

The Way She Surfs

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A story in five parts.

By Paige Briscoe

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Acknowledgements	4
i.	6
ii.	9
iii.....	13
iv.	20
v.	28
About the Author	36

i.

Wings beat and glide, beat and glide overhead, white feathers absorbing the heat. The blazing sun, enthalpy. Beak opening, closing. Nautical bleating. Shadows passing, swooping and looping, high and low. Under clouds, over sea. They pull up short, abrupt. Wings beating back and forth, back and forth softly as they hover. Webbed feet emerge, blinding orange against snow white. Extended, joints stretched, they land, toes curling around rust brown bars. They spread their wings once again, a flex of their might, a shake to send the sand away. Like Alex they face the sea, beaks pointed out. Alex shifts her vision to focus on the birds, but keeps the surfer in the corner of her eye. Watching. *Seagulls – they’re not the most elegant of birds*, she thinks. *Nothing like a falcon, an owl. The starlings that nest beneath the pier.* A cloud passes over the sun, hides her gleaming face from the world. Oh, how Alex longs to be her. Alex lets go of the hand she’s holding, lets her fingers fall between the slits of the bench. Takes a deep breath. Her body is shaking; subtle tremors that stretch from her head to her toes. Her palms are coated with sweat. She rubs them dry on her thighs. She doesn’t know why she’s brought him here. This is her spot - their spot - it’s not for him to share.

That’s not true. She knows why she’s brought him here - why she’s at this spot. Before them, the sea is calm; waves advance and retreat as they please, the gentle sounds of them spraying on rocks fills her ears. The lighthouse is dark today - there’s no fog disrupting sailors’ vision, the

sun shining a clear path over the water. Alex lives for days like these, where everything is just right; well, everything but the slight nausea in her stomach. *It's just nerves*, she tells herself. *But you're doing the right thing*. She takes another deep breath.

"I think we need to break up," she says, announces. Not once has she looked at the man beside her since they sat down. Her eyes are always on the birds, the waves, the woman who surfs. The glistening of the blue-green sea as it rises and falls, tumbles and curls.

Adrian – her boyfriend, her ex-boyfriend – sighs. "I know."

Alex finally – finally – looks at him. He's not looking at her. A game of cat and mouse with their gazes, chicken. His eyes are on the horizon, searching – but for what, Alex doesn't know. He brushes something imaginary off of his knees.

"You do?" Alex looks back out at the sea, retains his outline in the corner of her eye. She catches his nod.

"I do," he answers. A bird, far out, swoops down. It's on the hunt. They both watch in silence as the bird skims the water, flies back up; fish clasped tightly in its claws. The fish flops about for a few seconds before giving up, dejected. Prey. Accepting its fate. The circle of life.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Why make it harder for you?"

Alex turns sharply toward him. She opens her mouth to speak, but Adrian holds up a hand to silence her.

"I was your beard, wasn't I?" he smiles wistfully at her. "It's okay, I'm not mad at you. I know it wasn't intentional. You didn't know."

"What are you-"

"Don't, Alex. You don't have to pretend, not to me. I've suspected it for a while, I knew this was coming."

Alex feels her own heart break, her breath catch in her chest. This wasn't what she had intended. "Look," she begins.

Adrian starts laughing. It's almost hollow. "I didn't mean that in a cynical way. We've been friends for years, Ally; I know you. And I know when something's not right." He isn't looking at her. "I thought things would get better, especially after we spent Christmas at home, but these last few months..." He shrugs. "I'm not mad. I have no right to be. Sure, it kind of hurts right now. But it sucks for both of us, I know that, at least."

Alex is crying. The sea whooshes beneath them, waves receding, pushing; the rush against the rocks, the breaking of foam, spraying of salt in the air. Adrian puts his arm around her shoulders, pulls her in to rest her head on him. He rubs her arm, comforting. Affectionate. Platonic.

"I'm sorry." She says. He makes no confirmation of hearing her, but that's okay.

ii.

The rain hits, hits; pummels her face, her neck - the wind snapped her umbrella hours ago. She is defenceless, yet resilient. She pulls the drawstrings around her neck, tighter, tighter - an almost useless shield, but a shield nonetheless. There are no birds around her today, no gulls for her to observe. No man to sit beside her. She is alone.

