

# Patchwork



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0:05

**S**hit.

Shit shit shit shit.

The sand that had always held me so gently on the shoreline now grinds callously across my cheek. I couldn't get my right arm up to deflect the blow, but that's the least of my worries now. The swell has me pinned hard up against the sea floor and I can feel my lungs burning. I think this might be what drowning feels like, when the surface seems so far away and every move you try to make towards shore just sends you spiralling deeper downwards. Somehow, I don't panic this time – I know now that if you wait long enough you'll begin floating back to the surface. My body is yet to come around to this theory however, and I can feel every cell aching for its share of oxygen.

I finally break the surface, praying that the set was over and I'd have a chance to get back to shore. And there must have been some kind of diety passing by, because the next wave picks me up and deposits me relatively peacefully into the shallows where I can scramble back to shore.

**0:51** In between gulps of air, I turn just in time to see Rory's surfboard wash up in two pieces. Shit. Though it's forty metres away from where I lay, out by the reefy outcrop that signifies the border of this obscured cove, I can still make out its frayed leg-rope – confirming the betrayal which left me at the mercy of the ocean. I should never have come out on that bloody old thing, not on a day like today. I was lucky to have made it back to land in one piece myself. Still, Nan will kill me when she finds out what's happened.

Until that time comes though, I just want to focus on breathing.

*In.* A wave rushes up the shore, slipping under my heels up behind my knees.

*Hold.* A lone gull glides effortlessly mere centimetres from the surface of the unforgiving ocean.

*Out.* The wave recedes just as it came, leaving behind fragmented shells to accompany me in my sorry state.

My lungs are more than happy to be empty now that they have the certainty of air awaiting.

As I lay staring at the cloudless sky, one thought loops around my mind. "What compelled me to take his board?". I barely knew Rory, I certainly didn't spend that much time with him when he was still alive. Turns out stage four melanomas don't give you a lot of extra time together, and I spent most of it dumbstruck at his bedside.

I feel like stepping back in to those memories to give myself a firm shake: Ask him to tell you a story. Ask him who he wanted to be, who he was. Just open your bloody mouth and ask him something!

I didn't even know he surfed until Nana told me last night. And now I've immediately gone and broken his board. I can see a third, smaller piece of it thrashing back and forth in the shallows now, trying to reunite with the other parts of itself on the shore. It doesn't.

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**118** To be honest, I'm not sure I ever really dealt with Rory's death. I was so young and immature, and they had always lived so far away – I only ever saw him at the big family events.

I suppose I had always grown up with the idea that he wasn't my real grandpa anyway, not in the sense that we shared any DNA at least. That grandpa I never even met. Mum told me she only knew her birth father when she was a baby – he died shortly after they emigrated here.

Anyway, I always had mum.

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A small cloud moves slowly in over the sun, I can still see the light glinting off the crest of the crashing waves for one more moment before the cloud swallows that up as well.

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**1:36** My mum was everything you could ask for from a parent. I mean, at that age, I certainly didn't enjoy her never buying me Nutella ("like having chocolate on your sandwich"), or only being allowed McDonalds once a year (bacon and egg McMuffin with two hashbrowns – on the way to our annual camping trip). Although I can admit now that she may have had a point.

Besides, she was the one who took me to my first guitar lesson, pushed me onto my first wave, who always believed in me.

Today, I wish I'd have stayed home instead of going for that first surf. Mum had been adamant I give it a try for some reason, not that she would have forced me. I figured if she really wanted it for me, she must have had a pretty good reason. And she was right I guess. Now, it's kind of where I go to think. In spite of today's rage, the ocean can be quite a peaceful place.

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The cloud has passed over now, and the sun's warmth floods back through my body – beginning at my right ear and travelling all the way across and over to my left pinky toe. My breathing has finally settled, so I begrudgingly drag myself and the two halves of the old board back up to the shack.

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**2:03** The fire is lit (mum likes to make it up even when its not that cold), Nan has backed her chair into a wooden wall in the far corner of the den to finish her cryptic crossword (she can't stand the superfluous heat, or 7 down), and I'm now sprawled across the worn carpeted floor in the centre of the room, still half out of it after this morning's disaster.

Mum is off in another part of the shack – I suspect she also doesn't care for the extra heat, although my suggestions to perhaps not light the fire have continued to fall upon deaf ears.

I am flanked by a mountain of those old document boxes – like you see on TV when someone has to pack up their desk after getting fired. Except these ones have a few extra layers of dust, and infinitely more dubiously fresh-looking spider webs.

Luckily for me, Nan wasn't in a homicidal mood when I trudged back through the side door, tattered board in tow. She asked the same question I had resigned myself to: "What compelled me to take his board?".

These boxes are the result of that line of questioning. Something about "stories". Box after box I dragged out, with the intention of combing through each in search of clues – fragments that could be pieced together to form an image in my mind of the man who raised my mum.

The first few I open are just full of adult stuff (the boring kind) like tax returns and mortgage documents, so I move these well off to the side.

In the next box there are a few pictures of Rory, some framed with inscriptions on the rear – 3rd Place Ocean Road Surfing Masters or Camping in SA, March 1968. Others I had to ask for context – Mum with her friends before a 21st birthday party, Nan with Rory decked out in retro hiking gear. All the while, there is a growing pile of pictures with no real story, or at least with no-one willing to tell it. These are returned to their box, still guarding their secrets.

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**2:57** Eventually I come across a tattered leather satchel, which opens to reveal a cacophony of handwritten and typed letters, all addressed to Julie Gauci (grandparents' real names always seem a bit silly). The deep creases in each page indicate that these had been read and re-read countless times.

Dearest Julie, how are you my beautiful canary? I hope you are keeping well and keeping those bastards accountable! I saw an article in the paper about your current project – you've certainly got your work cut out on this one.

Nan was an environmental consultant on some of the big regional mining projects in the '70s and '80s. I don't know too much about it, but Nan calls bullshit every time a mine gets closed and they talk about 'repairing' the area, so I imagine she advised a few deaf ears in her time.

What I didn't fully realise is how long Nan would be away for each project – some of these letters span months at a time.

...Jo and I are getting on well enough – business as usual really. She is back at school now so we don't cross paths too often during the week, although we still spend most weekends down the coast surfing together. She's no little nipper anymore, quite the accomplished surfer! I'm ever so grateful we are able to share this part of ourselves so completely. I might even see if she's interested in competing, there's a...

I can't find the next page for that one, so I grab another letter, this one dated years later:

...I recently spoke with her teacher, who mentioned Jo had been getting into a bit of trouble during lunch breaks, something about a group of boys going after her mates. Seems like she might be the reckless type (reminds me of someone). I'll do my best to keep an eye on her, but you of all people know that isn't always possible, or particularly helpful.

My canary, try to keep yourself out of trouble as well. Hurry home, and trust that you will be greeted with much love upon returning. I was thinking we could head back to that bush camp on Lake Elizabeth (you know the one) – I should be able to wrangle a week off work. Have a think about it.

All our love, Rory (and Jo)

P.S. I went ahead and bought that gift we talked about for Jo's birthday.

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I ask Nan about the gift, but she changes the subject to lunch, and my stomach is not in any position to argue. So I take the hint and let it slide for the time being.