

Aplysia californica

Jason Tougaw

HOURS PILE UP into days and weeks on Southern California beaches. There are no rules, except: don't be a sissy. I love rules, but I keep breaking the only one I have. "Your life is most kids' dream," my stepdad Stanley says. "You live on a fuckin' school bus and hang out at the beach every day." He forgets that my dream life also includes almost no sugar, no TV, and him.

Mommy, Stanley, Aaron (stepbrother), Santio (stepcousin), and I are walking to San Elijo, for a change of pace. We have to walk from the parking lot at Cardiff Beach, where the converted school bus we live on is parked, next to the one Santio lives on with his mom and dad (Stanley's deceased wife's brother) and sister. We sneak through a private campground and descend steep stairs, slippery with sand, down the cliff to the beach. I hate this.

We're about to take off on a trip, all the way up to Oregon. Before we do, Stanley wants Aaron and me to try surfing. The far right end of this beach is called Pipes because the waves there rise high and break slow, like animated sculptures, their frothy heads sloping high and wide for the surfers who migrate to this spot to lose themselves in the pockets of air that form between a wave's summit and its base. "We'll get some of these motherfuckin' beach bums to give you a lesson," Stanley says. I hate this.

We spread our towels and settle in. There is too much seaweed, the brown kind, darkening the surf and scattered in big tangled piles all over the sand. I'm wrestling with my Snoopy towel, trying to get the corners flat and smooth out the folds that make his sunglasses look like they are specially designed for a one-eyed beagle. I have to do this without getting any sand on the towel because the sand makes me itch when I get out of the water. Even if I shake the towel out, I know the sand has been there and I can feel it tickling my pores. Almost flat and lightly sanded is the best I can do. I plop myself butt-first onto the towel.

There's a family of three about twenty feet down the beach: a girl in a pink one-piece with yellow palm trees on it, her nose white with zinc oxide, eating a bologna sandwich, her mom and dad both reading books. They're pale, all three of them, and they treat the beach like Disneyland, a place good for a few hours of tanning and sandcastle building. That girl doesn't know anything about body-surfing or the squirrels who live in the rocks or even the sand crabs. She doesn't know what it's like to live on a school bus parked at the beach. Her life is not a blur of gray, foamy Pacific ocean, breaking waves, and abalone sandwiches, tans everywhere, all year long, and scrambling to make the public showers during regulation hours or sneaking them off-hours.

I see their wet heads first, seven or eight guys rising up out of the seaweed, strolling toward us on their way to Pipes. All deep tan, some of them preadolescent but others with fine blond hairs crawling on their forearms and stomachs, surfboards welded to their torsos, pookah rattling on their collarbones. "Hey," one of them says as they pass. "Aren't you Mike's kid?" I stare at Snoopy's oval belly, mix a little sand around on it. The surfer is yellow-haired with white eyebrows and more yellow hair on his stomach. Probably thirteen.

"Santio's Mike's kid," Stanley says.

"I know your dad," the kid says.

"He's my brother-in-law," Stanley says.

"Didn't your wife die?" the kid asks.

"Yep," Stanley says, looking at Mommy. "But I got another one." He laughs. I can see the white-nosed girl watching from her towel.

"Oh," the kid says. "I told your dad I'd let you use my board sometime," he says to Santio. "He loaned me his wetsuit the other morning. It was like sixty degrees out, but the waves were rad. You want to try my board in a little while? My girlfriend's gonna show up pretty soon anyway."

"Sure," Santio says. He's only six, but he knows how to surf and how to talk to surfers.

"Hey," Stanley says, "how 'bout you guys give all three of these kids a lesson?"

"I don't need a lesson," Santio says.

"Okay, then give Santio a board and Aaron and Jason a lesson. For Mike?"

The yellow-haired surfer nods at the rest of them. They nod back. One of them says, "The chicks will dig that shit. Surf lessons." Another one grabs his balls and makes a screwing motion with his hips. Aaron and Santio look at each other and giggle.

"So when the chicks show up, I'll send the boys over," Stanley says. "What's your name?" he asks Yellow.

"Leaf," he says.

"Cool, Leaf. It's a deal."

