

david's revenge

[BRAD WATSON]



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180 degrees

James and Sai paddled over to David and sat up on their surfboards, facing out to sea.

“This is great,” Sai exclaimed, rolling his head to flick his bleached hair out of his eyes. “How long has it been since we all surfed together?”

“Ages,” David answered.

“It feels like months,” James added.

“It has been.” David peered down through the water to the sandy bottom below. An unusually cold current was running and the water was chilly enough to require a wetsuit. His full-length “steamer” had locked in a fine layer of warm water. Only his feet, hands and head were exposed to the numbing current pulling them slowly down the beach.

“It’s freezing,” James complained, teeth chattering. “I reckon my feet have frostbite!”

“Me too,” Sai added. “My toes feel like I could snap them off!”

David grinned, taking the opportunity to insult his mates. “That’s because I’m catching all the good waves and you two are just sitting there wishing you could surf as good as me. I’m too hot to feel the cold!”

“You wish,” James replied, rubbing his bare arms. He was wearing a faded wetsuit that was slightly too small. The short sleeves finished at his biceps and the lower section went only so far as his upper thighs. “I’m the only one tough enough around here to surf in a spring suit.”

“You mean you’re the only one dumb enough,” Sai scoffed.

“No brain, no pain,” David added.

“You just wish you had a six-pack and a body like mine,” James shot back.

David considered his friend. James was muscular and although his stomach muscles did not show through the rubber of the wetsuit, his biceps certainly did. What he said was true. James was lean and strong—and too proud of it.

“It’s a shame you can’t catch a decent wave,” David retorted, trying to deflate his friend’s ego.

“At least I look cool when I do get one!” James replied, splashing David in the process.

Sai interrupted with a chuckle. It was the sort of laugh David found infectious—one that made him smile even before it was clear what was funny.

“What are you going on about?” James asked suspiciously.

“You are both so right,” Sai said, catching his breath. He composed himself and began to speak semi-seriously. “David, you are a wave magnet. Fully! That air you did before was sick! When you launched off the top of the wave, it was awesome.”

“What about me?” James said imperiously, straightening his shoulders. He jutted out his chin as he examined his bulging biceps.

Sai’s grin broadened. “You should be in a surf magazine or something!” he said without giving away his sarcasm.

Sai paused as James swelled with pride. Then he went in for the kill. Paddling as if he had spotted an incoming wave, he glanced over his shoulder. Fixing James with a grin, he scoffed. “It’s just a shame that all the protein you eat gets hijacked by your body instead of your brain!”

James cursed and made as if he was going to chase Sai, who was already too far away. Sai just laughed again and kept paddling.

David laughed too. “It must be all that protein powder you buy from the gym,” he said. “All brawn, no brain, I say.”

“You’re just jealous,” James shouted in mock anger at Sai. “My little sister has more muscles than you!”

Sai placed his hands behind his head and tried not to wobble too much. Riding a surfboard was a new experience for him, so just sitting on one as it bobbed up and down in the surf was something he had to concentrate on. Even so, he oozed confidence.

Just then, a small wave popped up and took them by surprise. It ended the friendly banter instantly.

“I’m going left,” David cried urgently.

“I’ll go right,” Sai added, paddling quickly.

They both went for it. James took the second wave in the set of three, grinning broadly as it stood up higher than the first one and curled over. He scrambled to his feet but the wave broke against his back and unbalanced him. He toppled over and felt the punchy little wave pass, tugging on the leg rope, rolling him over and over in the turbulent whitewash. Somehow his zipper came undone and a flood of cold, sandy water filled his wetsuit. Rising to the surface, he retrieved his board, pulled up the zipper and paddled back out, hoping the others had not seen his fall.

Several minutes passed and the sea remained relatively calm. James rejoined his friends and they drifted slowly shoreward.

“Has anyone heard what’s happened to Mr Jones?” Sai asked, after paddling hard for a wave but failing to catch it. The moving mass of water stayed fat and carried on toward the sandy, white beach, breaking onto the sandbar at the very last moment. Embarrassed, Sai paddled back to the others, avoiding the larger group of boys surfing nearby. They were also from school.

“I heard he’s getting better,” David replied, almost paddling for a wave, then backing out. “Dad says he will take me to visit him on the weekend.”

“Can I come?” asked Sai.

“Probably. I’ll have to ask if we can pick you up. What about you?” David asked, squirting a handful of water toward James. “Wanna come?”

“Nah,” James replied, squinting toward the blue horizon. He wiped the salty liquid out of his eyes and cupped a hand over his brow, shielding his eyes from the glare.

“Dude.” Sai gave him a strange look, one eyebrow half-raised. “We should all go.”

“You can manage,” James said. “I don’t need to be there.”

