

Truth or Dare

Josh pulls his t-shirt over his head with a flourish. His grin is wide and inviting. 'Come on. Let's get you out of those clothes.'

Eva replies with an awkward smile. A twinge of fear curls in her belly and creeps up to her throat as she surveys the deserted, wintry beach around her. The southerly wind, blowing straight off the ocean, whips her hair across her face.

'And into a wetsuit,' he says.

She watches him slide into his wetsuit, the neoprene stretching over his athletic form like a black second skin. He's a knight buckling on armour, adjusting zips and Velcro fasteners with the determination of a warrior. His face is serious as he attends to the task, as though he's contemplating the challenge of the battle ahead. She waits for him to don a helmet and pick up a lance, a thought that excites and intimidates her in equal measure until she shakes away the fantasy. The glow of his masculine confidence casts her into shadow.

'Give me a minute,' she says.

'Having second thoughts?' His smile teases her, and she's distracted by the whiteness of his teeth. The grey day casts his features into soft focus; his skin seems impossibly smooth.

'It looks rough out there.' She looks out to the water, where the wind has whipped the sea to white foam and the waves roar as they crash onto the sand, then sizzle and hiss in retreat. In her heart, in her arteries and veins, her blood surges in sympathy. She imagines water molecules aligning inside her, like iron filings near a magnet, into neat geometrical arrangements of hydrogen and oxygen. Her head feels light. She remembers a time when she leaned over the edge of a boat to watch the moving water; mesmerised, she had to grip the railing to stop herself from launching into it.

There is no railing here to protect her from herself, and the water's song is different. This is no gently hypnotic sea; there is a wild challenge in its music, daring her to enter.

'It's not ideal for a first-timer.' Josh's dismissive shrug is far from reassuring. 'But you can swim, right?'

'Yeah, in a swimming pool.' It's too late to back out. She's ashamed of her cowardice, of the acidity and tightness in her throat. Admitting her fear is humiliating, but even worse would be admitting her lie.

I'd love to learn to surf, she'd heard herself say, in a girlish, flirty voice that she didn't recognise. *Maybe you could teach me?*

He's not her usual type. More to the point, he's not the type who usually chooses her. The men she's dated before have been like her: perplexed by the puzzle of existence, caught up in the quest to find logic in this illogical world. Josh is different. He takes life as it comes; uncertainty doesn't paralyse him to inaction the way it does her. The freedom with which he moves through life awes her. She wonders if he's delusional to see the world in such simple terms, or whether it's a conscious choice. Perhaps he's the clever one.

She sits cross-legged on her beach towel as though to contemplate the waves, pretending that she's not delaying the inevitable. Cold seeps through the towel from the damp sand beneath, chilling her thighs and her bare feet. She digs her hands into the sand to either side, stretches out her fingers to feel the coolness.

'You know,' Josh says, dropping to the sand beside her and pointing out to the rocky headland, 'there were ships wrecked out there, when the land was first discovered. You know this is one of the first settled parts of Victoria? Bunch of sailors died trying to swim to shore. There are probably lots of ghosts here.'

Eva wants to laugh at his naivety, at the idea that the land needed discovery, or that a handful of drowned colonists added weight to its ancient history. She imagines the thousands

of generations of people who belong to this country, their culture as old as humanity itself, and tries to comprehend how such a connection would feel. Their ghosts move the air around her. Insignificance settles like a mantle on her shoulders.

Through her fingertips, she connects with the earth. The granules of sand, rock and shells reduced by time and water, grind under her fingernails. She looks up to the yellow-ochre cliffs, rugged in their erosion, and imagines them crumbling with the ages. On the dunes above, the carpet of saltbush and marram grass ripples in the cold wind, a sea of grey-green that mirrors the ocean. Her gaze shifts to the horizon, where the bleakness of the sea and sky forms a smudged watercolour backdrop for the rough impasto of the white-tipped waves. The infinite pounding of the waves is a measure of time, and she sees herself as the sea must: a pinpoint of life, a fleeting consciousness of no consequence. As the cliffs and shells reduce to sand, she will one day be dust, and still the waves will break on this beach.

Josh gives her arm a playful bump. ‘What are you day dreaming about?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Come on.’ He chuckles, as though amused by her delaying tactics. ‘Quit overthinking and get your wetsuit on.’

Her borrowed wetsuit is a size too big, but even so, it’s a wrestle to get the unwieldy garment up over her legs and hips. Her swimsuit catches inside, wedging intimately where it shouldn’t, and he laughs as she adjusts it. His offer to help makes her blush. The wind chills her exposed skin, and she hurries to get the wetsuit over her chest and arms. It’s a cruel joke that hers is girlishly patterned with pink and white against the black, while her companion is in black from neck to toe. She feels like a liquorice allsort; he is a ninja.

