

## TABITHA SOREN

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COURTESY THE ARTIST

## FRANCES LEFKOWITZ

### Double Overhead

Learning to  
Listen to Fear

The surfing you see in magazines is not the kind of surfing I do. I have neither the skills nor the guts nor even the desire to paddle into double-overhead waves, no matter how perfect their shape, and swish back and forth on them like a skier getting air on a slalom course. I learned how to surf at the age of thirty-six, and I ride a longboard built for meandering down waves with the mild inclines of bunny slopes—knee-high, thigh-high, waist-high. What I do is go for a ride, wherever the wave wants to take me. It can be a slow ride, but it makes my body so satisfied to work hard to catch a wave, then get rewarded with that glide when the wave takes over and starts doing the work for me. Riding this liquid curl is the best thing I know how to do, one of the few things that makes me feel—sometimes only for seconds at a time—like I am right inside the swirling center of the beginning of everything.

Once upon a time, I did have the desire, the guts, and perhaps even the skills, to try for waves twice my size, waves that could beat you up and hold you under. Back then, I could not tell the difference between the after-the-fact rush of doing something that scares you and the feeling of pure pleasure in the moment of doing something that delights you.

Eleanor Roosevelt and the stern-smiled motivationalists who quote her tell us to *Do one thing every day that scares you*. The implication is that you have to climb Everest—or tackle Everestesque waves—in order to fully occupy your life. In surf culture there is a belief that the adrenaline triggered by fear is simply an internal obstacle we must shoulder past if we want to live up to our potential bliss. But adrenaline is also a warning, and it just might save your life if you listen to it. Most animals do not seek out opportunities to frighten themselves; they respect their fear, as it is generally alerting them to danger. So when we human animals follow our fear, why do we have to justify, even apologize for it?

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Not that I was reckless. At a new beach, I'd stand on shore and watch the wave for a long while looking for rocks hiding below the surface, and the best place to enter the water, and the impact zone, where the waves were crashing down. But with challenging waves, I was never going to feel fully



confident, so there was always a point when I had to push logic and fear away and just take the plunge. Or, as the motivationalists would say, *Feel the fear and do it anyway.*

Once, I was visiting my friend Nanci at her rental in Playa Negra, Costa Rica. The wave at Playa Negra is steep, fast, and famous, attracting surfers from all over the world, surfers who have little patience for each other and none for newbies, especially if those newbies are women. With the attitude, the crowds, and the sheer difficulty of the wave, it's astounding that I even got in the water there. But this was back when I was that kind of woman—not the kind who charged fearlessly and conquered all, but the kind who watched, waited, made a plan, and took the plunge.

That year, there were two excellent women surfers at Playa Negra, and one of them was my friend Nanci. A former pro volleyball player, Nanci, at almost six feet tall, was a confident athlete who came of age in a generation when women had to work hard to establish their right to be athletes, especially surfers. Her approach was to paddle right into the pack of male surfers and waste no time cussing them out if they even tried to steal a wave from her. The other great surfer was a Frenchwoman, about the same age, late forties. Elegant and sophisticated, even on a surfboard, French did her best to ignore the loud Americans, including Nanci and me. One day we were driving to the beach when we came upon French walking with her girl pals, all carrying longboards, which are heavy as well as long, and they still had a mile to go on that dirt road, in that heat. They barely took the energy to turn down Nanci when she stopped and offered them a ride, just a shake of the head was all they could spare.

My own approach to handling this crowd was to be polite but firm with the male surfers, who automatically assumed a female didn't know what she was doing out there. I'd sit out on the shoulder of the wave and pick up the leftover waves they let go by. If one of them took my wave, I'd let him get away with it once or twice before clearing my throat to let him know that I knew he was stealing from me. Of course a five-foot, three-inch woman with pedestrian skills operating politely but firmly finds her approach much more effective when she's backed up by a six-foot pal who's got admirable skills and a loud mouth. Still, at forty-three years old, I was as good a surfer as I was going to get—as strong, as capable, as fearless as I would

ever be. I was still operating on the principle of invincibility, on the belief—confirmed by decades of experience and no broken bones—that my body would get itself out of whatever it got itself into.

One morning in Playa Negra, I found myself sitting in the exact right spot to catch the biggest wave I'd ever ridden, a ten-footer that was bucking up and heading right for me. I remember facing it as it approached, calculating where it would peak up highest and fold over, factoring in my position, and deciding that it was indeed mine, as no other surfer was closer to it, and deciding also that I could make it, that I could catch it as it folded over and ride it down those ten feet of water. I turned my board around quickly and paddled toward the beach, the same direction the wave was traveling, so I'd be up to speed when it reached me. It's a quiet-before-the-storm moment as a wave approaches, and everyone was watching to see if I could make it. Then I felt it: the glorious surge of all that power lifting my board from behind and taking me along for the ride, pushing me forward, so I could stop paddling and pop up to my feet and angle my board to the right to follow the wave as it unzipped itself. And there, right where I was aimed, was French, paddling, popping up, cutting me off.