The flock of surfers migrates south to Pipes. We watch them descend into the seaweed as they round the curve of the cliff, barely visible when they float their surfboards into the brown sea and glide out past the breakers. I'm waiting now. Waiting is okay because it's not the thing I'm waiting for. I can almost convince myself that the waiting will last forever, that I'll never have to get on a surfboard in front of all these guys. At one point, Mommy says, "Surfing's fun, Boog. If you learn, you can go surfing with Bryan and Trever" (cousins).

"Why the hell d'ya call him that all the time?" Stanley asks.

"Why not?" she asks.

"You're gonna turn him into a wuss."

If I can learn to surf, I will enter the universal brotherhood of Southern California boys flouting authority and oozing sex from every pore. I pretended not to recognize the screwing motion that kid made when they were talking about the girls, but I did. It didn't seem funny, though, like it did to Aaron and Santio. It made my insides feel squirmy, like there were jellyfish in me. I know who these guys are. They surf all along the coast, from Torrey Pines to Solana Beach. They're at Cardiff all the time. "Just one killer wave, that's all I want," they say. When the waves don't show, they smoke joints on the beach and talk to girls.

I sit and think about the waiting until my skin feels hot. Then I become a bullet and shoot into the surf. I can hear Aaron and Santio pounding behind me. We have to wade through seaweed, which wraps its snaky arms around our ankles. The surf is pretty strong today, so we have to weave sideways, wrestling with the residue of broken waves, to get out far enough to ride some. Santio and I are up to our shoulders, Aaron to his neck. "No further," we hear Mommy yell. "That's deep enough."

"I got this one," Santio shouts. We all three freeze into position, waiting for the wave to find us. One, two, three—we all push off, heads and shoulders pointed diagonally at the sky, three slick bodies skimming weightless, both inside and above the wave.

Riding a wave takes you outside time. The wave becomes your universe, and the ride is all the time there is. It lasts forever. Every day delivers a different kind of wave, some gentle, some rough, some even, some rocky, some with little dips, others with steep cliffs.

The first wave is always an education. It teaches you the shape of the set. This one's got a second crest, and a second dip. We ride the

first dip, a quick slide down to the surface of the water, and after skimming for a few seconds, dip number two, a steep dive under a strong foamy crest. We all three go under. My limbs are wrangled in four distinctly different directions, the sockets of my shoulders and knees stretched way past comfort, my chin skidding on the sand. I'm sucked into the ocean sound, like the one you hear when you listen to a shell but times a thousand. I know this world. It's confusing, and the banging hurts, but I love its directional chaos, where up or down, surface or floor, shallow or deep no longer have any meaning. I'm there for a few uncountable seconds before I feel my head in weightless air, my up and down coming into clear focus, Stanley and Mommy a salty blur on the shore.

"I got totally sucked under!" Aaron shouts.

"Me, too!" I shout.

"Me three!" Santio shouts.

We run through the seaweed, our sideways paths much quicker this time, now that we know what we're looking for. I'm a succession of take-off positions, risings, skimmings, glidings, and occasional plummetings. The three of us are doing this together, but wave riding is solitary, which is why we have to tell each other about our nearly identical but unshareable rides every time we pull ourselves up off the sand at the end. I've forgotten that I'm waiting for a gang of surfers to expose me.

"That one was smooth," I say. Santio and Aaron don't have time to respond.

"Check it out," Stanley yells over to us. "Their chicks are here. They're paddling in, just like little duckies."

"You guys ready?" Mommy asks.

"Yeah!" Aaron yells. Santio and Aaron rise like little rockets. I try to be quick like them, but I'm very aware of my ether, a cloud of wavy air that follows me wherever I go. It's thickening, trying to keep me on the sand, trying to make the waiting last long enough for the

episode to be over. It'll look weird if I'm too far behind, so I try to run. Then Stanley comes up behind me and hurls me into the air. I don't have to do my own walking. He carries me like a surfboard, my ether bouncing like an underinflated balloon to the beat of his stride. When he reaches Aaron and Santio, he hurls Aaron up with the other hand. He's delivering us to the surfers.