She met him through friends, a line she repeats aloud to herself when alone, with an offhand flick of her hair, as though she often went out and met people like that. Standing at the bar, he’d smiled and said to her, *Hey, what are you drinking?* She’d looked left and right

to be sure he was speaking to her, which made him laugh; and then, she'd been thrown into her usual confusion of what to say and had mumbled something – which, again, he found amusing, for reasons she didn't understand. It didn't make sense. Why had he asked her out? She was so different from him. He was larger than life, radiating confidence and simple optimism; she felt small and reserved in contrast. So why did he smile at her like that, as though they shared a great secret?

Now, weeks have passed, and she still has no defence against his smile, which feels as warm and intimate as a physical embrace. It scatters her thoughts, enchants her, casts into doubt all she thought she knew about herself and the world. She's navigating a foreign land, and she doesn't understand the language or customs. He looks at her as though he sees through to her soul; but instead of backing away as she expects, he leans in with curiosity. One day, she fears, he'll realise his mistake, and she steels herself against the anticipated pain of that moment. But for now, she'll do anything to feel the warmth of his attention, even something as absurd as surfing in the middle of winter.

Josh rouses her from her pondering for a land-based lesson, and she practises the moves he demonstrates. Prone on the board, tuck the toes, a push up to a squat, arms up and out for balance. She feels ridiculous, pretending to surf on a stationary board with her butt sticking out behind her and her arms out like wings. She thinks of actors performing their scenes in front of a green screen, how foolish they must feel, and realises she's the same – an impostor, pretending to be something she's not.

Josh laughs off her doubts and compliments her form, which makes her cheeks burn. 'You're a natural,' he says. 'It takes some people days to learn that.'

'It's all very well here on the sand.'

'You'll be fine.'

‘The waves look big.’ They sit astride their boards – her borrowed foam board marks her as a beginner – side by side, looking out at the swirling sea. Eva feels a wave of déjà vu, as though his presence at her side is a memory from long ago.

‘Most of the waves are about two metres, I reckon. Maybe three. And you’ve got the board to hold onto.’ He looks at the water the way he looks at her sometimes: his eyes are soft, and a smile twitches his lips. She can tell he’s itching to get out into the water.

The water stings her feet, the cold so intense it burns. Hobbled by the awkward leg rope, she follows him through the shallows with the nose of her board tucked under her arm. It feels enormous, as though she’s dragging a boat. Within seconds her chest is so tight she can’t breathe. Every wave finds a new part of her to assault: her thighs, her waist, her lower back. Icy water needles through the wetsuit, finding gaps at her wrists and ankles. It takes a few minutes for the layer of water inside the suit to warm against her skin, by which time her hands and feet are frozen. She can’t feel the board in her hands.

Josh is on his board ahead of her, paddling away with strong, sure strokes. He twists around, calling out to her to do the same, but she’s busy trying to cope with the paralysing cold and the waves that crash around her. Their onslaught is relentless. She doesn’t know where to focus her attention. Salt stings her eyes and nose, and water roars in her ears. One moment she’s waist deep; the next, she’s floating up with the swell, and her feet have lost contact with the sand.

Grasping the board as he taught her, Eva flops her body onto it and feels it lift with a wave. The sea rushes over her, into her eyes and her mouth. She rises up and over the crest, then slaps down into the trough. Releasing her grip to paddle goes against every instinct; if she had claws, they would be embedded in the foam board. The tight collar of the wetsuit strangles her ragged breath.

Her hair has come loose and sticks to her face, obscuring her vision. She spares a hand to wipe it away, then resumes her death grip. Blinking away salt and panic, she can see Josh ahead, waving.

If she had any sense, she'd wave back, turn the board and let the surf send her tumbling to the shore. She could laugh about it. Tell him she's an idiot. That she only agreed so he'd like her. Admit the truth.

But a part of her, a tiny voice that clamours for attention from within, presents her with a different truth: she accepted this challenge, and she will face it, come what may.

She lifts her head and starts to paddle.

Josh is waiting for her, resting on his board with casual nonchalance as though he's lounging on a calm river. No matter how furiously she paddles, she seems to draw no closer to him. She wonders if a lesson hides in the observation.

He calls out, but his voice blends into the waves, and his words are indistinct. She catches a glimpse of his smile as he turns his board, arms out to propel himself forward before the face of a wave. One moment, he is churning water to either side of the board, and then he's on his feet, the transition smooth and seamless. Crouching, he guides the board, his eyes fixed ahead.

