

OUTER ISLAND

A short story by Daniel Webber

ARRIVAL

We commenced our descent at about midnight. A rain depression over Sydney had delayed departure. Following the tail of the storm, we entered an uneasy night, seatbelt signs flashing overhead. Finally, the landing strip appeared. In the dark, it seemed to float in nothingness - a brilliantly studded cross rising from the depths.

After a surprisingly smooth touchdown we were welcomed to Norfolk Island. The stewardesses informed us of customs regulations - the island being an external territory - and of speed limits - 40km in the township and 60 on the open road. We were advised to adjust our watches and finally to note

that the island's cows have right of way on all roads.

I had read in the in-flight magazine that: "The casual pace of the island, its weather and charming history appeals to honeymooners and pensioners alike". Now, as passengers grappled with the overhead lockers, I felt oddly out of place, being twenty-three and single. Reaching the tarmac and passing a row of wheel chairs I followed a yellow line to the terminal building. As I entered, somebody quipped: "Here come the newly weds and the nearly deads".

The customs officer chuckled as he took my passport. But, he frowned, flicking through it, looking for a clear page to stamp. Once through customs I hopped on a bus marked Hotel South Pacific and fell asleep. The famous Norfolk Island pine appears on the island's flag. When Captain Cook discovered the heavily forested island he thought the timber could be used for the masts of the Royal Fleet. But it proved too brittle for the job - those trees tall enough tending to rot out their centres and becoming hollow. A convict settlement was then established and the natural paradise experienced a period described as a hell on earth. The streets of London could be cleansed by sending the unruly down under. The Islanders, who

moved here after the convict settlement was closed, are descendants of the Bounty mutineers. The families were granted the island and a Royal pardon when they outgrew the tiny hideaway of Pitcairn Island far to the east. They demolished the gaol and used the timber to build homes.

After a few days I got a job clearing undergrowth. I'd already had a good look around. But now I was seeing places that seemed forgotten. There were valleys hidden within valleys, streams winding through ancient forests and waterfalls splashing into the sea. It was magical. The rest of the work team were Islanders, who horsed around in a way that made their lives complete. Their leathery faces creased as they smiled - affectionately, I thought, though I suspect they were getting good mileage out of my presence. Their Pidgin is a mix of Old English and Tahitian, so we communicated minimally.

I stuck with the ranger and we got along really well. He knew that the Islanders had their own way. So, we'd just scout around and assess trouble spots, returning to the group every hour or so to point at a section of hillside and depart. He was environmentally minded and very personally so and he knew the island like nobody else. We sat on a headland one day as

he explained that the semi-circular bay in front of us was once the rim of a volcano - the volcano that created the island. A ship was moored in the bay - an oil tanker connected to the island by a long hose. Enormous white petrol tanks disturbed the otherwise tranquil hillside. As I sat there, I preferred to think of a world hidden beneath the surface - the core of the volcano reaching deep into the earth.

The trip to Norfolk was done purely on impulse. It seemed the decision was made before I even really thought about it. It was lunch hour at the Quay and I found myself staring absently in the window of the East-West Airlines office. I can remember a poster of Norfolk Island, and my reflection, with swarms of people and traffic behind it. I had to get away.

SETTLING IN

On weekends, I do my own thing, which isn't so different to what I do during the week except that there's a surfboard under my arm. Since the island is so far out in the middle of the ocean, waves can come from any direction. So it took a couple of weeks to work out what conditions worked where. Of course, there's also the tide and the wind to consider, not to mention the size of the swell. So, estimating what surf spot would work when demanded careful analysis. Often, I would be drying off after a crummy, confusing surf, when I'd realise that somewhere would have been perfect, the tide now too high or the sun too low. I've got better at it, because sometimes the surf is perfect.

With nothing to do at night I took a job guarding palm trees. A native to nearby Lord Howe Island, the Kentia is popular in Europe and earns the Islanders a fortune - hence the need to guard them. I took the 9 til 12 shift and found the time passed easily. On calm nights, I could relax, having no trouble identifying the various creatures fossicking in the dark. But, in a wind, the forest became a cacophony. Every hour or so, I would hesitantly

investigate a sound, which would fortunately turn out to have been an old palm frond crashing to the ground. It's a terrifying sound when your job is to anticipate thieves.

