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BIGGEST SWELL SINCE FOREVER

Swimming in the aftermath

{*Swell Story 1*} by MARA WOLFORD

Today was pretty flat, or finally flat

enough that I could find other interesting things to do but surf. I put a few hours work in, then grabbed my goggles and ran down to the reef. I threw myself in the water at the same spot I use to paddle out, where the gremmies hit it. The keyhole at the top scares me for a lot of reasons and I prefer to avoid it, especially when it's big.

I'm flat on the reef and small waves roll over me. It may look sketchy, but it's not. I try to swim out to the peak, grabbing the reef to pull myself ahead, but the current is gushing at seven to eight knots and as hard as I swim, it pulls me backwards. I never swim with fins. I go with it, letting the current drag me off the reef. I dive under, backflip and watch the bubbles explode above me, surface, stroke out only to be drawn back again, enjoying the rays of sunshine and rainbow of bubbles caught in the sun's glint upon each impact, before I get washed in.

I run back up the point and do the same thing again. The current has mellowed and I make it out to the back. After one month of murk following the biggest swell *Since Forever*, the water is relatively clear. I start my exercise: 40 seconds down active (underwater, swimming metres against current), surface, one breath, 20 seconds down passive (dive to the bottom, float), surface, one breath, 40 active, 20 passive, repeat.

I don't know where I learnt this – it may have been sprint swim training as a child or I may have made it up – but it works as preparation for getting pummelled or losing your board in circumstances where you would have preferred not to. I repeat this exercise for one hour straight, holding position against the current at the same time. It's the best-ever game I've invented for

myself and no one else understands or cares what I'm doing, when all I'm actually doing is making sure I'm not a liability when things get heavy. I pretend I'm a mermaid. That's the part that makes it fun.

I haven't seen the reef close-up since the biggest swell *Since Forever* rolled through. At the peak of the mayhem, Captain Timmo Wau's boat came loose from its mooring, drifted into the lineup and infamously went over the falls. Timmo was away on a charter, he was waiting for the two Yamaha 750s he'd ordered from Padang to arrive for the boat. In the absence of motors, there was no way to move the boat to a safer mooring. Waves were peaking and breaking on bombies nobody knew existed. Surfers were attempting to ride strange, twisted double-ups. The channel in the middle of the bay closed out. Matt Bromley said that prior to this swell, Maverick's scared him the most,

All the living coral has been wiped off the reef. All the seaweed, too. It is vacant, stripped naked by one freakish swell. There were years when the reef went all white, bleached and died, and there were other years when it came back in all its glory of glowing purple, red and fluorescent green coral. The reef is my intimate friend/enemy. I know it by heart, all its nooks and crevices. Luckily, it has only seen the soles of my feet in my moments of desperation, not my head, back or arse, like many others.

But now there is nothing other than a green, slimy moss covering the old reef, probably due to nitrate run-off. Locals use a bead-like pink fertiliser they call *pupuk* on the ubiquitous ground vine that grows on the island that is used to feed the pigs, and it's just pure nitrates. There are no more fish around other than a few stragglers. I come across a moray eel with a cricket ball-

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but he'd changed his mind that day. That day had been terrifying for him.

Somehow nobody died, but there was bound to be collateral damage.

The swell furiously smashed the reef, broke it up into pieces and there are rocks all over now, high on the beach. Tonnes of accumulated coral and sand from under the reef washed up on the shoreline afterwards. That's why the current is so strong now, as it sucks through the cleared-out passages that are wide open and unblocked. We suspect a corner of the reef was broken off too, which makes the line-up a little more interesting these days. But the thing I noticed most in my mermaid dives is the damage.

size head that makes him measure around two metres in length from the hole he was stalking me from. He must've taken up residence once the reef had been cleared of its previous occupants. His head is bright blue and brown in the sunlight shimmering through the water and I find that mildly interesting before I swim away, because moray eels scare me.

I let the waves take me in, effortlessly riding the whitewater that pushes me to shore. I glide flat over green, slippery rock in a foot of water. I think about how fast things change as I grasp the shelf with my fingers, float flat and ease myself onto the green, mossy reef at the water's edge.

Mark Healey wrangles a set, with debris and lineup opposite | photo below @tedgrambeau and insets by @chachfiles