"You cats ready?" he asks when we reach Pipes. There are more surfers there, some who don't know what he means, some of them as old as nineteen. They're looking at Leaf, their pink eyes asking, "What's this old guy want?" There are about a hundred girls in bikinis, four or five for every surfer.

"Hey, who's gonna help me teach these kids how to surf?" It takes a few seconds, but a kid, about twelve, wearing red trunks, his golden, feathered hair almost dry, says, "What the fuck. I will." You can tell his hair would be brown if he didn't spend every day at the beach.

"Gotta train 'em young," another guy says. He's probably fifteen, in white trunks, half-Mexican looking, with a darker tan than anybody and straight dark hair streaked reddish.

The half-Mexican guy takes Aaron. The guy with the golden, feathered hair takes me. "I'm Jake," he says. His hair is longer than short. His skin is the color of light coffee, and he has a few more golden hairs circling his belly button. The ones on his arm are so bleached they're transparent. I've seen him before. He always has a tan, but he wouldn't get much lighter than this anyway. Everybody knows him. He hangs out with guys a lot older. I guess because he's so good.

The hierarchies of the outside the world, the ones you're supposed to leave behind when you commit to your hippie lifestyle and live on a bus, find their own forms at the beach. The secret society of surfers requires an attitude, a healthy disregard for fear, and some skill. Santio is already in. Our connection with him grants Aaron and me what amounts to an audition. If you can surf, like Santio, you can

be an instant teenager. If you can handle the sea, you're ready for beer, pot, shrooms, and girls. I have the genes for this. My uncle Gary's surf shop, S&N, is legendary, one of the first, way back in the sixties. During my freshman year of college, I will learn about fifth-century Athens and realize that S&N is the surf culture version of it.

Jake and the half-Mexican kid lead Aaron and me into the breakers. Jake slides me onto the board. It's twice as long as I am. Aaron has a board, too. We see Santio paddling out alone, Leaf lying on the sand with a girl in a bikini. Stanley is walking north into the seaweed, toward Mommy.

"Hop on," Jake says. Jake is only twelve, but like all surfers he moves like a man and is treated like one by everybody at the beach. His body, molded by hours and days and weeks tussling with ocean currents, bypasses adolescence. I smell the pot when Jake starts fiddling with my body, feel it sweetening my ether. "Like this," he says, showing me where my limbs should sit, how my muscles should feel. His breath is weirdly hot on my cheek. I can't concentrate. Waves sneak up on me and bobble me forward. I can ride them fine, lying flat. I have a lot of experience with boogie boards.

Then comes standing. Jake shows me how to stand on shore, fixes my legs in place and bends my limbs to strike the pose. I can do this on the sand, no problem. Out in the water, it's impossible. My ether slips before I do. Wave after wave, I feel myself move and crouch, lower and lower to the board until I can be absolutely sure I won't be toppled chest first onto the shark head of the board.

You can't feel the waves. When I bodysurf, I lose myself in the waves, but on a surfboard, the waves become little slaves you use to fuel your ride. I stare at the shark head of the surfboard and imagine it skewering me. I can't rail against a wave. Its listening skills are even worse than Stanley's. I can't stand up. I chicken out, lying flat every time. Jake gives me five or six tries. I have lost his respect. My fear is grounds for immediate dismissal.

"This kid can't ride a wave," Jake says, mistaking waves for surfboards. My fear of him, this sport, my whole life, is a tangle of seaweed that trips me as I climb off the surfboard. My forehead just misses the board's shark fin when I fall, grazing flat fiberglass instead.

At least the waiting is done. I walk pretty slowly back up through the seaweed to where Stanley and Mommy are. I can see them reaching over the sand between their two towels, kissing. The zinc-nosed girl and her parents are packing up. People like them only stay at the beach for a couple of hours.

"You chicken out?" Stanley asks.

"He's too uncoordinated," Mommy says in my defense. *Uncoordinated* is an abbreviation for the fear and longing that makes it impossible for me to stand up while Jake watches me, for the way my ether becomes slippery when he focuses on me. Jake's nurturing touch is all there is, his hands on my limbs and his hair grazing mine. I want him back. I want him to protect me, but I have no idea how to turn him from peril into salvation.

