



Lesson Six

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It was Christmas Day. My wife, Delian, and I were learning how to surf. We'd just completed the fifth of our six introductory lessons at the Easy Beach surfing guesthouse in Ahangama, Sri Lanka. We ordered pre-dinner drinks and enjoyed the sunset from the porch. The waves crashed and lapped against the shore.

Two traveling surfers, Ollie and Matt, joined us. They ordered pints of Lion lager, and welcomed our surf-related questions. After a few tales of their wave exploits, Matt held up his glass and looked right at me.

He warned, "Don't forget that every surfer's got a story. We all have a story about the wave that was almost too big, the rip that was almost too fierce, the call that was almost too close." I laughed, and reminded him that mine was the story of a thirty-two-year-old man vacationing in Sri Lanka, a beginner. I wasn't about to go chase big waves. The head-high peelers greeting us each day were all I wanted.

Easy Beach was owned by a Norwegian hippie named Oystein. Three years ago, he'd sold his auto body shop in Norway and permanently moved to southern Sri Lanka. With the cold behind him and his beautiful lodge built, he was now living his surf dream. Early, on the morning of our final lesson, Oystein was already in his board shorts and rash vest. His blond mane blew faintly in the breeze as he sipped at a glass of Sri Lankan milk tea. He wished Delian and me a great sixth lesson, finished his milk, then jumped on his bike

and pedaled off to his favorite break, his board held under his arm and the sun on his back.

Yannick, our laid-back French surf teacher, showed up in his van. My wife and I climbed over the boards to our seats. Already inside was Akalan, Yannick's Sri Lankan assistant, and Sophia, a Swedish beginner along for the day. Everyone was beaming, talking about yesterday's perfect Christmas waves and bright night full moon. Yannick reviewed the day's lesson. He spoke about popping up and taking the drop, while Delian and I coated our calves with sun block. The van grumbled down the coastal road, which seethed with bikes, people, cows, *tuk-tuks* and Tata trucks.

We parked in the sparse grasses in front of Weligama Beach, and Yannick turned from the front seat to hand out our rash vests. Red for me and Yannick, white for Delian and Sophia. Akalan gave us a smile, pulled out a newspaper, and told us he would wait in the van.

We each grabbed a longboard. The path to the sand led through coconut palms and morning glories. I skipped across the hot, bright, sandfly-infested beach right into the knee-deep water. I put on my leash. Delian and I stretched out in the water. The sun was bright and the sea was calm. Leaning in close, Delian gave me a squeeze and kissed my neck. Biting gently at her earlobe, I said, "Don't forget to put on your leash."

Yannick walked into the water and called out, "Who's got more quarters? Looks like the wave machine's shut down." I tugged my board back to me and paddled out over the morning's tiny surf. The four of us lined up and scanned the flat ocean. I splashed some water onto Delian.

We spoke of yesterday's perfect, green, eight-foot faces. We had learned to read the horizon, prepare for sets, to anticipate a good wave, paddle and launch. I wondered how this whole world, this unbelievable fun, had eluded me for so long. Now, as we bobbed through the last surfing lesson of our trip, Delian and I stared out at the waveless sea and felt let down.

"No matter," said Yannick, "just take a small wave when it comes and practice your launch. Remember, quick and smooth."

I sat up on my board and looked around. The sky was cloudless, open and wide. Two boys were playing on the beach, screaming taunts in Sinhalese. A school of small fish skipped through the ocean's surface, flashing silver just over twenty feet away. Four white egrets sailed low over the water past us toward the small island in the middle of the bay.

"Hey, you see that?" I called to the others and nodded to the shore. When we had entered, there was a bright sand beach. Now, the water covered the sand and seemed to be slowly creeping toward the morning glories. The water was stretching into the trees on the side of the road, and the two young boys were now splashing loudly in and out of the rising shallows. "You think it could be a full-moon tide?"

"I don't know," Delian said. "It's pretty crazy, though."

"Sophia, you see that? The water's reaching the road!" I said.

"Stay away from the shore," warned Yannick in an uncharacteristically serious tone. "Make sure you stay away from the shore. As long as you're on your board, you'll be okay. I'm going to see about Akalan and the van. I'll be back. Don't come ashore."