She duck-dives her board through the wave and comes out the other side to face another, and then another. Remembering what Josh has told her about sets, she looks ahead, but her field of view is too narrow to make sense of the pattern. Josh's estimation of the size of the swell seems optimistic; the smallest of the waves is double her height. She feels like a pedestrian caught among speeding traffic on a highway.

After the set comes a lull, a moment where she can gather herself together to reel in the untethered fears and thoughts and senses that the water has scattered. Josh is paddling back toward her now. His hair is plastered onto his head, his face split with a broad grin; he's

in his element, completely at home. The warm skin tones of his face – his cheeks flushed with exertion, his faded suntan – stand out against the colourless sea, as though he's been painted into a black-and-white photograph. She wonders if she looks the same to him.

As the next set rolls in, Josh guides her onto a wave, but her first attempt ends as soon as it begins. After turning to face the shore, she paddles as instructed, as Josh says, 'Go, go, go!' She draws her hands and feet under her, pushes up – and the board rolls, tipping her off. Her yelp of shock is drowned by the wave breaking over her head.

The relative quiet of the deep water embraces her as she sinks, but the leg rope keeps her board nearby, and she bobs back to the surface, treading water and panting while she finds her bearings. Her need to wipe her face, to clear snot and salt and hair from her eyes and nose, takes momentary precedence over her need to grab the board for safety. As soon as she can, she throws herself onto it with a slap of her sodden wetsuit and clings to it like the life-raft it is.

Josh's smile is encouraging. 'Back on the horse,' he says with a wink.

On her next attempt, he gives her board a push as the wave's power surges under her. This time, she gets one foot forward, and a flush of excitement – that this might be possible – teases her for a nanosecond before she wipes out. By the time she resurfaces and regains her board, Josh is about to catch the next wave. She watches his metamorphosis as he rises from prone to standing, like a caterpillar unfolding into a butterfly. He glides away toward the shore. She imagines that at any moment he could lift from the water, weightless, his arms catching the wind like wings. Even his dismount is graceful: he relaxes back into the water, a voluntary act of daring rather than a defeat.

A wave buffets her, penalising her inattention, but she recovers with unexpected ease. The tension in her shoulders has relaxed; her grip on the board has softened. Her worst fear – that she'd fall off and look like an idiot – has been realised, and Josh's only reaction was to

smile. She brushes off the twisted priority of her values. She knows she's not alone in fearing humiliation more than death.

Josh is making his way back to her; the next set is on its way. She passes on the first, and the second waves. The third wave rolls toward her like a wall of water, dwarfing any other she's seen today; it's a monster, a giant. She turns her board, churning her arms through the water. The sea before the wave dips as though sucking back into itself; the ocean hushes with respect for the majestic wave.

Glancing back over her shoulder as she paddles, Eva has no time to think. She has no experience to draw on, no instincts. Her limbs flush with heat and her chest tightens. Josh's instructions run through her mind on repeat, a soundtrack in time with her panting breath and rapid heart. She tucks her feet, gets her hands under her shoulders and pushes up.

Her feet plant on the board and she remembers Josh's words: *Arms up. Look up.*

Her eyes fix on the beach – white sand, black seaweed, grey-green grass – and for a wink of time, she is flying. Wind and spray buffet her face, like pin-pricks of ice, but all she can do is gasp with wonder at what she's achieved. Pleasure rushes through her like a drug: cocaine confidence and heroin euphoria and marijuana peace all at once, and although she's never had any of those things, she glimpses a new understanding. This is Josh's drug. His rapture.

It lasts less than a second.

The board tips under her; in an instant, the tail lifts and flips her over, as the lip of the massive wave crashes her into the impact zone. The leg rope tugs at her ankle, and she feels a sudden release as it snaps. The force of the breaking wave engulfs her, so powerful that her teeth rattle in her head and she loses all control of her limbs. She plunges down, shaken like a ragdoll, and tumbles over and over in the turbulent water.

As though she's in a washing machine full of foam, she can see nothing; the rushing in her ears amplifies her thumping heartbeat. Her lungs burn within seconds as panic drives her to breathe. She gulps a mouthful of salt water and gags. And still, she is tumbling, somersaulting. Any sense of up or down, of position in space, is lost, as though gravity has paused, as though even the laws of physics have abandoned her. She throws out her arms in a blind attempt to arrest the movement.

Her hands touch sand, and she clutches into it. The certainty of knowing she's reached the bottom is welcome after her reckless descent. She can fall no further. Her rational mind urges her upwards, but her body disobeys; she settles onto the sand, face down, like an autumn leaf floating to the ground. Here, under the waves, the water barely ripples. Her eyes rest closed; she presses her cheek to the sand.