"He chickened out," Stanley says. Zinc-nose and her parents are walking toward the steps that lead up the cliff and out of the beach. Her pink buns remind me of the girl with pigtails in the Coppertone commercial, begging as they bounce to be snatched by the jaws of a yappy little dog. But there are no dogs allowed on San Elijo.

She's not the Coppertone girl, and I will never be a surfer. I won't smoke pot at seven, have sex with girls, wear wetsuits all winter. I won't master the skill and strike out on my own, heroically, to become a new kind of surfer, one who masters his fear but feels it, one whose expertise makes him sexually irresistible to your more regular surfer, who is almost always sublimely beautiful, at least until he's twenty-five. Everybody sees the failure. "Jason doesn't surf." It sounds like no big deal, but the sentence reverberates, to remind me that the failure is definitive.

I can't sit here basking in it while Mommy and Stanley enjoy each other, giggling and still reaching across the sand between their towels to kiss. I need a way to eradicate them from the beach. Between bouts of surfing, I can see Santio and Aaron are throwing seaweed at each other and anybody else who won't kick their ass for doing it. This makes the difference between me and them, the difference that infuriates Stanley. Usually, I just become a target for Santio and Aaron. Humiliation is my best distraction. It suffocates the luxury of noticing the kisses.

Pouting, I wander through the seaweed, gritting my teeth and half-thinking. I am an expert pouter, feigning indifference but courting attention. *Don't notice me because I hate you*, I scream with contorted, too-slow gestures and backward glances. It isn't working. Nobody gives a shit. Killing time, I experiment with designing myself a seaweed outfit—a wreath for my head, a stole around my neck, a hula skirt. I untangle yarns of brown vines and selected strands on which the poppers are still inflated with water. I am risking Stanley's derision, and I know it. Maybe I want it.

Then everything changes, the way it does when you see something you don't understand, a sight so inexplicable that just trying to process it transforms you.

Among the seaweed, I see a shiny sparkle of light too slick and too long to be a bead of water. For a second or two I'm not sure what I'm looking at, but gradually the shine takes shape, and I see a slimy mass camouflaged in the seaweed. It's about eight inches long and four wide, curvy, solid, heavy but pliable—the same mottled dark browns as the darkest strands of seaweed. It has antennae and eyes and a gill-like tube poking out of its back. It coils around itself on the underside. I poke it and watch it quiver, tightening the coil. I pick it up and after a few seconds the coil loosens. I've heard of sea slugs, but I've never seen one.

"Hello, Mr. Sea Slug," I say, peering into the coil. I am somehow so

sure he is a Mr. and not a Mrs. "Those squirt poison. They do." Santio and Aaron are fading. "What are you doing? Be careful." Mommy is wasting her breath. I don't even hear her asking Stanley if they really do squirt poison. Stanley, the guy who gleefully warns me of the sterilizing power of oleander every chance he gets, says, "Yes, yes they do."

My new friend has a complicated organ on his underbelly, beneath the coil, also dark brown, shaped like a little human heart. "Poison, poison, be careful. Don't touch it." "What the fuck is he doing?" He needs water. He seems lethargic. With every poke and every second he seems to move with less strength. He pees purple stuff all over me. That must be the poison, I think. It doesn't sting. *They were wrong, as usual. They don't know anything. God.*

He's drowning in air, drying out. The tide will rise too late. So I carry him, out to my waist in ocean and seaweed. I wait for a break in the waves and hold him under the water. He seems to loosen, blossom. "What the fuck? I always said that kid of yours was a freak." I cradle him in both hands. He has eyes, but his expression seems to be in his coils more than his face. His demeanor says calm relief. He isn't rapturous, just content, regaining equilibrium. He isn't quite grateful, just glad. "Poison. Freak. Fuck." We understand each other. I slide my hands out from under him, careful not to jostle his coiled body. The water catches him and he floats, a little sideways at first and then relaxing into the current. Three seconds and I can't see him, only seaweed.

I miss Mr. Sea Slug, but I won't cry. I wade back to shore. Santio and Aaron are out in the surf with boogie boards now, Stanley and Mommy kissing. The surfers are way out deep, having left the little kids in the dust. I'm a little shocked to find that nobody's paying any attention to me.