The job was for the month prior to harvest and during that time I watched the changing phases of the moon. I also noticed that at a particular time each night the moon would be in a slightly different position. That seems obvious enough, except that the successive nights saw it move in the opposite direction to the way it passed across the sky. I don't suppose I'd ever thought about it. But this indicates that the moon orbits the planet in the same direction as the planet spins - eastward. It also explains why high tide is almost an hour later each day. Since the moon has advanced in its orbit during the course of the day, it takes an hour extra for the land to catch up to the tide as it follows the moon.

The whole island took part in the harvest and my job was to keep a journal of what quantity came off which trees. The Islanders would be up and down a 30-foot palm in not much more than a minute. The seed was measured by the bushel and at the end of three weeks the island had produced a record harvest with a seed value in excess of five million dollars. About a quarter of

the harvest would be potted, a seedling doubling its value in a year, or ten-fold in three.

WINTER SWELLS

The weather's unpredictable today. It rains for half an hour and then the sun comes out again, sometimes shining through the rain. There's a commanding view of the coast from my window. The surface of the sea is all chopped up. A squall is on its way to the horizon - a curtain of rain gradually fading into the distance. Just before dark, I notice the swell is rising. The white-horses are marching in columns. I go to bed early and when I wake next morning the sky is clear and the swell clean. A light breeze is carrying spray off the back of each wave. As they peel across the reef, sunlight is being refracted in the spray, changing colour as it passes through the spectrum.

After a couple of months I figured I knew what the island had to offer in the way of surf. But, as winter approached, the swells began coming almost exclusively from the south. These were more powerful than the swells I had become accustomed to and a whole new pattern of surf emerged. There was no doubt that these swells had originated many thousands of kilometres

away, as they were faultless. From the headlands high above the waves, the ocean appeared as corduroy to the horizon.

During one such swell, we started clearing undergrowth in a valley on the west side of the island. It was warm for winter, even hot in the sun, and the mozzies were relentless. A flock of parrots started squawking and screeching at us, or so it seemed, as though we were trespassing or something. You had to shout to be heard. It was maddening. Then one of the workers bellowed at them and they stopped. We cracked up laughing.

Not long after, I noticed a distant rumbling - the surf! I quickly made my way down stream and as the roar increased a salty mist filled the air. It was like entering another world. Eventually, I came to the edge of a shear drop. It seemed like the edge of the world, the ocean stretching out before me. The swell was big, really big, or else the island had shrunk. The waves roared as they turned blue ocean into foaming white froth. They seemed to be peeling in slow motion. It was awesome. I just stood there, kind of spellbound, watching these magnificent walls of moving water, crashing as they peeled off down the coast. Suddenly, I noticed the ranger standing beside me and he signalled for me to follow.

The roar diminished as we made our way up slope. I must have been concentrating on my footing, because suddenly the ranger vanished. Then I heard him laughing - his laugh coming from inside the hollow of a tree. I peered in to see him sitting in a chamber almost two metres across. He spoke and his voice was the only sound. He told me how shocked I'd looked and we laughed. Then he shared with me the story of a man who escaped the convict settlement and lived in a hollow tree. According to the legend, seven years passed when one day he was discovered, caught, and led back to the gaol where he was hanged. Not two months passed when the two soldiers responsible for his capture went missing. They had gone fishing on the west coast and fell prey to the curse Barney Duffy laid on them when they turned him in. This valley was where Barney Duffy lived in seclusion for seven years. We stayed for a while and then set back. The Islanders were having a smoko and one was lighting a fire. Soon, night fell and we all sat listening to the crackling embers.

The biggest swells came every seven or eight days, each lasting two to three days. In between, the swells were often of good quality from head height to about double that. My favourite break I called Barney Duffy's

because I'm certain he'd have watched it - maybe while showering beneath the waterfall, visible from the surf or fishing from the huge rock I jumped off. The waves are hollow. When the swell is from the south, the waves peel across the reef for about twenty metres, staying hollow the whole way. It's very easy to ride. I think I could do it with my eyes closed.

Riding inside the hollow part of a wave is an extraordinary thing to do. The water rushes up the face of the wave, arches over your head and falls in a perfect sheet, with you inside. I have a technique that I must have learnt unconsciously, because I feel as though I do it unconsciously. I place my back-foot a little bit to the side of the surfboard that faces the wave and my front-foot a little bit to the other side - the side that faces the land. To increase speed, I just lean back a little. This makes the surfboard penetrate at a sharper angle, which increases the resistance and, therefore, also the speed. By leaning forward, the penetration angle is lessened and the board becomes flat against the water, making it drift sideways, thus slowing it down. It all depends on the centre of gravity and I sometimes find myself rocking gently back and forth, feeling the transition.