Almost alone. Out at sea, across the watery depths, she (Alex doesn't know her name, probably never will) plays *tig-you're-it* with the waves. This is the fourth week that Alex has come to this jetty, alone, to watch this woman surf. The whole ordeal, to Alex, is mesmerising. Or maybe the woman is the mesmerising part. Alex feels like the *Bandar-log*, hypnotised by the hissing and swaying of Kaa as he preps for his feast upon the monkey people. She has no feast to look forward to, no mass brawl to feed upon and gain satisfaction from. She does, however, have a leftover korma sitting in her fridge, coconut milk seeping into every pore of her chicken pieces. Absorbing the cumin spice, ginger, garlic; marinating the rice that floats in every which way, swimming like fish against the tide when she stirs the pot above the flame.

The cotton of her socks clings to every inch of her foot (which isn't many, actually - Alex has tiny, tiny feet for an adult. It is both a blessing and a curse), cloaking her toes, the maybe (read: definitely) too long nails. Every slight movement sends a convulsing shudder through her as she feels her damp feet press into the equally damp sole of her shoes.

Canvas. Futile in the rain, mud- even a weakling to grass, sometimes, a victim to the green stains of chlorophyll. She can feel water move from one material to the other. Osmosis. Pressure. Alex sneezes. Somewhere, a gull bleats. She should have dressed for the weather - nothing she is wearing is appropriate. First there's the shitty Converse, then the faux leather ('pleather', if you will) trousers, sticking to her thighs and calves, burning and tingling her skin from the cold. Removing those later will be like removing a strip of hot wax - better to rip it off all in one than peel and flinch for who knows how long. It doesn't get much better on her top half. There's no layer method - just a low grade cotton t-shirt with a quote from *Parks and Recreation* printed on, underneath a now soaked raincoat. *I should invest in a decent umbrella, she thinks, maybe one from Next, or Debenhams.*

Alex wonders why the rain hasn't deterred the surfer. She must be dedicated. Inspired. Alex wants to know her name, her story- her voice. Her. The waters are rougher, waves tougher; far out, a wave rises high, white foam curling in. Crashing. Battering itself, its sisters. She compares herself to the water. Inhales. The sea smells so familiar to her now. Always in the back of her mind, her throat. Her body is the rocks. Her mind is the waves; crashing against, receding, crashing again. Temporal. Thoughts rushing in, out. No drop the same. Acceptance. Admittance.

I think -

There's no light bulb moment. No bath tub experience, where she sits, relaxed in bubbles up to her chin, before gasping, lurching forth. Yelling the age-old phrase 'eureka'. No, none of that. Quite the opposite, in fact.

It is a slow burn, like a fire on the beach in the wind and fine rain - the flames are there, the ashes are forming, but there's no engulfing. No accelerant. Just a dim, flickering flame. The softest wind could blow her out, turn her to smoke. Raise her body; ethereal. Float to the heavens.

that -

It started with a dream. A fleeting, half remembered flight of fancy with a girl dressed in green velvet and a mass of peach coloured hair.

It built into cautious, hidden glances at their rears, their breasts. Burning, flushed cheeks - the embarrassment, the shame, the fear.

And now it's averted gazes, transient eye contact. Soft smiles that last for minutes after. Fluttering carnivorous butterflies stirring up nausea in her stomach, eating her alive. Maggots on a corpse. Sickness that lasts for hours. Panics - bursts of short breaths, gasps. Suffocation. Eyes on the brink of tears - a stinging. Tightening of her throat, an invisible boa; constricting. Guilt, lingering in the wisps of every thought. Lurking in the shadows of every encounter.

I might -

Deafening silence. Moments of nothingness, stillness. Fear of moving, of shattering the illusion. More fragile than ever before, a thin champagne flute. Stones in glasshouses.

be -

A bird shits at her feet.

gay.

She looks up, watches the seagull fly away, leave her behind. The rain has already washed the excrement away, has dripped it through the slits between the slats. Alex tries to look down; to see the water below, find out if the sea has been tainted. If she can spot the mar.

Alex wonders how she looks. Overthinks. Stresses. The energy she exhumes- is there a vibe? Do people already know? Adrian knew. Knows. Supports. Reassures. She's not broken. She's not 'wrong' or 'disgusting' or 'sick'. She's just. Gay.

iii.

Alex looks different to the last time she was home. She's finally, finally, sinking into her skin. Growing into the husk shell that she was before. Accepting herself. Her hair is bleached at the ends. Brown fading into blonde. Ombré. She is still contemplating coating the blonde with blue or pink or red or green, but that might be too much too soon. Or just too much in general; coloured hair isn't really her. She's never looked anything but plain.