Back in the seaweed, my eyes now open, I can see dozens of slugs, boys and girls, adults, teenagers and toddlers, maybe hundreds of them, all varieties of sea slugs fighting for their lives among the

kelp. I'm in motion, more focused than I've ever been. But I'm not quite conscious or in control. I have discovered my automatic pilot. Without even thinking I step up my rescue mission. I will carry slugs in twos and threes and return them to the sea, taking only a few seconds to cradle them before slipping my hands from underneath their heavy little bodies and watching them disappear under the water dyed red with so much seaweed. I root them out of the most tangled piles of kelp. I move methodically, in inches, combing every strand. It feels morally wrong to do any less. If I save one slug, they all deserve to be saved. I don't want those left behind to think they are somehow inferior and deserve to die. Simultaneously, I guard incoming waves diligently, watching for new or repeat wash-ups.

My task turns out to be harder than I thought. Nobody interrupts me or asks me to stop, but I just can't save them all or stop them from washing up again. Santio and Aaron don't throw seaweed. It would be more accurate to say that I've lost awareness of them. I can't remember them, except as hazy background ghosts, because they don't exist for me anymore. In my new slug-induced state of mind, the cumbersome physical world fades, loses its solidity, dissolves into ether, a vague and semitransparent daydream.

The slugs take precedence. Stanley and Mommy evaporate. Not quite completely, but they become misty like Casper the Ghost: there but not quite there. I hunt and return the slugs all day. I spend a little time talking to each one. "Hi there. It's gonna be okay. Don't worry." I examine its contours, its firm, brown balloon body, waiting for the tide to pass. I feel the individual presence of each slug. I poke and caress them all. Like the original Mr. Sea Slug, they recoil, but seem to calm as they acclimate to the world of my cupped hands. My ether has achieved equilibrium, dissolved gently into salt air around me.

But I can't save them all. I regret it even now.

The *Aplysia californica* is a star in the history of neurobiology. The common Californian sea slug has played a major role in the science of memory.

The sea slug is an invertebrate, a distant relative of the oyster and the escargot. The neuroscientists tend to apologize for his unattractiveness but celebrate his unique nervous system nonetheless. They see irony in the fact that such a simple creature, such an ugly one, has been so valuable to research in the physiology of memory. Their first mistake is their failure to appreciate his aesthetic charm—his glistening brown skin, the way his shape morphs when he moves, those antennae wiggling for our empathy. They do appreciate his huge neurons, nearly a millimeter: easy to study. His nervous system traverses his body and does not center in his head. This must explain his expressive body and relatively static face.

The discovery, in John Dowling's *Creating Mind: How the Brain Works*, one of the first books I read about brain function, stunned me. I hadn't seen a sea slug in two decades. This was a reunion. Like me, Mr. Sea Slug was a californica. His relatives are about ten inches long, so he was undersized. He is also commonly called a sea *snail*. *Slug* suits him better. His purple pee was defensive ink. He was defending himself against me.

According to Dowling, my memory is inaccurate. It isn't Mr. Sea Slug's underbelly that recoils when touched. His coils are on his top side, with the gill poking out from them. The behavior is called "gill-withdrawal-reflex." And he's famous for the fact that with each subsequent touch his gill recoils with less force. It's called *habituation*. Neurobiologists see this behavior as a primitive form of memory, perhaps the foundation of even the most sophisticated forms of human memory. But if he is pricked too severely, as with a needle, the withdrawal is more extreme and lasts longer. The technical term for this one is *sensitization*. This doesn't seem like a revelation. *Duh*, I want to say to the neuroscientists, but I'm too busy grappling with the idea

that they have been collecting my Mr. Sea Slug's progeny and pricking them with pins. That's not the worst of it. They have been removing those little human hearts, called mantles, from their bellies. They shock them, like mental patients. I could never be a neurobiologist, I realize, letting go of the fantasy, because I could never torture Mr. Sea Slug. I could never write this, never make my rapturous discoveries, if everybody else had been as squeamish and empathic as I am.