CRASH

The ranger let me use his car for a few days while he was off the island. He reminded me that the cows had right of way. But, I must have forgotten, or else I was distracted by the appealing curves in the road. Coming out of a tight bend, I suddenly swerved to miss one, but collected its enormous head in the windscreen. Unbelievably, it survived, setting off like nothing had happened.

A new windscreen, I was told, would have to come from the mainland. So, it'd be about a week. At the service station, I was approached by an old man. Recognising the car, he must have thought I was the ranger. He had some clearing to do behind the house and I said I'd come and check it out. As he shuffled off, he said he'd put the kettle on. The station attendant gave me directions to the old man's house and helped remove the shattered windscreen. It was not until he suggested I vacuum thoroughly that I noticed the inside of the car was glittering with splintered glass. I wound down the windows and drove off, the wind whistling by my ears and carrying a swirl of glitter out behind.

Although the house was not far from the main drag, it was in a world of its own. The road, I was told, led straight to his house and I found his was the only house on that road. The area to be cleared was a large patch of lantana. I was feeling a little shaky from the incident with the cow. So, I wasn't all that keen. Lantana is a nightmare. But I figured, since the old man moved at such a casual pace, he wouldn't mind if I took my time. So, we ended up sitting on the back veranda drinking tea and talking for an hour or more.

It was his childhood home - a period when the island's orchards supplied the Sydney market. The way he stared ahead as he talked I sensed a film was rolling in his mind. "There were garden parties", he said, and fell silent as if suddenly transported to his childhood. At that point, I decided to deal with the lantana. As I stepped off the veranda and it loomed large before me, I remembered how the workers would approach it. Instead of grabbing at its tangled mess, they would search out the root. So, peering into the mass, I focused on where the branches came together, finally meeting at the main stem. The next step was to cut a tunnel to it and while I was absorbed in this task there was suddenly the splutter of a motor - the old man nowhere

to be seen. The splutter became a roar and from around the corner of the house emerged a tractor, the old man in command. Manoeuvring as he changed gears, it appeared he drove it every day.

He backed up and, letting it idle, leapt off, rope in hand. I tied it to the stem while he tied it to the tractor. He got back on, revved and pretended to engage the gears, laughing as I scrambled from the tunnel. Then he engaged and watched as the slack tightened. He pushed the throttle, feeling the resistance, and then slowly increased. The bush held tight, being netted to the ground and surrounding trees. But, once it started to tear away, the whole mass, covering a much larger area than I'd realised, now followed the tractor. As the remaining vegetation resumed its fuller posture, leaves raining here and there and dust still settling, my attention was drawn to the ground where there was now evidence of a rock garden. I came closer and could see still more rocks marking off a lower level with steps leading to it. I spun around to see a very smiling old man walking toward me with a rake and a hoe. He insisted on dealing with the root and instructed me to clear the remaining debris. We worked for who knows how long, it didn't matter, and at the end, there stood a splendid rockery with stone steps arcing through it to a lower section. What a triumph. It felt great. "What a team",

he said and was adamant I accept fifty dollars.

I fell sound asleep that night and dreamt I was walking on a beach and came upon a pile of bones. Reaching down to pick one up I noticed something solid under my foot. I dug around it and unearthed the animal's skull. I figured it to be a cow's. I was taking it home, but on the way decided to hang it on a pine tree where a branch had been snapped off. Somehow it seemed to belong there.

I wake suddenly to the sound of a distant church bell - a lone note sent out across the island and into the night. I pull the covers up, thinking how right it felt - the skull hanging on the tree. Then, I hear the bell once more and after a moment it occurs to me that somebody has died. I listen as the bell sounds on each minute, but soon fall asleep.

ALONE

The next day, on my way secretly to see if there are any bones on the beach or a skull hanging from a tree, I decide to drop in on the old man. As I pull up beside the new spacious rockery, I feel proud of the work we did. Walking to the veranda, I half expect the old man to emerge from within. But, he doesn't. I knock on the beam a few times, but decide to try again later. I reverse the car out, turn onto the road and then notice the enormous pile of lantana, still roped to the tractor. About halfway along the road it hits me. My friend has gone. Pulling off the road, I stop, get out and stumble aimlessly from the car. A tree on the edge of the clearing catches my attention and I head toward it. Leaning against it, tears well up and I am suddenly overwhelmed by emotions that feel like they're rooted in my soul.