Her father picks her up from the train station, waits in the car for her. Doesn't offer a hand to help with her case, doesn't say hello. Presses a button that unlocks the boot, pops it open just enough for her to slip a finger in, a hand, push it up. Heave her case inside. She climbs into the passenger seat, sits beside him. He turns the engine over, starts the drive to their house- this is all normal. He isn't a big talker. *He doesn't know*, she repeats, over and over and over. The coldness from him isn't because of that. This is just who he is. She loves him for it. Their companioned silence drones on. And then: "You've changed your hair." A side glance, a once-over look to confirm his statement, a check for any more discrepancies.

"Yeah," Alex says, reconfirms. Twirls a blonde strand through her hand. "I thought it was time for a change." Nothing more is said. The air around them loses its charge, the static dissipates as Alex relaxes, sinks deeper into the car's interior. They are comfortable. Friendly, almost. Alex

watches the trees as they pass by, shades of green fluctuating between light and dark and freckled with brown.

“How long are you back for?” He asks her. His eyes do not leave the road, but there’s nothing untoward in his voice. She suspects whatever the answer, he won’t particularly care.

“Just the weekend. I have work on Monday evening.”

Now he glances towards her. “You got a job?”

Alex clears her throat. “Yeah, I, uh, teach kids how to swim. It’s just an after-school club once a week. It’s not bad.” Alex smiles to herself. “Some of the kids are pretty funny.”

Her mother is waiting for their arrival. She has the front door open as soon as they pull up on the driveway, gives Alex a hug and a kiss on the cheek in lieu of a greeting. Takes a strand of Alex’s hair and wraps it around one of her own fingers.

“This is very nice,” she tells Alex, beaming. “It suits you.” Alex smiles. Her mother is a far kinder soul, sweeter than her father; a cinnamon bun fresh out of the oven. The family dog, a sweet, five-year-old collie, barges through the hallway, her short, stubby nails clacking on wood. Bounds towards the sound of her, the familiar scent. Launches at Alex, back paws barely on the ground still. Heavy panting, tail wagging. Alex laughs, gives Cassie all the fuss that she deserves.

Alex is positively stuffed. If there is one thing about home that Alex misses more than Cassie, then it is definitely her mother's cooking. She isn't amazing, her mother, and Gordon Ramsay would definitely flay her alive if he were to ever witness her technique, taste her creations - but she's the cook. The home-maker. Marge, the culinary enthusiast. Her food has never, ever failed to cheer Alex up, leave her sated. She is lucky, she knows.

"So," her mother starts, as soon as the adverts begin. They are watching *The Chase*, sitting as a family in the lounge. Her parents are on the sofa, a seat apart from one another - normal, too. The cat is curled up between them, ginger tabby on beige suede. Her mother doesn't care so much about hairs everywhere, not any more. Cassie and Roger have worn her down, constantly jumping up and down on surfaces she can't bear to expel them from. Alex is sitting on the large dog pillow, Cassie's head in her lap. They all need a wash - the smell of dog is strong, but comforting, and Alex can feel it clinging to her own body, her clothes.

Alex looks up at her mother. "Yeah?" she asks, scratching the fur on Cassie's neck. Her hand comes away coated, hair sticking to her like a glove. She will be finding hairs in her fresh laundry for weeks, months. (It's worth it).

"How is Adrian doing? I'm surprised he hasn't come home with you!" Ah. The bomb drops. Explodes. Alex's hand stills. She hasn't told them. Yet. She looks down, eyes staring into Cassie's blue ones. From

this angle, it looks like Cassie is grinning up at Alex. She takes more comfort in this.

"He's good," Alex answers, forces a smile towards Marge. Pauses. "I forgot to tell you, though; we broke up a few weeks ago. Mutual, we're still really good friends." She picks at her nails. Inspects them, claws out the dirt from beneath.

"Oh, honey," her mother's sympathy. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Her father adds in a grunt. "He was a good kid."

"What brought it on? You always got on so well, ever since you were little."

It's time, Alex thinks. Breathes in. Out. "Nothing." She starts, "it just wasn't working out." Waits for the silent prompt. Hands shake. "Because..." Alex clears her throat, gulps. Tries to squash the fear building up inside her. Crush it. Dust to dust.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking lately," Alex forces out the words, hates the resistance she feels on her tongue, her teeth. Crumbling will. Marge is looking at her expectantly. The *Go Compare* man is singing in tenor in the background, convincing no one to use the comparison website. "And I think- well, no, I know that, I'm..." *Just have to spit it out. Rip off the plaster.* Her heart is beating so fast, so irregular. It is loud in her ears, a swooping and dizzying rush of blood. Ringing. Bile in the back of her throat. Acidity rising, burning. *I don't want to do this I can't do this*

I don't need to tell them- erratic, breathless thoughts. Swirling around in her brain, buzzing and nattering like a flurry of bats- "gay." Exhales. She has told them, but there is no relief; no invisible weight lifts from her shoulders. If anything, she shrinks down. Retreats. A hermit crab to its shell; slithering up and around to the tip, curling in. Squirreling away. Alex risks a quick glance up. Her mother's smile has faded. Her father is staring at her. She knows that look. Expecting a punchline. She looks back down at Cassie, roughs up her fur. At least she is still looking at her the same.