The current quickly took Yannick right into the trees and out of our sight. Sophia, Delian, and I paddled as hard as we could out into the bay. Looking over my shoulder, to where the road should have been, I saw the van. It was drifting and bobbing, panning onto the opposite side of the road and into the jungle trees. Yannick had disappeared. "What's going on?" I demanded as I paddled harder and harder, keeping pace with Delian and Sophia. We'd made it deep into the bay. The water kept rising behind us. It pushed into beach houses, smashing out the windows. Resting fishing boats were set adrift.

"Delian," I yelled, "what's going on?"

Our frantic gazes darted from shore to horizon as we paddled hard to put distance between us and the chaos on shore. A few hundred feet into the bay, we stopped and looked back but saw nothing. A woman wailed, wood cracked, and men yelled out from the trees.

"What should we do?" I demanded.

"I don't know, but Yannick said stay away from shore!" cried Delian. Just then the current switched directions. Brown silty water drained off the land. We spun around and paddled against the murky flow to keep from getting swept out to sea.

"Come on, Ran! Keep up," Delian yelled. My shoulders were sore from the past few days. I fell back in the streaking current as we struggled toward shore. Palm trees, doors, wood planks, beach chairs, branches, leaves, Coke bottles, plastic bags, dung, foam, and other muck from shore streaked by. I paddled and pushed against the garbage as the deep green ocean gave way

to the chocolate silt scooped from the coast. I saw Delian stumble to her feet. I stepped into the current and found that I'd been paddling in less than a foot of fast flowing water. Beside and around us, the ocean floor was exposed, veined with rivulets of water still draining off the land.

Covered in grit, I lifted my board and trotted toward Delian. A red rash vest came running out of the trees, carrying two halves of a snapped board. Yannick, pale and shaken, yelled, "But you must—you must stay away from the shore! It's too dangerous. Stay in the water! Another surge will come."

He eyed us and the horizon. About two miles behind, at the mouth of the bay, a line of foaming green water was swelling. "Quickly, make it to higher ground," he pointed to the island a couple of hundred yards out in the bay. Minutes ago, that island had jutted from the water, now it was bare to the elements on the exposed sea-floor; hardly an island at all. Yannick hurried back to Akalan and the van, which had been caved-in against the trees.

The distant swell of waves approached us. Our panic rose. Delian and I joined Sophia in the run across the slippery seabed back toward the water. The rivulets were a foot deep when we began. As we got closer to the exposed island, the rivulets grew deeper and their currents sucked harder. Sophia somehow managed to plow ahead through the mud. Delian and I were caught in a section of surging currents. A little upstream, the flood waters caught Delian's surfboard and pulled her down.

"Lift it!" I yelled, "You have to keep it out of the water!"

"I'm trying! I'm getting tired!" Her words were raw and cutting.

In a moment of unbridled fear, I undid my leash, tossed my board, and screamed for Delian to do the same. I thought that without our boards we could better continue walking through the currents. She stumbled again and was pulled into the raging silt. My heart raced. She was carried fifteen feet before she found her footing and staggered up covered in mud. As quickly as she stood up, she was pulled in again by her board. This time I jumped in after her. The current was nonnegotiable; it sucked me into deeper water, away from the direction in which it had pulled Delian. I fought to keep my head above the surface, to keep my eyes on the place where I thought she should come up.

Thirty yards away, I saw her board surface in the incoming swell, fins skyward. A splash of blonde hair flashed in the sun. I felt relief as her arm reached over and grabbed a rail. She was okay, I told myself.

A palm tree floated by me, gangly fronds hung from its solid trunk. I grabbed on and screamed for Delian to paddle to shore, not knowing if she could hear me or not. Then a miracle happened. My surfboard drifted by, twenty feet away. Two fins pointed up. There was a small nub of hard plastic where the third fin had been sheared off. I let go of the tree trunk and swam hard to my board. I reached the leash, pulled in the line, and then fastened the Velcro strap around my wrist. I climbed onto my board and clutched the rails tight. The choppy current led me out to sea.

I was pushed right past the rocky shore of the island that we'd originally attempted to reach. I turned into the current and paddled for the rocks as hard as I could. Chop came at me from every direction. I had a hard time staying on my board. I let my legs drag for better balance, but they only slammed into floating trees and other debris. I paddled frantically against the current. The island slipped out of my reach. Exhausted and terrified, I gave up hope of reaching land.