The shock eventually subsides and a calm descends. The branches of the tree are silhouetted against a deep blue sky. Low clouds are passing rapidly, giving a fluid dimension. I hear children playing. But, it's only a creek splashing over rocks, behind the tree. The ground beneath the tree has

been eroded by storms, exposing the roots on that side. I climb in underneath and sit looking out at unspoilt nature. The creek splashes and swirls and plunges and I see now that there is a miniature world surrounding the creek - a lush jungle buzzing with activity. Details emerge. A butterfly launches from a branch. A trail of ants winds its way down a stem. A beetle is climbing over a bed of glistening moss. It's all happening simultaneously. Life here seems so vivid, so active, so alive. Taking my shoes off, I step into the creek. It is cool, and the pebbles caress the soles of my feet. Magically, as if on the wake of a butterfly, I float upstream, lost to myself and at one with nature.

A little further upstream the water broadens and the canopy overhead gives the impression of being in a cathedral. Shafts of sunlight enter through high windows and light the water where fish dart and swerve and break the surface. I hear music and the gurgle of people talking. Crouching low I make my way toward its source. Behind the branches, I can see a house. There are people outside, well dressed, some wearing hats. There is a burst of laughter. On a lower level a girl is skipping with a rope. There's also a boy, aiming a slingshot at her. She squeals, and as she runs to the house, I recognise the steps. A chill runs down my spine. I slip and nearly fall in the

water. The creek is full of human skulls. A skeleton reaches up and grabs my ankle. I panic and kick at it. But, it tightens its grip. The boy looks up. It's hopeless. I can't get away. I try to prise its fingers free. But, now it's a ball and chain. I grasp the ball, strain to lift it from the water and, holding it to my chest, scramble from the creek. Branches scratch at me as I run frantically in the direction of the car. Breaking free of the brush, I see the car door is still open. I jump in and turn the ignition. The engine turns over and the radio blasts static. I rev and the door slams as I swerve onto the road. Frustratedly, I try to tune the radio between shifting gears. A bell sounds and there is silence. I sit up, sweating profusely. It's dark. I collect my thoughts and moments later the bell sounds again. I remain sitting til dawn and when eventually the sounding of the bell comes to an end, the silence that follows seems laced with death.

FAITH

During spring, the swell dropped off a lot. It was small, but neat. I started surfing the reef in front of the old gaol and, one day, found a friend. I was sitting out the back when, suddenly, a head appeared about twenty metres further out. At first, I thought it was an old man who'd somehow swum out without my noticing. But, as I studied him, I realised no one could live to look that old. It was a sea turtle. We stared at each other for a minute or two and then he went under, popping up again from time to time. I got the impression that he accepted me and we kept in touch for a couple of weeks.

I'd never paid much attention to this surf break because the waves seemed too quick. But, in a small swell, it's fun and very hollow because the reef is so shallow. For about a week there was no wind - just dead calm. The sea was glassy smooth, making the swells invisible because they reflected the sky. Normally, a wave needs a bit of wind in the face to keep it hollow. But, being so shallow, it wasn't necessary. The waves were idyllic, and so smooth they reflected the land like a mirror. Riding inside the tube I could

see the reef passing by underneath, the odd fish darting out of the way.

All that remains of the old gaol are its foundations and the outer walls. In the wall beside the main gate can be seen remnants of the steps that led to the gallows. I can see these from the surf and, as I wait for a wave, I wonder if a man was ever hanged on a day as beautiful as today. In his last moments, did he look out at tiny waves glistening in the sunlight as they peeled across the reef? Might he have sensed beauty, glimpsed perfection in that moment before the end? Old man turtle has come to visit and much closer than usual. Then I see why. A dorsal fin glides by just ten metres out. I stroke to shore and, hurrying across the reef, tread heavily on a sea urchin. Pain shoots up my leg and I see that the spines have snapped off, embedded beneath the skin. I limp to the road and figure I'm lucky to have kept my foot, even if it does hurt.

I dropped in to see the ranger that night and had the pleasure of meeting his daughter. I felt I already knew her, as she reads the news on the local radio station. Faith is of Islander descent, and very beautiful. Her eyes are captivating. She paints, "for fun" she says. But, her father insists his daughter is an artist. After dinner the ranger showed me some of Faith's

paintings. I recognised instantly the places depicted. There was even one of the waterfall at Barney Duffy's. The ranger thought only a few people had ever seen it.