Her father is the first to break the silence. "You're kidding, right?" he scoffs. "You're not gay. We didn't raise you to be fucking gay." He spits the last word, almost, and it hurts.

"Jack." her mother cuts across. He gives her a scathing glance, almost daring her to say more. Almost.

"I will not have a fucking dyke for a daughter. Not in this house."

Alex stands. Opens her mouth to say something - anything - but can't. She looks at her mother- she won't meet her gaze. Alex swallows, hard. Feels the lump solidify, sharp edges push against the lining of her throat. On shaking limbs, Alex leaves the room, walks up the stairs. Locks her bedroom door shut behind her. *What have I done?* She doesn't know how long she stands there, still in shock, still unable to really process it, before she feels her phone vibrate. A text from her mother.

(18:32) *Stay upstairs please, honey.*

The affectionate nickname does nothing to quell the horror gurgling up inside her. Downstairs, there is no yelling. There is never yelling in this house; not even when Cassie was a pup or when Peter and Alex had misbehaved as kids. There are just words. Stern words, disappointed words. Harsh whispers.

(18:54) They think I can't hear them

Alex hits send. She doesn't know who else to turn to, really, doesn't know who to trust. From the floor below she can hear her mother's furious 'whisperings': "She is your daughter, Jack, I don't care what you have to say!"

"It isn't right, Marge, and you know that." Her father isn't as quiet, doesn't care to spare her feelings. Her phone buzzes, a response from Adrian lighting up her screen.

(18:55) Ally I am so sorry

(18:55) Don't be. Like you said, I was going to have to do it eventually

(18:56) It's still shit. Let me know if there's anything I can do for you. I know mum will let you stay there if you need an out, or even a lift to the train station.

Alex closes her eyes, lets her phone slip from her fingers. It thuds onto the wooden floor, gives a little bounce. She's sitting, knees drawn

into her chest, head bent. Back resting against the wood stain, she feels the tears brew behind her eyelids. Her breath comes in shaking gasps, half chokes, half sobs; in no time, her nose is filled to the brim with snot, clear mucus that dribbles down to her cupid's bow, over her lips.

iv.

Alex blows her whistle, hands on her hips. Wonder Woman pose.

“Okay, kids. Enough warm up.” The kids stop splashing about; twelve pairs of eyes stare up at her, owners kneeling on the pool floor in the shallow end. Every Wednesday evening she teaches these kids - nothing fancy, she’s not a qualified swim coach or anything; but she can teach discipline, technique - and she’s the only lifeguard available on weekday evenings with adequate CPR training. And practise. Not that Alex will ever tell her mother, but those first aid qualifications she made Alex enrol in to ‘boost her employability’ and ‘enhance your CV’ are more helpful than she could ever imagine.

“I want you to partner up,” she tells her charges. “Front stroke relay, followed by back, butterfly, and then front again. I will be timing you all, so make sure you rest adequately in between your runs. Fastest of each stroke gets to sit out the final lap today. Choose who’s going first in your pairs, then get in to position.”

The kids erupt with chatter as they gather at the rope markers. Competition never fails to rile them up, get them in the spirit. A prize never hurts, either. Whilst they sort out their pairs Alex grabs the stopwatch and clipboard from her lifeguard seat. They’re not as high, those white wooden chairs, as they are in TV shows or movies. In fact, the first time she saw one in real life, Alex was a little disappointed. *It*

makes sense, she supposes, especially in a pool; the higher you are, the longer it will take for you to get into the water. Disappointingly logical, responsible.

“Is everyone ready?” The kids with goggles pull them down over their eyes. Alex brings the whistle up to her lips. “Three, two...” she blows. Splashing is in abundance, covering her toes, reaching her knees. The time chart she made is already spotted with droplets, some of the fresh ink smudged. Alex watches as they swim, race between each other. There are no budding Michael Phelps in this pool and that’s for sure, but they’re trying. And this is better than them loose on the streets, causing havoc. *Better these waves be contained,* she thinks, chuckling to herself.