“He’ll be ripped if we don’t all go.” Sai continued earnestly. “I’d be really cut if I was him. Dude, you . . .”

“I’m not going,” James interrupted, openly annoyed. “Get it into your thick head! And stop calling me ‘dude’!”

There was an awkward silence as the boys realised the playful jesting had been replaced by darker undercurrents. James paddled off to the left and further out to sea. There were no waves coming and it was obvious he was just looking for an excuse to distance himself from the conversation.

“Hey James,” Sai mocked. “What do ya reckon you’re going to catch out there?”

When James did not respond, Sai turned to David. “What’s wrong with him?” he asked.

“Maybe it’s all those protein shakes he was drinking,” David speculated. “I heard they have steroids in them.”

“Maybe—but he’s been acting strange ever since we got back from the camp. Don’t you think?”

“He’ll be alright,” David said, turning his board to paddle for a wave and stroking toward the

beach, arms straining, hands cupped. James and Sai were two of the most different people he knew. Where James was tall, muscular and freckly, Sai was shorter and Asian in appearance. He bleached his hair blonde and always wore the latest surfing clothes. Sai was usually easygoing, relaxed and predictable. On the other hand, James was more easily annoyed and tended to be more moody and competitive.

David dug hard into the water and snatched a quick glance over his shoulder. The wave had sucked up faster than he had anticipated and the lip curled over as he jumped to his feet. The water whacked him on the back and almost knocked him off the board as he gained speed. He retained his balance, dropped down the face and completed a bottom turn, carving back into the wave before picking up speed and launching himself off the top.

Grabbing the board, he attempted to spin through the air in a 180-degree turn. But instead of a graceful landing, he plunged heavily into the back of the wave and went under with a large splash. His board flicked up and landed on the back of his head as he surfaced.

“Loser,” Sai laughed as David paddled back out.

“You’ll be the loser when I pull it off,” David replied, rubbing the back of his head ruefully.

Sai hooted, pointing over David’s shoulder. Several much better waves had appeared and James was about to catch one that was breaking left. The wave was half as big again as any of the others he had caught that afternoon. Paddling out wide had paid off and now James was in a position to show off.

The first wall of water jacked up sharply as James stroked powerfully and leapt smoothly to his feet. He grabbed the edge of his board, leaning into the wave. He pointed at David triumphantly, grinning from ear to ear, with water tubing over his head. But just as it seemed he would power out of the barrel, the side of his board tipped awkwardly. The nose pointed down more than it should have and James face-planted into the shallows.

Sai whooped with mirth as James’ board flew into the air and he was rolled over and over in the foaming water.

“You got wasted,” David shouted, copying James’ triumphant finger pointing as the unlucky boy surfaced in waist-deep water boiling with sand and foam.

James heaved himself onto his board and began to paddle wearily back out toward David and Sai. Another wave reared up and James tried to duck-dive through it. He pushed into the board hard with his knee but it was too late. The wave sucked him up and over, board and all, and he crashed backward into the shallows of the sandbar. Two more waves pounded on him as, gasping for breath, he tried to paddle to the safety of the calmer waters beyond the breakers.

“You are such a style master,” David said sarcastically when James finally reached them, panting with the effort. “Can you teach me how to do that?”

“That wave was awesome,” James said as Sai continued to laugh. “I can’t believe I blew it. I just got hammered!”

“Magnificent, dude,” Sai said. “Even better considering all the girls were watching you from the beach.”

“My wettie is full of sand and it’s even in my mouth!” James cursed. “I’ve had enough. I’m going in on the next wave I can catch!”



David followed James a little later. As the wave David rode broke, he lay down and caught the whitewater on his belly, guiding the board carefully toward a small group of girls sunbaking on the beach. When he got to his feet in the shallows, one of them stood up. She wrapped a towel around her waist and came running down to meet him at the water’s edge.

“Was it good?” Joanne asked David, her white teeth flashing. Her eyes were blue and playful, and he suddenly wished he had gotten out of the water earlier.

“Surf’s a bit small—but not bad,” David replied, unzipping his wetsuit and peeling down the top half. “There was one good set. Did you see James cop it? He was gloating because he caught such a good wave and then he got drilled! I was hoping you all saw it.”

“No,” Joanne said, stepping over a pink-tinged shell. “We were too busy talking.”

David and Joanne reached the others, fine sand squelching under their feet. James was sitting on a green beach towel, rubbing sunscreen onto his shoulders. To David’s surprise, Kimberly was sitting right beside him.

“What’s she doing with James?” David asked, spearing his board nose-first into the sand.

Joanne winked mischievously at David. “Be patient,” she said. “You’ll see.”

David watched curiously as James whispered something into Kimberly’s ear.

“How long has that been going on for?” he asked in a hushed voice, aware of the others surrounding him and of Sai, who was now carrying his surfboard up the beach.