From deep within the Earth, a low thrum vibrates her body, resonating with her heartbeat. She spreads her arms out to each side. She imagines she's a giant, large enough to hold the globe in her arms; her heart beats in sync with the planet. For what seems hours, she cradles it in her embrace. And then, she shrinks back into her fragile, precious humanity, melts into the sea floor, and the hug is returned; she is cherished as an infant, held in warm, accepting arms. A chatter of voices in her ears, in languages she doesn't know with words that ring like music, tell her she is not alone. Others have gone before her, and more will come after. The water feathers her hair, caresses her face with its velvet touch, soothes her body.

She could stay here.

The thought is a flicker at first, but it grows louder with each passing moment. The inner voice that urged her to face today's challenge offers her another truth: she could choose to stay here, to stop struggling and let go. Her heartbeat slows. The space between the beats lengthens into perfect stillness.

In her lungs, the burning grows – her body needs air – and she observes it with curiosity. Her choice has consequences. She considers them, weighing up the pros and cons. Hasn't she always been like this, paralysed by analysis? Staying seems simpler. But then, when has she chosen the simpler path?

Without warning or intention – as though propelled by the Earth – she thrusts upward. Her arms and legs find a strength she's never known, and she cuts through the water, as streamlined and sure as a dolphin. When she breaches the surface, she gulps a lungful of air before the waves catch her in their rolling power; she surrenders to them, and the surf takes her all the way to the beach. Panting, she crawls out on her hands and knees to collapse on the soggy sand near the water's edge.

The air she breathes feels different, cleaner, as she sucks it into her desperate lungs. Lying on her back, she stares up at the dome of grey sky above. Behind it, stars and universes hide, obscured by the day, and she marvels at the paradox of light being a disguise for itself. She feels like a sponge, absorbing oxygen from the air directly into her skin; as though the act of breathing involves her whole body. Air moves the hairs in her nostrils, douses the fire in her chest. She feels heavy, as though her experience has added solidity and presence to her body, and she has no doubt that she made the right decision. The certainty of this knowledge shifts invisible gears inside her, one door closing as another opens. She is in the right place. The right time. The right body.

'Eva!' Josh, splashing through the smaller waves, leans down to flick off his leg rope, abandoning his surfboard so he can sprint toward her. 'Eva!'

She holds up a hand, manages a queenly wave. Words are not yet possible.

'I thought you'd drowned!' He slides to her side, knees squelching into the wet sand, and wipes a hand over his face. There is no smile, no banter. His face is twisted, screwed into

itself as though he's in agony. He wipes again at his eyes, smearing a trail of sand over his cheeks. His hand is wet and clammy on hers. 'Eva, I'm so sorry!'

She grips his arm to pull herself up to sit. His distress intrigues her; she can't look away from his face. Tears have made furrows through the salt and sand on his cheeks. There is no sign of his previous bravado. He could be a different man entirely; his armour is in tatters, his self-assurance shattered.

Wiping his face again, he struggles to speak. His tight staccato is breathless with emotion. 'I thought you were dead. I shouldn't have brought you out in this weather – I was showing off – I'm such an idiot!'

'Did you see me stand up?' Her words are hushed, as though she's in a cathedral.

Josh puts his face in his hands. His voice is muffled. 'I saw you get totalled. And then you went under. You were down so long. This is all my fault.'

Her body feels like jelly, but she forces it to obedience. She kneels in front of him, like a penitent at an altar, although she knows it's Josh who seeks absolution, not her. Boldness is her new flavour; she pulls his hands away from his face so he's forced to look at her. 'It wasn't your fault. It was my choice.' She offers him a smile. 'My choice, Josh.'

His eyes are clouded, like the sky behind him, and all she gets in return is a faint twitch of his lips. A wave of vertigo rocks the ground under her; her head floats up, as though she's drifting into the clouds. For a moment, she is convinced she can see ghosts around her. Indistinct, transparent shapes flutter behind Josh, trailing out onto the water. But when she blinks, her vision clears, and they're gone.

She leans in, presses a kiss on his salty lips. 'Thank you.'

'For what? The lesson, or nearly drowning you?'

She intertwines her fingers between his and gives his question due consideration.

'Both,' she says. The warmth of his hand seeps into her, spreading up her arm to her chest.

The water laps at them, the tide making its inevitable return. Eva looks out at the waves as her escapee surfboard, the useless leg rope trailing like a black snake behind it, limps to the shore and beaches itself. It has survived its ordeal, outwardly unchanged, as is she. It seems a decade ago that she lay on the sea floor. The details have already faded into sepia tones and blurred at the edges, but it doesn't matter. She remembers enough.