It’s relaxing, almost, to watch them race. She has to stay alert, of course; record the times, ensure no one drowns, all the responsibility that comes with her job. Naturally, Rebecca is in the lead. Her speed, for an eight-year-old, is absolutely incredible. Front stroke is her favourite, the one she loves more than any other. Alex writes down each individual time as the swimmers begin to pass their (imaginary) baton to their partners. Rebecca was fastest, Nathan close behind- there’s still a chance someone will beat her time.

Alex closes her eyes. Takes a deep breath. Bounces. Jumps. She is arcing, spine curving - hands cupping, praying. The stagnant air coats her body, lathers her skin. Her breath always, always catches the first time.

Between the tips of her fingers breaching the barrier and the top of her dusty pink swim cap, she barely has enough time to close her mouth, protect her throat, lungs from the chlorine burn, the choking taste. Her nose will suffer regardless, an inescapable pain she has long learned to live with. Full physical plunge. The pool curls her watery fingers around Alex's body, hugs her tightly against her chest. She's frothing at the mouth, a tongue of foam that spits bubbles upon bubbles of air. Limbs, spread eagle; a push, the form of a frog.

Her arms and legs propel her forward under the water, send ripples that resonate through the entire pool. She's glad for this quiet half hour, when the kids have gone home and the pool is closed, where she can be free. Dive, leap, bomb; until Jefferson comes into to start the evening clean, she is the queen. The empress of the water; Amphitrite, Mera of Atlantis.

Jefferson, as always, comes all too soon. "Sorry lass," he tells her, thick Scottish accent living up to who knows how many stereotypes. "I tried to stretch out the other jobs. Guess I'm just too good, eh?" He winks at Alex as she braces her palms on the side of the pool, heaves her body up. She puts on a forced smile, a fake laugh. Picks up the discarded shorts she wore over her swimsuit whilst teaching, holds them scrunched in her hand.

"See you next week," she tells him, walking out, a half-hearted wave over her shoulder.

Post-swim shower in the ladies' changing room and then she's drying her hair, leisure centre provided hair dryer almost burning her head, singeing the roots of her hair. In the mirror, the reflection of the notice board behind her, she spots a new poster. A photograph of the water, of a view she knows all too well. She switches off the dryer, hangs it back on its hook, makes her way over. Inspects. It's the bench she frequents, captured from behind. The view she sees every week. A smile forms on her lips as her eyes drink up the image; taken just before sunset, an orange smeared sky with smooth blends of gold. A silhouette, resting on the bench. Her bench. *Is that me?* she thinks, asks herself. She squints her eyes some, straining at the figure. She cannot tell. *It's probably not me. Plenty of people sit on those benches.* The poster itself is meaningless, an article about upcoming events featured on the promenade in the next few months. She cannot see herself going to any of them. She skims through them anyway, just so she's aware. *Adrian might be interested in the sea food one, I'll text him about- what?*

Another photograph, nestled neatly in the bottom right corner, steals her attention. For the second time, her breath catches. She knows that girl. She knows the blonde hair, the logo on the wetsuit. It's her- *her*. Alex is speechless, mouth agape. She has never seen her, so close - has never noticed the glimmer in her eyes, the greenness of them. Alex reaches a hand out, traces the length of her body with her finger. She pulls it back, sees the caption underneath: *'Pictured: student Delilah Skarsgard, an avid surfer on these waters.'* Delilah. Alex has a name.

“So this is where you spend your Saturday evenings.” The voice makes Alex jump. She whips her head around, sees the grinning face of her brother.

“Peter!” She jumps up; shocked, elated. Peter is half a foot taller, three years older - so when Alex runs in for a hug, she feels positively dwarfed. His embrace is warm. Loving. Kind. The antithesis of their whole relationship. She pulls away, punches his arm.

“You scared me! What are you even doing - *how* did you know I was here - it’s a five-hour drive for you!”

Peter laughs, holds up his phone. “Snap maps. I was a little concerned I’d find you in the water, if I’m honest. Your little Bitmoji wasn’t exactly clear. Plus, Adrian assured me you’d be on land.” Together, they reclaim Alex’s spot on the bench. The hairs on Peter’s legs glisten every time the slight breeze throws them to the direction of the sun. It’s definitely the weather for shorts, and Alex regrets the choice of her black skinny jeans. Even the rips in them on her thighs and shins don’t help much.

“What are you doing here?” She asks, again. A cloud passes over the sun, momentarily engulfing them in its large shadow. Involuntarily, Alex shivers.

"What, can't I just come check on my baby sis, who lives two-hundred and twelve miles from me?"