“I don’t know,” Joanne replied. “They look serious though.”

James caught Kimberly by the shoulders, easily pinning her down on the sand.

“Stop it,” Kimberly cried, only half serious.

“I can’t believe that James is with Kimberly!” David said, voice still hushed. “It freaks me out seeing them together like that. They hate each other.”

“Not anymore, bro.” Sai made a low whistling noise and put his fingers above his head, imitating a shark’s fin.

“What does that mean?” Joanne asked David.

“Nothing.”

“No, what did Sai just do with his hand? Tell me,” Joanne pleaded, squeezing David’s hand.

“I can’t. It’s like a code.”

“If you don’t tell me, I will never speak to you again,” Joanne threatened, taking a step away from David and crossing her arms.

“Alright,” David said. “I give in—but don’t tell anyone. It’s like sign language for cruising, like a shark does when it’s swimming around with its fin above water. You know, like when it’s hunting.”

“So you think he is hunting Kimberly?”

“Yep.”

“I get it now,” Joanne replied. “But you should warn him that if anyone is a shark, it’s her. As her half-sister, I should know.”

“He doesn’t even really like her,” David said, watching James release Kimberly and get to his feet. “It’s only a few weeks since we were ripping her off and playing jokes on her. She was really angry at us.”

“What’s happening with that Anthony dude?” Sai asked. “Wasn’t he her boyfriend?”

“Not anymore,” said Joanne, cupping her chin in her hand.

“I can’t believe he hid it from me,” David began to say.

“He’s not hiding anything now,” Joanne replied.

Now James and Kimberly were arguing. David didn’t want to eavesdrop but they were talking so loudly he couldn’t help himself.

“It’s over, James,” Kimberly said, standing with her arms crossed over her chest. “Just accept it.”

“Why? Tell me why,” James demanded. “We’ve been together for three days and now it’s

over? Just like that?"

"It's just not working," Kimberly answered, brushing sand off one of her carefully-shaved and tanned legs.

"What's not working?" James demanded. "That's not what you said on Saturday night when we . . ."

"Shuuush," Kimberly interrupted, suddenly aware that the others were listening. "It's just the way it is. We'll still be friends, OK?"

"Ouch, that's the killer blow," Sai mumbled under his breath. "When a girl says you can still be friends, it means everything is over. James just officially crashed and burned."

"I didn't even know they were together until just now," David complained.

James lowered his voice before replying to Kimberly. Everyone pretended they were not listening in as he said, "Right. If you want to break it off, fine. It's your loss!"

James sat down on his towel without saying another word. There was a long, awkward silence, then everyone went back to their conversations as if nothing had happened.

Sai sat down in the sand beside David. He was a good friend but David wished Sai would give him a bit more space with Jo.

Joanne looked away as Sai pulled his rash-shirt off. When he had towelled himself dry, she spoke. "Have you gotten over—you know—everything that happened?"

"You mean what happened on the camp?" Sai asked bluntly.

"Yes, that."

"Sure," Sai said. "It's all good now. No problem."

Joanne looked at him doubtfully. "I haven't heard you guys talk about it much."

"No need."

"What's the counsellor like?"

Sai exchanged a conspiratorial glance with David. "She's OK."

Joanne persisted, curious to know more. "What's her name?"

"Ummm, Andrea or something."

"Is she helping?"

"Not really."

"Why not?"

"I dunno." Sai shrugged. "She just wants us to talk and stuff. You had to be there to know what it was like, Jo. Talking about it is just a waste of time."

Joanne touched David lightly on his nose. He was lying on his back, soaking up the warm rays of the sun, eyes closed. For the whole time he had surfed he had tried not to think about what had happened—but with Joanne's questions, it was impossible. He wished she would just let it go instead of always dragging him back to the past and expecting him to tell her his thoughts and feelings.

"David, are you OK?" Joanne asked, leaning over and whispering in his ear.

"I'm fine," David said. "This sun is so good. I was thinking about how to get back to the cave. There's something there I need to get."

"What is it?"

"Nothing really. Just an old box and all our gear. Dad says we'll have to wait until the holidays. He won't let us go back to the valley without him."

Joanne lay back and closed her eyes, too. David could feel the warm sunlight on his body. He could sense Joanne close by. He wanted to focus on her but all her questions had reminded him of what had taken place. They were sharp memories—the sort that twist uncomfortably and jab

unexpectedly, leaving you feeling empty when they have passed.

David reached out to take Joanne's hand. In the process, his fingers brushed against the fine sand. It reminded him of the riverbed in the Blue Mountains. David allowed his mind to wander. Although he was on a beach enjoying a lazy afternoon of school sport, another part of him was back in the valley, on the second day of the hike.

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