Habituation and sensitization fascinate neurobiologists because they indicate a form of learning, a long-term alteration of neural systems in response to environmental stimuli. There are thirty-three tiny neurons in a single fifteen-hundred-member ganglion (colony of nerve cells) in Mr. Sea Slug's abdomen, responsible for the coiling and loosening. Twenty-four sensory neurons do the feeling, the receiving—these are the neurons that spied on me when I first poked him. Six motor neurons do the moving—these are the neurons sent to negotiate with the intruder. Just three interneurons transport messages between the stimulus troops and the diplomat motors—this trio was responsible for telling the motors how to deal with me.

With repetition, *Aplysia californica* learns to gauge stimuli, and thus either habituation or sensitization can have lasting effects for up to a month. In the process, those thirty-three neurons—who are not, after all, spies, diplomats, and negotiators, but dramatically and morally neutral biological entities who exchange bits of chemical—are reorganized. They "learn" to exchange different chemical compounds in different patterns. The theory goes that long-term memory involves a similar reorganization of neural conglomerations. The human hippocampus consolidates short-term memory and makes it available for future recall, using mechanisms similar to those of my friend *Aplysia californica*. For Mr. Sea Slug and I both, the processes involved synapses, phosphorylation, Calcium (Ca^{2+}) and Potassium (K^+) ions, and neuromodulatory proteins called kinases. Channels opened and closed; chemicals were released and ingested. Mr. Sea

Slug recoiled, then loosened. I recognized his fear and was bowled over by his subsequent trust. I was inspired to save his life.

The seduction, I like to think, was part of the species' evolutionary plan. I imagine a meeting of the elders, long ago in the early days of the *Aplysia*, just after they found themselves cast from paradise and into the chaos of the seas: "Emotionally wounded young human boys will save us from extinction. You must practice your habituation and sensitization. Without these skills we will perish in beds of seaweed on dry shores up and down the California coast." And thus memory was born.

The *Aplysia* spent thousands of years evolving their primitive memory skills to a perfect pitch. Centuries stretched into millennia, until finally the prophesied moment of their peril came to pass one day in 1975. There on the shores of San Elijo, while surfers languished in their pipes, the slugs habituated and sensitized me into a trance.

Imagine the complexity of the tiny neural patterns the slugs and I induced in each other as we reshaped each other's perceptual signatures, the vastness of the tiny synaptic responses, the multitudes of potassium and calcium secreted and ingested, the neural channels coaxed open. Think about the fact that neural structures had to be permanently reshaped for memory to result, in both them and me. Stanley, Mommy, Aaron, and Santio faded from my neural structures as the slugs took possession of them. Overwhelmed with the power of their stimuli, I have spent a lifetime turning the slugs upside down, imagining their underbellies recoiling and their gills motionless on their backs. My faulty memory is no dishonor, though. After all, it's the sea slugs themselves who remind us that memory need not be accurate, just functional. It comforts me to think that the slugs and I were busy rearranging each other's neurons. We did this for our mutual protection.

When Stanley finally tore me away from my rescue mission, I

resisted quietly until there was no more hope of delay. I snatched up my Snoopy towel and followed him up the stairs on the cliff, my ether starting to churn again as I tried to squelch the knowledge that so many of those slugs were drying up in seaweed clumps up and down the beach. The sea slugs couldn't calibrate their coiling. At the first sign of danger, they reacted strongly, unable to hide their fear. Not me. I had to use my more advanced human powers of deception to protect the secret of our bond. When I felt my coil want to tighten, I loosened instead and walked quietly up the stairs, my hands stained with purple ink, dragging Snoopy up in the sand.

FROM BOYS TO MEN

GAY MEN WRITE ABOUT
GROWING UP

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TED GIDEONSE

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Contents

Introduction

Robert Williams and Ted Gideonse • vii

Sleeping Eros

Michael McAllister • 1

The Story I Told Myself

K. M. Soehnlein • 19

Preppies Are My Weakness

Tom Dolby • 35

Barbie Girls

Eric Karl Anderson • 45

Signs

Raymonde C. Green • 57

No Matter What Happens

David Bahr • 69

The Lives and Deaths of Buffalo Butt

Todd Pozycki • 89

Dick

Alexander Chee • 103

The Upshot

Trebor Healey • 119

Guide

Austin Bunn • 131