"You can," Alex concedes, "But you never have." She looks at him pointedly. Peter pretends to wince.

"You wound me," he says, mock offended. "But you're right. Mum phoned me last night." He pauses here, not for very long- but long enough that Alex notices. "She mentioned the, uh, incident with dad, when you went home."

Alex stills. "Ah," she says eventually. "So," and her whole demeanour shifts, her body language cold, defensive; voice harder than the block of ice it feels like her feet are in. "Are you here to tell me how disgusted and ashamed you are, too?" There is venom in her words, her voice, spitting out on the attack. Shock and anger fuel her. She didn't expect this from Pete, never Pete; despite their antagonistic relationship (they were brother and sister after all, what else could one expect?) she was his baby sister. He always had her back, when needed - always.

"Oh, I am definitely disgusted and ashamed by you," Peter starts - and that's it. Alex dies, a victim to the shock; well, okay, maybe that's not quite true. But she is definitely heart broken, is definitely experiencing the feeling of her heart - her world - shattering before her eyes. She feels numb, the ice of her feet now creeping its slithering tendrils up her calves, over her knees, around her thighs, piercing her stomach-

"- I mean, come on, Ally, you still play *Pokemon GO*. *Pokemon GO!*"

"I - what?" Alex is completely thrown, caught off guard, hairs on end and nerves shocked with confusion. She looks at Pete, face distorted. "What are you on about?" She mumbles, sniffing a little bit. Tears have welled in her eyes, and she is now powerless against them.

Peter looks at her, horror written all over his face. "What am I on about?" he retorts. "That game died in twenty-sixteen!" he shakes his head, then grins, puts an arm around her shoulder. Pulls her body close to his chest. He starts to run his fingers through her hair, moves his hand to her shoulder. Rubs back and forth, comforting.

"Look, Alex," Pete starts, "I don't care who you date. Or who you want to date. If you're bi, gay, whatever - you're still my little sis. And if you felt like you were actually my brother - whatever to that, too. I'll be with you on it, one hundred. I love you, Alex; dad being a Class A cunt isn't going to affect that."

"Thank you," she says, her voice soaking into him. He gives her shoulder a gentle squeeze. Reassures her without words.

"Ain't no thang but a chicken wing" he replies, quotes, casts out. Alex rolls her eyes.

"I hate that song, and you know it," she accuses, sulks.

Peter laughs. "It's my favourite!" Alex pulls away, sniffs, wipes whatever is left off of her face with her fingers. She has a tissue, somewhere, in her bag- Pete holds one out to her. "Here." She takes it,

blows her nose. Offers it back. He pulls another face at her, distressed.

It's her turn to laugh.

V.

A boat, chugging along the horizon. Smaller, to the naked eye, than a baguette. A loaf of bread. The sun, shining her rays. Filtering in and out of drifting clouds. Aeroplanes. Low flying military aircrafts. The light, airy breeze kicks up sand, particles of grit. Carries up specks of sea water, sprays from waves. The smell rises, like fumes from an invisible fire; salt and fish and vinegar. Incites the senses. Excites them. Alex closes her eyes, tilts her head back, face to the sky. The risk of leaving this place with rings of pale skin where her sunglasses are is high, but- who cares? She feels good. Is enjoying herself, being herself. Her visit home was a month ago. Time is flying by, slipping through her fingers. A handful of sand. No attempt to make a fist. In all this time, her father hasn't tried to call, message. She is trying not to let it get to her. It sucks. By God, does it suck. She tries not to dwell on it. It helps - so, so much - that her mother is constantly reassuring her. Comforting her. Assuring her that it is *'only a matter of time, sweetie,'* and that he is *'coming around to it, slowly, I promise - he even made it through three episodes of The Ellen DeGeneres Show in one sitting!'*. It helps, too, that Pete had a bust up with him over it. Defended her. Is sticking to his guns; refuses to speak to him until he talks to her. She is so grateful.

A seagull bleats overhead, masks the sound of her rumbling stomach. Alex still feels it; the gurgling. Peristalsis. It is the smell from the waterfront chippy, wafting over, surrounding her. Assaulting her. She

checks her watch. It's practically lunch time. *Might as well*, she decides, stands. Pats her pockets, checking for her phone, the ten pound note. House keys. Delilah hasn't started surfing, yet, is still paddling with her board to the deeper depths. *It will be like a picnic*, Alex muses, a smile tugging at the corners of her lips; *dinner and a show*.

