption. But when he turned to see the squirrely look in my eyes and then glanced at the astonishing pair of Reef Girls, naked from the waist up, he froze. Then, in his quiet, terribly civilized South African accent, he hoarsely whispered, "My God, Reef."

Life most restless surfers, Neil gets up at first light, sticks his head out a window, and scans the horizon for swells. He loads up his car and hits the beach parking lot in town. Solemnly he stands at the railing, checks out the waves, tastes the wind, estimates its direction and variations over the next

few hours, then calculates everything with respect to the incoming or outgoing tide. After that he drives to the outskirts of town to check the wave conditions from the top of Lennox Point. Once in a while he'll drive farther afield to study the surf at Boulders, Sharps, or Flat Rock. In their sputtering, oil-belching vehicles, Kiko, Mihkel, and Neil usually rendezvous at my place on Raynor Lane because I'm right on the water and central. Depending on the tide and how long the wind stays off the surf and the amount of stink-eye we're willing to endure from our respective wives, we choose a spot and surf for a few hours of bliss.

Describing the act of surfing to a nonsurfer is like telling someone about your last session of sex. The atmosphere, circumstances, buildup, and quirky characters who participate in the event are as interesting as the lovemaking itself. And so it is with surfing. Aside from the waves we caught and the extraordinary Reef Girls we saw that morning at Flat Rock, we had the pleasure of surfing with a one-armed surfer named Terry. As Neil and I were paddling together in absolute glassy conditions with a gentle swell jacking up to good size waves on the outer reef, we watched the one-armed surfer take his drop and execute a fine wave. When we caught up with Terry, he told us surfing legend Bob McTavish was a friend who personally shaped his boards. " Ah, yeah, McTavish likes to tell everyone Oyster paddle in circles," he joked, effortlessly thrusting with his one good, meaty arm as Neil and I humped our boards through the water, wheezing like old dogs.

Terry always straddles his board just outside the breaking waves and waits. Swells roll in, lift him, then roll on into the beach. But he waits patiently for the right wave, then windmills furiously with one arm and makes his drop, left or right, and never fails. Along with a true waterman's skill acquired over a long period, he's got guts and is always cheerful. In his presence a rowdy crowd will turn mellow, almost reflective. Terry's got the right grip on life. A better grip than most of the two armed surfers I've met, myself included.

Often we see long-haired hippie Jeff in the surf, sharking the waters for waves. Because summer has arrived and the ocean has gotten warmer, a lot of surfers go without wetsuits. The atmosphere in the waves and on the beaches has become more like Hawaii or California again. Jeff is the quintessential local, aging surfer. Unencumbered by a wife, kids, or a nine-to-five job, he camps just down Raynor Lane in a tiny flat whose walls are covered with photos of scantily clad Reef Girls and posters of surfers on awesome waves. One day while we both dropped in on the same big wave

and were nicely accelerating along the glassy wall together, he flailed his arms and screamed, "What the fuck are you doing, mate? Tying your shoelaces?" Jeff works part-time installing hardwood floors, selling the odd surfboard, and teaching at a surf school in Byron Bay. His old Volkswagen van is rigged for camping, working, surfing and making out. The Three Amigos, some of my other surf-dog friends, and I might have become Jeff if we hadn't been saved from ourselves by our good women.

The far north coast of New South Wales is rife with a scary number of surfers who have mortgaged their lives so they can live near the beach and surf. A lot of surfers, fishermen, junkies, retirees, windsurfers, skateboarders, single moms, and wannabe artists have ended up shipwrecked here. They're escapees from the urban rat races of Sydney, Melbourne or from constricting inland hick towns like Broken Hill, Towamba, and Wagga Wagga. I've met people from Japan, Israel, Canada, the United States, France, and England who are living here indefinitely. They're all lured by the great weather, surfing, fishing, and a laid-back beach lifestyle. Dale has always known about and happily gone along with my gravitational pull toward the beach. But now she's a little concerned and has intimated that in only one year here I've begun my decline from a sensitive, considerate househusband toward a hard core macho surfer jerk.

Now, after being serenaded by the Three Amigos, I pile my surf gear into Kiko's van and we motor off for a dawn patrol. Neil and Mihkel follow in Neil's car and we head for Wategos for a surf. The night before I made a batch of cookies for the boys, so we're all set. As we round the corner above Wategos, we see twenty layers of peeling waves breaking all over the place with only a handful of lucky surfers quietly taking their drops. Everything seems in slow motion, and I think of a nice line from James Hamilton-Patterson's book *Playing With Water*: " The sea turns over and over, a geological machine smoothly meshing its gears and grinding up time itself. " Kiko looks at me and grins. " Shall we imbibe, Reef?"

When you get to a beach, everything seems possible. If hedonism is a belief that the most important part of human destiny is to have a good time, then that's exactly where the Three Amigos and I are headed. Like a quartet of Hollywood gunslingers or pilots, we stride along the scumbled sand, our surfboards tucked under our arms, checking out the waves and the babes. We walk as far as we can to the end of the point and jump in with our boards, surrendering to the warmth of the Pacific. Up and down through the silky swells we paddle until we're outside the reef. Then we discover why

there aren't a lot of other surfers here. The sea is filled with jellyfish. Kiko and Neil catch the first big wave. I watch their heads trim below the lip of their wave as they disappear toward shore, leaving me alone with Mihkel and the jellyfish. Daintily we paddle along, dodging foot long tentacles, which occasionally sting our wrists, forearms and legs. I count a half dozen dolphins flying through the waves and playing around us. Covered in swollen welts, I quickly stroke into a full wave and do my drop, glimpsing the Byron Bay lighthouse set against the sky. Then, as I cut back and accelerate along another steep section, I gaze at Mount Warning and the soft line of mountains beneath ragged clouds - perhaps for the last time.

A little later, out in the water, Mihkel says, " Mate, it's incredible. Here we are an Estonian, a South African, an American and a Canadian - the new Australians." Mihkel is an art instructor who slogged out a decade teaching at a school a couple of hundred miles inland before he and his wife earned their plum jobs on this coast. He has thick, long blond hair and piercing blue eyes the ladies swoon over. A gifted artist, and absolute gentleman, he doesn't live to surf anymore. He surfs because being in the ocean still makes him happy and he enjoys the company of Kiko and Neil. For years the Three Amigos surfed with their longboards California-style and had most of the waves to themselves. Now the longboard revolution has made the traditional boards fashionable again, especially with aging baby boomers.

After a while the Three Amigos and I get tired of battling the jellyfish and head back to shore where we sprawl on the sand, scanning the horizon. Truant adults playing hooky from our lives, we talk about our wives and children, where we've been, and where we're going. The air fresh, the waves eternal, the summer seemingly endless.