

## Halfway Home James Simpson

*Dedicated to the memory of Chris Boyd (1978-2013), who was tragically taken from Western Australian waters on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 2013.*

Life couldn't have been better when Tommy and I swapped the frigid, wintery Victorian ocean swells for the warm and clean summer swells of Cottesloe. We left a lot behind; our families, friends and a way of life which is in stark contrast to what we've experienced in Victoria. There were a number of factors that led us to make the decision to move. The sense of adventure and escape is something we both craved, and we felt moving to the West was a way of fulfilling this dream. Also, to find work. Jobs were in low supply in the region of coastal Victoria we lived, and although we aren't exactly the sharpest tools in the shed, we were smart enough to realize that in the booming West, jobs were in high demand, and we'd have more chance of getting decent pay to keep us surfing for a long time. Which brings me onto the major reason why we made the move. The surf. The weather. I can't even begin to describe how beautiful it is here. Every morning when I wake up at 6am I am constantly reminded why Tommy and I made the move in the first place. The natural beauty of Victoria; the strong, cold and strong wintery offshore winds blowing on the face of the waves, the whirling sounds created by the wind alone, although magical, cannot compete with the warm waters and light offshore winds which bless Western Australia for a large part of every year. Although this coastline is one of the most beautiful places on earth, it can also be one of the most dangerous; what it offers you, in terms of raw beauty and power, it can also take from you, in much more serious and devastating forms.

We had been in Cott for a week or two, and Tommy and I were lounging around in our rented out apartment on Marine Parade. "We need to get jobs mate!" I told Tommy one day, conforming to my role of being the more level headed bloke out of us two. "We can't keep living on family-sent packages

from over East, or it'll be our families as well as us living on the dole!" Tommy was quick to respond. "Ease off mate, we're dong just fine! But really? Life isn't too bad now, I'm happy to keep going like this for another week or two!" It didn't take long for me to convince my happy-go-lucky mate that if we wanted to keep living the dream, we'd need to secure a constant stream of income. To our delight, we managed to find a job, after a drive up the coast, at a brewery in Fremantle. "Two mates, one dream, one brewery!" Tommy shouted joyously on the way back. Although I wasn't sure what he was trying to get at, I was glad his mindset had turned, and that he was happy. "You reckon they'll pay us in booze?"

It was a morning like any other. Up at 6, I woke up Tommy, and we headed up the coast for a surf after a quick bite to eat. It was particularly gloomy and overcast on this day, but we were undeterred. No wind, and a solid 3 metre swell had combined for some almighty conditions. We were pumped. It's going off!" Tommy exclaimed, almost frothing at the mouth. We quickly moved back to the car, grabbed our boards and wetsuits, and walked down to where we could hear, and almost see the waves breaking on the sandy beach. As we arrived, we could slightly make out what looked like and sounded like large waves breaking in the lineup. "I'll see you out there mate!" Tommy was out there straight away; whilst I pulled my wetsuit on at a much slower rate than Tommy did and took a bit of time to take in the beautiful landscape, as it was being gradually unfurled by the rising sun. As I was about to paddle out, I noticed something. There was something peculiar about this morning. I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Everything seemed caliginous and gloomy. "Ha, just the weather" I said aloud, apprehensively. And that was when it happened. *It happened.* Out of the corner of my eye, I saw it. The single *worst* moment of my life. Tommy, whilst pulling out off the back of a wave had ridden into reasonably shallow water, was hit. A huge grey figure leaped out of the water, snatching him, and within half a second, he was gone. It all happened so quickly. "No!" I screamed, "No, no, no, no, no!" My refusal to believe what just happened led me to sprint into the water, and just as

suddenly turn around, facing away from the ocean, Tommy, and the 5 metre Great White, and just cry. And I cried and cried and cried. I knew it was useless trying to save him. I had heard that once the whites got a hold of you, there was no letting go. I ran as fast as I could, distraught and hopeless, back to the carpark, and called an ambulance. I frantically described them the situation over the phone "He's dead, my mate is dead!" The ambos sent in the choppers, who pinpointed the shark and herded it offshore. An austere looking policeman interviewed me, whilst his female counterpart tried to comfort me. I was inconsolable.

They asked me what action I wanted to be taken, with regards to the beast that took Tommy's life. For most, this would be an easy decision. However, Tommy's words on our last night in Victoria at our farewell party rang like bells in my ears. "Just let them be, hey? It's their environment, their home. As surfers, we take the risk, it's our choice to surf in their homes, dressed as bloody seals! If they chomp us, it's our fault, and it's the price we'll pay for doing what we love in the place we love. I'm willing to pay that price, aren't you boys?" I didn't share the same view as Tommy did on sharks and the tolerance of their incessant presence in Australian waters, but I know he wouldn't want me to go ahead and kill the animal. "Let it go mate", I told the Department of Fisheries officer, "Let him be."