Faith got her name from a great aunt, one of three sisters, Faith, Hope and Charity. The sisters were Christians, of Fletcher Christian descent. But, their mother was an Adams, from John Adams, who preached to the Pitcairners from the Bible retrieved from the Bounty before it was set ablaze. There was also a Wisdom somewhere back in the family tree, though he's said to have gone insane. The symbolism is uncanny, though hardly surprising, an innocent child burdened with a name like that.

That day, Faith had bungled the lost-and-found segment on the radio, and her father wasn't going to let up, if only by chuckling to himself every once in a while. "A pair of glasses has been lost in the vicinity of the old gaol." she announced. "If anyone finds them, would they please hand them in at the radio station." Then, the very next item: "Found near the old gaol, a pair of bifocal" That was about the time I was hurrying from the surf. My war wound had begun to throb and I couldn't hide the fact that I was in pain. Nor did I wish to, with sympathy on hand. Luckily, Faith's tender touch

made up for the pain of having the spines removed. We talked at length about her paintings and the places we both knew. She agreed it was time to exhibit. The job done, and exhausted by the ordeal, I fell sound asleep.

SUMMER

I limped around for about a week, but stayed out of the water for almost a month. In any case, there wasn't much surf and the winds were bad. The weather got steamy hot and I got a job mowing lawns. Soon I was working full-time, mowing, weeding, cutting back and trimming garden edges. Everything was growing so fast. But, with steady application a garden can really take shape. My efforts were appreciated too, judging from the cool beer and warm conversation enjoyed at the end of the day. Somehow things made sense.

I still managed to get a few waves in on weekends and was lucky the conditions were so favourable. But then, I knew the island back-to-front. One day the swell swung more to the west than was usual. It was too small for most of the breaks and the wrong direction for in front of the gaol. But there was one break I hadn't yet surfed. Actually it's the only proper surf beach on the island, where waves break on sand. It's at the furthest end of the island and a long walk from the road. So, before setting off, I pack a

lunch, some fruit and a bottle of water.

I arrive to see a set approaching. There's a steep hill behind the beach with a track zigzagging its way down. From so high up, the surf looks tiny. But, it's probably about head height. It looks promising. As I descend to the beach, crossing back and forth, I see the conditions are perfect, and not the least the direction of the swell because the waves are wedging. A semi-submerged slab of rock situated halfway out along the point causes the wedging effect. Deflected by the rock, incoming swells become crossed, doubling their height. When, at last, I step onto the sand I drop all my gear and dive into the shore break to cool off. The sensation is exhilarating. I paddle out and catch a few waves. But, it's too quick. So, I decide to go in. There's no rush. The tide is just a little low. I eat lunch and lie in the shade of a kentia.

When I wake, I almost think I'm dreaming, the surf is that perfect. I grab my board and make a dash for the water. Before entering, I watch the peak standing tall, the cross swell linking with the incoming wave. Meeting the shallow it sucks out, throwing the lip into space. Its glassy curtain falls silently and explodes on impact, sending up a huge white ball of water.

Peeling faultlessly, the wave blasts the water in front of it, cutting a straight line to me at the water's edge. The waves are frequent, riding in on the rising tide, and I can't paddle fast enough.

I surf intensely for an hour or more, and though I could keep at it, I decide to go in for some sustenance. I devour an orange and the taste competes with the salt on my lips. I drink the water and rest for quarter of an hour. When I make for the surf again, I'm more subdued. Still paddling firmly, I realise mowing lawns has paid in more ways than one. Now, nice and relaxed, I feel content just being here.

EXHIBITION

Tube riding is easiest when you face the wave. But, since I'm accustomed to riding one way - that is with my right foot forward - I'm tending to ride the face more than going for the barrel. It feels really awkward to stand with the wrong foot forward. But, having had so many waves, I give it a go. It's so weird. I feel like I've just stood on a surfboard for my first time. I get clobbered and come up with sand in my hair. I decide to give it a miss.

However, just as I'm dropping into the next wave, I once more pull my left foot forward and stand, crouching low with feet wide apart. Leaning back, I feel the surfboard drive. I lean forward and the lip wacks me in the side of the head, forcing water into my ear. Despite the discomforts, I'm enjoying the novelty. I keep at it and after a few waves I find that a kind of monkey-stance helps. I pretend to be a monkey and when finally I ride the full length of a wave, I make ape noises and beat my chest.

