

The June that his foot and mine fit in exactly the same print, my son was caught in a killer rip tide off Costa Rica's Pacific Coast.

One moment he danced in waist-deep foam, close enough to call back when I warned that we'd ride only a few more waves before lunch, the next his thin body rose backlit against the top third of a luminous green wall. If you have spent childhood summers near the ocean, your body knows what comes next. What happened was all wrong. Riv should have crashed in with that big wave. He disappeared behind it instead.

The first of the two longest moments in that afternoon's long swim was framed by the waves between us. I couldn't see him beyond the swells and didn't know as I dove through them and began to swim to open sea, if I would find his panicked face or featureless water.

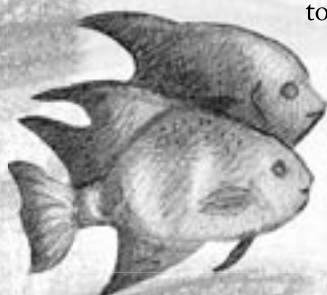
The second was when I thought, despite my assurances, our hands held together as I pulled and swam, pulled and swam, despite the deceptive clarity of my husband and daughter in the innocuous remnants of these waves, and, most harshly, despite my love for this child, that we weren't going to make it back to the sand. And in that second long moment I wondered what I would say to him when he knew it, too.

There was no bottom to the muscle of water we struggled in, only the relentless pull toward the huge emptiness behind us, and a new sound. Continuous and strangely arrhythmic, it crinkled on our shoulders and into our ears. The sound of water flowing away from shore, splishing lightly against us, the flotsam it carried.

The rip tides at Dominical, we learned later, are famous throughout Costa Rica and the surfing community for their deadliness, claiming a life about every four months. Later, we heard the stories. Just weeks before, a father had been dragged out and drowned after managing to pull his three-year-old to safety.

The rip is worst at low tide.

Your only chance is to let it carry you out until it weakens, and then swim at 45 degrees back to shore, if your strength remains.



# Giving Back

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Two babies out of my eight pregnancies lived to be born. River was the first, and the only one to make it without expensive treatments from the problem pregnancy specialist. He was the chubby baby who nursed, wakeful, for hours longer than the easily-napping children of my friends. The three year old whose dreams woke him screaming night after ragged night. The boy whose strong emotions brought on painful judgment from our friends and family with more "manageable" children. Their unspoken verdict echoed my fear; that my gratitude had stained my mothering with indulgence.

But this was the boy who at four hauled the inner tube body of a stranded squid into shoulder deep water, at six hand-fed fish to a dying sea lion. He did not look for thanks.





This was my child with the deep wonder. The summer of his fifth year, after sleeping out in the desert wilderness near where we live, Riv looked into a clear pool and asked, "How did it all begin?" He knew the scientific names of a dozen sea slugs while still struggling with multiplication. Walking on the beach in Mexico one morning, he noticed, in the sun's low angle, quicksilver drops resting on the sand: beached jellyfish. He couldn't pass one of these thumbnail sized blobs of life without cupping it in his palm for a trip back to the open water.

My son had been the most impassioned of fishermen. Cursed with parents who knew nothing of the art, he held the same gene as his fly-casting uncle John. He tied a passable Woolly Bugger before he could properly tie his shoes. And as Riv began to catch fish and was able to hold them in his wet hands before release, he marveled at their beauty. He always opened his hands with a quiet tenderness, thrilling in the moment they flicked their tails and were gone. I never saw him do this without reverence. "It is so beautiful. Look! So beautiful."

There is a strain of old story, a gratitude story. The one where one animal helps another, when no one else, not even the most able by dint of great

power or strength, is willing. The helper is repaid with his own life at the moment of need: The mouse removes the thorn from the paw of the lion. We read these stories as children. Some, remembering the reciprocity that governs all relations, still dance the rain to our corner of the desert every summer. Most of us forget. We move out into the world and conclude that reciprocity is not direct, not a simple balance of right relations, rooted in profound gratefulness. The overly helpful or empathetic soul can't negotiate the deal. The softhearted are called naive, or worse, idealistic. One must learn to maneuver, catch or be caught.

I know not by what grace the ocean released us that day. I stayed awake night after night that summer hearing the water's uncaring sibilance. I stared at the ceiling remembering.

*Riv, don't panic, it's okay, we'll make it. Now, try to ride this one.*

*Mom I just can't do it, I can't swim against it. I'm so scared, so scared, so scared.*

I closed my eyes before sleep and felt again the water dragging and dragging against us, nothing under our feet as I push him in front of me, through one swell, then another, but getting no closer to the shore. I am small, and not a particularly strong swimmer. We finally remembered to swim 45 degrees, but at the end, the ocean's grip simply, suddenly, released. A wave carried us forward. We kept swimming. Then there it was: the outstretched arm of my blessedly solid husband and there Riv's shout, "I can touch, yes, I can touch!"

I do know this: My son has always felt pain as our species continues to rend the earth. We make him angry with our destruction. In the way of a child, he does what he can, and what he does is immediate, concrete. I do know this: He carried a gasping halibut from the drying sand to the cool waters of the Gulf of California in January. He and I swam away from a deadly Pacific rip tide in June.

We went in once more that day. Stayed really close to shore and to each other. The end of the breaking waves, those last, almost gentle, roils of foam sounded like quiet exhalations. We rode them a few more times; to clean off the sand and not go home too scared. We stood, grateful, in the peace between the ocean's breaths and cried out together as a silver fish coursed the breaking swell in front of us. "How beautiful," he said. "How beautiful it is."