Chips and gravy. Salt and pepper. No vinegar. A British staple. The Tupperware is fully biodegradable; white, grain textured 'Vegware'. Her fork is wooden. She will recycle them, after - add them to the compost bins near her flat. She takes her time eating, glaring at any gulls that hover too close for her comfort. They will descend, if she isn't careful; flurry around her like bloodhounds down a rabbit hole. Piranhas at a feast. Flying vermin, her father calls them. A twinge of pain as she thinks of his words, a spasm across her face. Wincing. It makes sense; that phrase. Parasites. Bottom feeders that lurk on rooftops and behind industrial waste bins in shaded alley ways. If this was Gotham City, Alex is convinced that in the place of those menacing stone gargoyles, it would be stone seagulls. Equally menacing, casting long shadows over buildings and beaches, causing shudders and squeals from adults and children alike. Alex is glad this isn't Gotham City.

Delilah is up and moving, tackling waves head on. The sight is more impressive than ever - is it because of the weather, her new outlook on life, the two combined, or- Alex doesn't know what, or why. How. Maybe it's the new location. Alex is still sat in her usual spot, but Delilah isn't in

hers; she's more left aligned, closer to the lighthouse, to the rocks. A little further out. The waves are larger there, faster. Alex swears her heart misses a beat every time Delilah vanishes for more than a second, hidden by some bigger wave, some slight tunnel of curved water; but she always comes out the other side, with (Alex imagines) a grin on her face. Always.

Until she doesn't. *Five, six, seven-* Alex gets up, leaves her chips on the bench- the gulls descend as she jogs over to the railing. She can't see Delilah. Panic sets in, frantic glances from every sense of disturbance in the water. Nothing. Her board, empty, drifting. *Come on*, Alex thinks, *where are-* she spots a mass of Delilah's hair in the water, floating, sinking, disappearing-

Everything sort of happens in slow motion. Alex doesn't think, really; she just- acts. Actions she will later regret, but that is neither here nor there.

Delilah still hasn't resurfaced, her board crashing into the rocks. Back and forth, back and forth. Alex takes a few steps back, jumps a little on the spot. Preparation. Runs towards the barrier: hands on the railing, clasped - leaps over.

Falling.

Her form is lacking. The impact will hurt- but she forgets this knowledge. Carries on falling.

Everything stops. Alex is winded - *drowning?* The sharp sting of her body hitting the water made her gasp involuntarily, inhale sea water. Too much water. She's scrambling; going nowhere but down. The coldness of the water is like she has jumped into a block of ice, shattered into shards. Her limbs don't work. Sunlight, fading...

... hands, grabbing. Pulling. Blurred shapes, a shape in the darkness. Rising, floating. Breaking the surface, hands under her arms, her back against something damp. Warm. Gulping in the air- hands, flailing, hitting something solid. A surfboard. Alex uses the board to stable herself, leans her forehead down on the cloth covered polystyrene as she tries to regain her composition. Closes her eyes. The board is softer than she had expected. *Surfboard*, she thinks, *this is-* her eyes open, and slowly, slowly, she raises her head. Sees Delilah in front of her, opposite.

They stare at one another, both heaving, gasping, Alex more so. Salt water is still at the back of Alex's throat, coating her lungs, swaying in her stomach. She coughs again, splutters. Spits out more water. She was not created with the stomach of a fish; her body too adapted to freshwater. Her cheeks are red, burning like the sun that watches over them, snickering in playful delight every time a cloud passes over her. Red, because of exertion. The adrenaline. The fear, rush, panic - embarrassment. Both Alex and Delilah are resting their forearms on the surfboard that floats between them, using its buoyancy to just tread water with their legs.

"I'm sorry," Alex starts, minutes and minutes after, breaking the gasping silence. "I- I saw you go under - and, and then you didn't resurface so I panicked," she's stumbling through her words, now, as if this couldn't get any more embarrassing for her. "I'm actually a, uh, trained lifeguard-" *why am I still talking, telling her all of this? She's not interested,* Alex tells herself, *and she probably doesn't believe me anyway - I know I wouldn't, not after than horrific shit show. God, she must think I'm so fucking stupid* - "and it- it was just the shock, you know, of the sea, and from so high up, too, that's like - what, fifty feet? The pool one only goes up to thirty." Alex barely remembers to breathe. "This water is so, so cold, how do you even - wetsuit, of course, I've seen you in it so many times before -" *why did I say that, oh my God-* Delilah starts laughing. Alex's cheeks grow redder and she averts her gaze downward to the board. She has never noticed before, (why would she have?) but the board is a galaxy of colours; of reds and oranges with bursts of blue and whirls of white. It's as hypnotic as Delilah is in the water.