The sun is getting lower now and the swell less frequent. I retire to my

things on the beach and sit absorbing the awesome beauty of nature. Suddenly, I notice a figure walking toward me across the sand - a female. I jump up, unsure if I should escape or stand and fight. But, it's Faith, and besides, I'm human. She says she's been over on the rocks drawing. As she hands me the clipboard I remember my monkey performance, praying she didn't see it. But alas, she has even recorded it. I can see in the picture that my left foot is forward. The rocks give an ideal perspective. I even look like a monkey.

We talk a while. I try to explain what it's like to ride inside a barrel. She seems genuinely interested. All the same, I choose not to go on about it, and we just sit enjoying the sun together. After a while, she reaches for her drawing block and tells me to keep still. She begins to sketch, eyes darting back and forth. Then she stares at me for a full five seconds and says it's okay if I breathe. We laugh, and I see a naturalness in her that I long for.

But, if I'm going to get another surf in, I'd best get a move on. It's intermittent, but still a nice shape. I leave Faith on the beach and paddle out. There are long spells between waves now, during which I just sit on my board and daydream, watching the sun dipping behind clouds on the

horizon. Sometimes I wonder if this tranquillity is what I like most about surfing. Suddenly, there's a splash to my left and I turn to see something so unmistakably head-shaped that the thought of a shark dissolves quickly away. It's old man turtle. He dives under and pops up again further out, appearing and disappearing, and then suddenly gliding beneath me. I get a fright and realise that while I can see him against the sand bottom, I would never see him against the dark reef.

It's time to go in. But, the surf and the whole atmosphere are too perfect to leave. So, I end up paddling out once more. A big fish jumps clear of the water about a hundred metres out. Flocks of birds swirl about, gradually coming to land on the perfectly still ocean. They take flight again, all at once - an enormous flock looking like a thumbprint on the sky. Suddenly, they divide into two and circle in opposite directions, reuniting once again and coming to rest on the smooth sea. The setting sun has sparked a deep orange glow, vividly highlighting the clouds on the horizon. It is picturesque.

The light is quickly fading. So, I turn to go in, but discover it's completely dark. I blink and blink and blink. But, there's no light whatsoever. I look out to the tranquil scene on the horizon and back to this empty black space. The

blackness seems all encompassing. I'm not sure what to do. If I paddle in, I risk getting carried onto the rocks. I best wait for a wave. The sea is unusually flat. Soon, the vaguest silhouette of a swell approaches and, although it disappears, I turn towards the land and paddle hard. The board begins to lift as the swell rises from beneath me. As it peaks, I leap to my feet, total darkness and wrong foot forward! Dropping down the face, I can only go on feel, the water passing beneath the board and the way the board responds to the changing curves in the wave. Ever so carefully, I straighten out, riding on my stomach in nothingness.

Walking up the beach, I trip on a rock. It's pointless looking for my things in the dark. So, I sit on the rock and watch the horizon as the last light slowly gives way to night. A warm breeze keeps me company. Every few moments a wave rushes up the sand. It's so tranquil, . . . peaceful, . . . and perfectly free. Time drifts by and then water swirls around my feet. The moon is rising and the beach is suddenly bathed in a silvery sheen. I collect my things and head for home. I take a road that winds down into a heavily forested valley leading to the centre of the island. Faith lives nearby, and as her place comes near I can hear music. Crossing the cattle-grid, I remember it's the opening night of her exhibition. People are coming and

going. As I near the house, Faith appears from within. She knows why I'm late. We meet in the doorway and embrace. A tear races down my cheek. It's salty. I'm reminded of the surf.

"Come on" she says, grabbing my hand enthusiastically. "There's something I want to show you". Faith drags me into the crowd. It looks like everyone who's anyone has turned out for the occasion. The place is packed. Though, no one's really looking at what's hanging on the walls. Suddenly, Faith gestures toward a picture in front of us. It takes a moment to register that it's the picture Faith drew of me today on the beach, already framed and behind glass. "Wow." I say, a little stunned. "Do I look like that?" She's drawn my brow knitted in concentration. I think I was looking at the surf. "You did then." she says. A red spot has been placed on the wall beside the picture. "Who bought it." I ask. "I did." she replies with a laugh. "How much?" "Oh, not so much - the cost of the frame."