I turned back to the open ocean and tried to think. Far off, an empty fishing boat spun 360s in the current. The current pulled me in that direction. I paddled hard until the nose of my board slammed into the boat. A thick piece of rope hung off the rear, and I used it to pull myself aboard. The boat pitched and yawed in the huge waves as I reeled my board in and lashed it to a wooden post. I felt a bit safer in the 25-footer.

Another surge of water came, this one bigger and moving more swiftly than the last. The boat spun and leaned deep in the white-capped current.

I gripped a guide rail and pressed myself into the deck. A triggerfish, huge and dead, spun in an eddy and gently bumped into the boat's hull. Watching the carcass float in the current, I tried to imagine what was going on by the beach, and how I would find my way back.

I stood up to take an inventory of my situation: a locked engine room, old wooden poles with nets and hooks at the end, but nothing I could use to pick, smash or pry the small brass padlock keeping me from the engine. I paced the boat, holding on and trying to find the solution to my desperate riddle. Thinking that one of the poles would make a good flagging signal, I lifted it and noticed a small key held fast to a peg with a length of fishing tackle.

The key fit the padlock. A smile crossed my face as the door opened. I peered into the old, greased-up machinery. I had no idea, not a clue, as to how to start the motor. There was no switch, no pull cord, no throttle, nothing but an old, grease-bathed hunk of metal. I screamed and slammed my palm against the doorframe, holding on as the ship leaned deep. After the pitching calmed, I howled again and kicked at the doorframe.

I scrambled back up to the deck and found a rusty trident anchor in the bow. I dropped anchor and tried to sense if it hit the bottom. I tied the nylon rope to a post on deck. The shore was now more than a half-mile away. I squinted and tried to get a glimpse of what was going on. I sat down and held on to the creaking rudder. I told myself that Delian was safe. I talked it out: of course she made it, she's the strongest woman I know, she made it, she must be onshore. Looking to the far-off shoreline, I repeated: Delian is safe.

In reality, I had no idea if she made it to shore or drowned trying. Regardless, Delian is safe remained my mantra.

For more than two hours, I rose to scream at far away dots, only to sit down again in despair. There were other boats like mine in the bay, little black mites on the horizon, too far away to reveal signs of life. Every once in a while, I would take a breath and start screaming again in futility. I was still unsure whether or not the anchor had set or was just dragging along below. The sea was alternately rising and falling. Every once in a while, I would angle the rudder to coax the boat away from waves that were suddenly slamming against shallow reefs.

I saw a far-off boat moving along the turbulent ocean. I waved my surfboard to get its attention, and howled as the little boat pattered away and out to sea. I sat down again and replayed the image of my wife being pulled into the silt.

In my shock, a fracture developed between my hopeful thoughts and my desperate actions. There is no video, but if there were, it would show two hours of a man hopping in and out of the shade, muttering, taking off his rash vest and waving it at the shore, pulling and pushing the rudder, staring at the engine, toying with fishing gear strewn over the deck, tying and untying the anchor rope, staring out to sea, staring toward shore, and yelling himself hoarse.

The water eventually calmed. I stood up again to scan the horizon. The boat that recently passed was headed straight toward me. As it neared, I

screamed “*Hundai!* Thank you!” and “Help!” to the driver. He yelled back in Sinhalese when he saw that I was going to leap from my boat into his. He confirmed that my anchor was secure then let me board.

In this small boat packed tight with bodies, we motored through the flotsam and garbage, floating trees, broken boat hulls, and other refuse to investigate intact ships. These were the ships I had screamed to as I spun in the current. In one boat, we picked up two bewildered fishermen, two guys in their twenties. Their teeth flashed white as yells erupted between them and the man driving our boat. We were a mile into the wide bay. After securing their boat as best as we could, we finally turned back to shore. Everyone aboard stared at my bright rash guard and shorts. My surfboard knocked erratically at my feet.

As we neared the shoreline, the sea reeled and threatened to toss us on the rocks like a lidless crate of live crabs. The driver backed in slowly. The sea inhaled and we bottomed out. The ocean surged back and crashed us into a standing palm tree. I jumped out, ecstatic to feel solid ground beneath my feet. I thanked the men who rescued me, grabbed my surfboard and ran.