"Do you always talk this much?" Delilah asks, giving her head a shake. Her hair follows in strands, flinging water over them, the board, back to the sea.

"I- uh, I'm not- I don't-" Alex stammers. Delilah laughs again.

"I'm sorry," Delilah says, sounding bashful, grinning, and *oh my God,* Alex realises, *she has an accent.* "That was rude of me, I didn't mean it quite like that. Let me start again," and her teeth are dazzling.

Blinding. White against the blue; clouds in her mouth. "Hi. I'm Delilah. What's your name?"

"Alex. Hi," she breathes. More silence. "I like your board," Alex blurts out, desperate to hear her voice, desperate to just know. "Stars, and... stuff."

"Yeah," Delilah agrees, "stars and shit. I had it custom made about a year ago. I was so scared it would get scuffed up through customs, but it's survived pretty well, thankfully. Have you surfed before?"

Alex shakes her head. She's warming up now, little by little, as her body adjusts to the temperature of the water. She's glad she put her hair in a plait today. There's no way it would have survived the plunge otherwise.

"Oh, really?" Delilah sounds surprised, shrugs. "I thought you might have, since I see you watching, like, all the time- I was really hoping my moves were impressing you."

"They were!" Alex is quick to agree, to shout out- she realises, now, she has no control over herself in front of this woman. No control at all. "I mean, you always look so, cool and- and in control. It's really beautiful, the way you surf."

This time, Delilah is the one to blush. "Thank you." She heaves herself up onto the board, straddles either side with her legs. Alex doesn't quite know what to do, so she swims backwards slightly, makes room.

Delilah shuffles back, towards the rear end of the board. "Hop on," she tells Alex, before grinning: "there's plenty of space." It takes Alex a second. Then she's laughing. Hysterically, maybe too much, maybe not enough- Delilah laughs too, and Alex is in love, most definitely- the way her speckled green eyes have lit up, the flush in her cheeks, those white teeth. Dimples, as she smiles, her laugh- soft, light, floating. Awkwardly, Alex clammers up to join Delilah on the board, nowhere near as gracefully as Alex would have liked, and Delilah starts paddling them towards the shore with her arms. No sound but the waves, the gentle whooshing of the wind. Alex's still-heavy breathing.

"You know," Delilah says, conversationally, as though they had known each other for more than the last few minutes. "My friend has a sail boat here that he sometimes takes out, to see the dolphins. It's really lovely when they're out, and sometimes there are seals too!" Her voice has an excited twinge to it. Contagious exuberance. Alex finds herself grinning, glad her back is to Delilah. Hidden. "I'm sure they'll be out today," She sounds so confident, assured. Her whole energy is attractive to Alex. Alluring.

They're almost at the shoreline. A twinge of sadness hits Alex - their encounter will be over soon. And then what? Do they part ways, never speak again? Do they exchange pleasantries, numbers, plans that never come to fruition? Does she stop coming down here, to watch Delilah surf? Delilah is still chatting away.

"- I could give him a call, if you want, see if he's free." Knee deep in the water. They can walk to the sea's edge. Alex disembarks, watches as Delilah hoists the board under her shoulder. She's beaming at Alex. "We can grab some ice cream, dry off on the beach until then. What do you say?" The question startles Alex back to attention. She stares, dumbfounded. *What, she thinks, is- is she asking me on a date? Or just to hang out?* Delilah's smile starts to drop little by little as she waits. And waits.

"Oh, no," Delilah says, flushing, mortification in her voice. "Have I misinterpreted? I'm sorry, I just thought-"

Alex begins to panic, eyes wide; "no, no!" she's quick to blurt. The water swirls all around them, seaweed tickling their legs. Alex is glad she kept her trousers on, otherwise she would be freaking out every time she felt something drag across her skin. "I- yeah, that would be nice, actually. I'd really like to do that. And to get to know you." The smile is back, and so is Alex's.

"Okay, great!" A pause. "You know I'm asking you on a date, right? Just to be clear."

Alex laughs. It feels right. "Good to know you're not just pitying me for my failed attempt at being the hero." Delilah laughs, too. "But yes, that's more than good with me. You can tell me about the surfing. It'd be cool to hear about that."

About the Author

Paige Briscoe is a 22 year old blogger and writer from the West Midlands. In 2019 she graduated from Prifysgol Aberystwyth University with a BA(Hons) in English Literature and Creative Writing, and in winter 2020 will graduate from the University of Derby with an MA in Publishing. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, she aims for all of her prose to contain queer characters, in an effort to promote their normalisation in the literature and entertainment world.

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