We stand there side by side and it occurs to me how effective a frame is for presenting a picture. Of course, it's the picture that matters, or what the picture represents, maybe. But a frame helps a lot. I notice my reflection in the glass, just as I did in the window of the East-West office in Sydney a

year ago. Though now the people behind me aren't passing each other by. Such a different world.

We circulate and reconnect a few times in the course of the evening. In the bathroom, I see how scruffy I look, a layer of salt on my face. It doesn't seem to worry anyone. I rejoin the party where people have started singing Islander songs. The night rolls on as guests slowly disembark and vanish into the night. When, at last, all the last guests had left, Faith opened a bottle of champagne. The exhibition had sold well. In a way, it saddened Faith to say good-bye to her works. I could see a moment's uncertainty as she pondered the meaning of it all. I suggested she might look at it as her creativity now entering people's lives. I kind of envied her for being able to offer something of her own creation.

THE EARLY

I wake at first light to the gentle sound of birds chirping and the distant rumble of the ocean. The swell's up! Soon, I'm peddling down the drive and up the valley road. I know a secret spot I haven't been to in a while, and something tells me it's on. I don't know why I think of it as a secret spot. I suppose, I'd just forgotten about it. It's a tiny cove on the south side of the island. The path down to the water crosses a creek where a solid pine trunk gets you to the other side. In the moist morning air it's wet and slippery. A short climb and I'm on a ridge looking down at an idyllic scene - waves peeling on either side of the bay. I should come here more often.

I study the surf a while and see it'll be safest to jump off the left side of the bay. There's a channel just inside the impact zone, where a current should carry me clear of the rocks. I make my way to the end and find a good vantage point. Before entering surf, it's a good idea to study the set-up, how big the waves are, if there are any rocks to be wary of, where the good sections are and where to position yourself. The paddle out has to be timed, so as not to dive off as a set approaches, and if there are any rocks to

clamber across, this takes planning. It can be a tense situation. So, it's important to be focused. Fortunately, this cool morning air sharpens the mind.

The factor that most determines when to go surfing is the tide. Wave-shape and the whole pattern of the surf changes with the tide, more or less hour to hour. The wind and swell remain constant for hours, even days. You have to be sensitive to all these factors to get to know a surf break, and each break is different, since the underwater topography of one place is unlike any other. At beach breaks, even the sandbanks change shape from week to week. So, it takes commitment to get good waves. Though, sometimes, you just luck on, like this morning. I'm tempted to get out there. It'll be warmer in the water. There's a good wave now. To think, I've got it to myself. I'll get a few on the left and paddle across to the right. It's longer.

Surfboards, leg-ropes and wetsuits have to be considered long in advance - not only suiting the surfer, but also various surf conditions. Untold factors go into surfboard design. I have two boards for different sized surf. The other would be better for this morning. It's bigger. But, I daren't go get it, else the swell drop or the wind change direction. Like anything, when an

opportunity presents itself, you've kind of got to take it, however prepared you might be. The left is good and hollow. I'll see how it goes.

I like to keep my boards in good repair. Dings are inevitable at these rocky breaks. A cracked fin can easily snap off. A ding on the rail might be where the board snaps in half, or else the exposed fibreglass will put a cut in your leg-rope, and if that breaks, the board will end up getting bounced around on the rocks until you can find your own way in to retrieve it. But then, hectic situations are half the fun.

Then there's getting ready to head out. Putting on a wetsuit and waxing up has a kind of ritual feel about it - a few moments spent mentally preparing for engagement. When it's big, it feels like you're preparing for battle, your wetsuit like a suit of armour, your board a shield. I normally wear booties and a helmet at reef breaks - added protection in battle. But, I'll have to do without, this morning. I hadn't needed them at the beach yesterday. I feel kind of naked, without them.

Now's my chance. I zip my wetsuit up, put on the leg rope and, watching the water drain off the reef, follow it, hopping from rock to rock until I'm

looking off the edge of the reef. Again, I'm standing between land and sea - between two worlds. Suddenly, the board is illuminated. The sun is peeking over the island! It feels like the beginning of a memorable day. As I paddle over the first wave, I catch sight of the moon, now touching the western horizon. How strange that it's actually orbiting in the opposite direction to the way it appears to be going. Only by seeing the big picture, can you know this. I wonder if Faith knows this place. I like it here. The island, I mean. There's a lot more - more time, I guess. It's going to be a great day, today. I can tell.