

Bad Dad

by Alex Austin

Hugh drained his Snappy Tom, twisted the bottle into the sand and uncapped his coffee. The nausea had passed for the moment.

The waves were too challenging. There were many surfers not much older or taller than the twins, but none were quite as young, none with their slender builds and narrow shoulders. None eleven years old. None eighty pounds. Hugh turned his eyes from the sea, leaned close enough to the sand to observe the shape of individual grains and spit hot bile. "They aren't that big," said Takumi, five minutes older than his twin, Hitoshi, and the more assertive.

"What if we stay close to shore, dad?" asked Hitoshi.

Hugh pushed sand over the simmering yellow and looked up.

"Just catch the wash," said Takumi.

"The currents are too strong," Hugh said, breathing deeply and then bravely sipping his coffee.

"Not like we're swimming. We've got the boards," insisted Takumi.

Hitoshi clapped his brother's shoulder. "We'll stay close together."

"We've surfed six-foot waves at Malibu."

It was true but those were gentle compared to these.

They continued to make their case. They were remarkable athletes, capable of mastering skills that escaped other children. It wasn't that Hugh lacked confidence in them....

A cadre of surfers soared down a wave's slope like a rocket's streamers. How beautiful!

"Why did we come here then?" asked Hitoshi.

"You're always telling us how good we are," said Takumi.

"You are good," Hugh said with conviction.

"Then why can't we go?"

Hugh pointed. "Look at the size of that wave."

"We wouldn't take that wave. We're not stupid."

"I know."

"We'll stay close together."

He couldn't contest that. As identical twins they conformed to that reputation of physical and psychological inseparability. They were always together, never tiring of the other, boundlessly interested in the other's thoughts and moods. Protected from the usual childhood troughs of emotion by their twoness. He shifted on the sand and leaned into them, thinking he would hear their whispers of consolation, but they were silent, staring at different horizons and removed from each other. His stomach churned. He wished he'd bought a second Snappy Tom. He closed his eyes for a moment, hoping to slip the thudding headache.

When they were seven, he'd taken them out to the desert and let them shoot a .38 at rusted cans. The explosions rocked them back on their heels. That same year in November, they'd climbed Half Dome in Yosemite. The snow fell on the stone as they inched their way to the top. Takumi slipped, slid and gashed his forehead, but he refused to stop. His blood melted through the fresh flakes. But how he and Hitoshi beamed when they reached the top and gazed at the valley floor, radiant in its fresh white blanket. He imagined their joyful cries atop the freak waves.

Nearby a seagull mewed. Hugh's head throbbed unmercifully. He searched for adequate words, but finding one or two he lacked the energy to string them together. Why couldn't they? Why couldn't they?

"Ten minutes. I'll let you go in for ten minutes."

"All right, dad!"

Beaming, they folded the Velcro leashes around their slender ankles. The leashes were made for thicker limbs and even fully wrapped still had play.

Carrying his coffee, he walked with them into the surf. He was hip deep and the backwash was enough to knock him off balance. The chaotic waters reflected sunlight in a hundred directions, poking holes in his vision like a migraine.

Takumi and Hitoshi threw themselves onto their tiny surfboards and paddled skillfully into the wash.

"Ten minutes," he shouted, though he wasn't sure they could hear him over the booming waves. Through his fly eyes, he followed their slender bodies as they fought their way through the surf, paddling parallel. Nosing down to let the broken waves crash over them.

They faced a set of big waves that carried surfers. They broke though the base of the first wave, disappearing as the wave rose up to curl and collapse. He saw them again, just as the second wave struck. They made it through the third and took their place among the hundred other surfers on the flat water, waiting for the next set. Hugh calmed a little then. He watched all the surfers drift to the right. The entire sea was moving north. A wave formed, rising. The twins paddled side-by-side forcefully, belying their age and bodies. Together they turned, shooting forward as the wave lifted them until they were on the crest, held in suspension for an instant and then rocketing down, perfectly balanced, soaring down the wave's infinite face. Crouched, they cut right and then left with dazzling synchronicity. As the wave folded and crashed, they rode parallel to the shore and then rolled off their boards, disappearing into the froth.

When they reappeared, they instantly turned their boards around and started paddling out again. He caught the fierce smiles. How long they had been out? He lost track of time watching them. It was no time, all time. He followed them again as they drove though the waves, getting farther out. Except for their size, they could have been pros. As he backed out of the surf, Hugh lost balance, dropping his coffee cup, which he'd forgotten he was holding. He walked out of the surf and back to the blanket, where he watched them take another wave. There was a refreshment stand back from the beach. It would take only a few minutes he thought. He needed it.

By the time he returned with his coffee, most of the surfers had moved farther out. He scanned the black wetsuits, looking for the smallest. Beyond the surfers, a boat churned south, rising and falling in the swell. They had been in at least 20 minutes. He walked to the water's edge and called their names. It was impossible to be heard over the ocean's roar. With a bullhorn, he would not have

been able to reach them. The surfers were paddling furiously against a current that threatened to pull them off the break. The set came. The first wave was the largest of the day.

A dozen surfers turned their boards toward the shore and paddled furiously to catch it. He tried to pick out his sons from the other surfers being lifted on the wave like chips of wood, about half failing to catch it. For a few seconds, the pack was invisible. The second wave rose. More surfers strove to catch this one. When the third wave came, it was enormous. The remaining surfers were determined to ride the monster. Hugh saw the two boys turn their boards to shore and paddle madly.

Lodged 10 feet high on the face, they simultaneously stood up and shot sideways, moving dizzyingly fast. They cut trails, spreading apart as the wave carried them shoreward.

As they toppled off their boards, Hugh screamed for them to come in. They were close enough to have heard, but ignored him they turned away and lay on their boards, stroking seaward. He clawed his way out.

"Takumi! Hitoshi!" Hugh shouted.

One turned and then the other. Hugh's coffee cup again slipped from his fingers, bounding away. They were not his sons.

It was like that. They were gone. This stupid man standing on the beach screaming, swimming into waves that tossed him back like a rubber inflatable, and finally grabbed by others as the mechanisms that come into play, came into play.

An hour later their boards washed up on the beach. The leashes remained attached. The bracelets of Velcro still fastened but no longer on the slender ankles.

His hangover and his children were gone.