I sprinted up the paved slope and onto the coastal road that led to Weligama Beach. The reality of what had happened on shore came to me sharp and swift, like waking from one nightmare to another; this one more horrific than the first. My restless two hours on the boat were a violent seesaw of flooding and death for those on shore. *Delian is safe* remained my desperate assumption as I ran past the hundreds of Sri Lankan faces. We stared at each other, shocked and dazed. I later learned that half of the coastal people were drowned or sucked out to sea never to be seen again. Half.

I ran on the hot pavement. The buildings looked like they’d been bombed then wiped clean. Unlike images of a war zone that feature fire, soot, and ash, everything on this coastal road was flattened and washed. No dirt, no dust, just slabs of shattered walls and strewn things with wiped faces. Everything was flattened, except for the buses and cars, which were either heaved onto their sides or folded around tree trunks.

I jogged past families wailing at the foundations of their lost homes. Everything these people called their own was strewn like splintered props across the landscape. Two men my age, brothers perhaps, stood silently over a drowned woman, a woman old enough to be their mother. A mongrel stood where a house used to be. He howled for all who were left living.

I knew that I still had a long way to run to get to Weligama Beach. I repeated to myself that Delian was okay. But the pit in my gut deepened as I looked at the destruction. I ran over shattered plates, bent cutlery, and picture frames; past smashed cars and half-ton boulders strewn on the road; and by corpses—still wet, but with gray skin and bulging veins. I ran my way through groups, people crying over the dead, people staring at the dead—hushed voices all around. I kept running, running back to where we had entered the sea, each step bringing me closer to the possibility of a life without Delian. Life without her, the looming thought I tried to deny with each step but which crept ever nearer, was a nightmare that would always end with Delian slipping, falling into a cruel current I was powerless to deny. What would I do without her, if I survived and she didn't?

Then my breath was cut, cut to the quick. I saw her familiar step and the flag of her white rash vest approaching down the road. She began running to me, both of us doing the same tip-toe dance between shards of glass, wood, and rocks. There was nothing to say, nothing we could say. We rushed into an embrace. For the second time that day, language failed. The first time was when we were separated, the second was this moment when we held each other, shocked and disbelieving.

Delian and I cried and were quickly held tighter by Yannick, Akalan and Sophia. Our little group, each with their own trauma and slice of the whole, looked at each other in awe, crying, incoherent and uncertain. In the calamity of our surroundings, one thing was clear: we were the lucky ones.

We made our way through the grotesque panoply and carnage, creeping along the ravaged miles back to the guesthouse, past giant boulders strewn like marbles across the road and tragic, silent train carriages swept off their tracks into the jungle below. We kept a constant wary, weary eye on the sea, as everyone feared another deadly surge.

Easy Beach guesthouse was structurally intact, though listing. Delian and I braved the upper floors to gather our things. The building pitched and rolled with the wind. It gave us vertigo. We descended the stairs and found ourselves next to Oystein, owner of a now broken guesthouse. Only a few hours ago, the elegant courtyard had been furnished with tables, chairs, counters, refrigerators, three motorcycles, and display cases filled with wax and gear. Now it was hollow. Nothing. Not a chair, not a shard of glass, not a torn scrap from the stacks of surfing magazines. The motorcycle Delian and I

had rented to ride down to southern Sri Lanka was gone. It was either drifting at the bottom of the sea, or had been carried high and far into the jungle.

"I'm so sorry. Oystein, what are you going to do?" I asked.

His bright eyes, now forlorn and almost washed out, looked past me. "I'm finished," he sighed, his beautiful dream collapsed.

"Have Matt and Ollie turned up?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "They moved into the village temple, high in the jungle." Shaking his hand and feeling helpless, I told him that if he rebuilt surfer's paradise, I would spread the word about his establishment.

Shouldering our packs, Delian and I left Oystein to his fate and headed for higher ground. We spent a sleepless night in a jungle villa, hidden by trees and safe from the waves. We held each other tight as we heard the distant surf crash against the beach.

Turning her face to mine, Delian said, "Up on the roof of that house, I kept waiting and waiting, looking for your red shirt, hoping to see you paddling back. I felt like I'd been waiting so long, so long that I couldn't possibly wait any longer. But then I thought that if you died, if you never came back, I would be waiting forever."

That we would return to Sri Lanka was a promise we did not need to make; it was a given. Staring at a midnight ceiling, waves calling from beyond the trees, I remembered the cold beers of the previous evening and Matt's promise that every surfer has a story.

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

*This article, story or other document was written by Ran Elfassy as part of the **Shooting it RAW** podcast.*

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