The rules on this are very clear: the wave belongs to the surfer closest to the peak, which is the highest point of the wave, where it breaks from clear water to foam, where all its might is located. Sometimes a secondary and tertiary rule comes into play, but I'd met those, too: I'd caught the wave first, and I'd gotten to my feet first, so I was standing up while French was still paddling on her belly. The wave was mine, and it was her responsibility to look over her left shoulder, toward the peak, to see if someone else was already on it. She should have pulled out when I'd made my intentions clear by paddling for it, and she definitely should have pulled out when I'd caught it. Instead, she jumped on it three feet in front of me, cutting me off in the same way that a driver merging onto the freeway might not look over her left shoulder for cars already in the lane and slip in, too close and too slow, forcing the car with the right of way to brake, swerve, or crash into her.

So there I was, stranded at the top—just ahead of the peak, the center of the wave's power and its danger—and it was too late to back out of it. Because I'd already caught

the wave, I could not uncatch it. But because French was in front of me, I could not ride it, or my board and I would pummel into her board and her, and it would be a two-car rather than a one-car accident. All I could do was wait for it to tumble and take me down with it.

Standing atop that ten-foot wall of water, time came to a brief pause, long enough for me to yell "Fuck you" for French and everyone else to hear, all my politeness evaporated. Then time went back to normal speed, and the wall came crashing down, throwing me and my board down it, then tumbling on top of me. All you can do in this situation is hold your breath and try to remember which way is up, and when you finally get to the surface to grab some air, come up with your arms covering your head because of the seven feet of fiberglass surfboard tied to your ankle—at least you hope it's still tied to your ankle—bouncing around somewhere out there. And when you do get that mouthful of air, make it big because you're about to get both pushed and pulled back under by the next eight- or ten-foot wall, since these things come in sets and you are stuck in the impact zone.

My body was in full survival mode, getting held down, coming back up, six or seven times, finally rejoicing when the set eased into a brief lull, so I could find my way out of the impact zone, mount my board, and paddle back out to the lineup with the other surfers. My fuel through all this was adrenaline, from the body's instinct for air over water, but also from outrage and incredulity. And, as I've said, I still had no reason to believe I couldn't take a beating like this.

To her credit, French paddled ever so casually over to me to apologize once I got back out there. This is a ritual in surfing for anyone with a modicum of respect for the sport: if you screw someone over you acknowledge it. This lets them know you know the rules, you didn't break them on purpose or out of ignorance, and you hope they won't retaliate. All eyes were on us as she said her sorry.

"Why would you *do* that?" I asked, nothing sheepish about me now.

"I didn't think you could make it," she replied.

What she had done was treat me like a girl surfer—assume I could not make the drop and would miss the wave. I'm sure French had been cut off for years, by guys who knew the wave was rightfully hers, but thought—or

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claimed they thought—that she couldn't catch it. But instead of reversing this behavior, instead of giving the girl surfer the benefit of the doubt and her rightful right of way, she replicated it. While I went tumbling with my board bouncing after me, she glided down that wave on her feet, as powerful and elegant as a woman and as cutthroat as a man.

After I caught my breath, I caught a few more waves, but nothing as big and perfect as the wave that might have been. Once the adrenaline drained, I was exhausted from fighting all that water and took a last, small wave into the beach. This is not French's fault, but I never again had a chance at a wave that big, and now I never will.

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I wish I could claim big waves, rough conditions, and daredevil stunts, but the embarrassing fact is that the sea was calm the day of my accident, the water was glassy, and the waves were small. It was a summer afternoon at the mild-mannered Maine beach where I'd learned to surf. The tide was almost dead high, and the beach was crowded with sunbathers. I was scheduled to help teach an evening surf camp, and I'd driven down early to pick off a few of those little rollers before class. The water was moving so

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languidly that the ride would be over almost as soon as I stood up on the board. Then I'd slip back down to the prone position, without ever getting in the water, without ever reacquainting myself with exactly how shallow it was, and paddle back out to snag another one.

I got to the end of one of those short rides and, for some reason I will never be able to explain, instead of sliding back to my belly, or jumping off the board feet first, I dismounted by diving off the board head first. When the top of my head hit the bottom of the ocean, the pain was so profound I thought I was going to pass out underwater. Inside my head an electrical storm was raging, complete with stars and bolts of lighting, just like in the comics when someone gets their head smacked. But I forced myself to stand up.

There were people all around me, but the accident made no noise, and no one noticed it. I wouldn't have had to even raise my voice to tell someone what happened. But I'm a do-it-yourselfer unaccustomed to asking for help or even recognizing when I need it. I looked to shore to see how far I had to walk. That's when I saw the lifeguards climbing down from their tall white thrones, going off duty. For a moment it occurred to me that I might need their help, that I could ask them for it. But I let that moment pass.

Instead, I walked, ever so slowly, out of the water, up the staircase, down the sidewalk. With each step, the pain

spread and solidified. By the time I got to the car, my whole neck and the right shoulder was frozen solid, and my head would not turn. So I crawled into the back seat, found my phone, and called my friend Nanci to ask her to find a sub to teach surf camp for me. When she heard me say the word "neck," she had the wherewithal to call an EMT friend, then call me back to say, "Call an ambulance. And don't move."

In the ER, after X-rays and CT scans, I was on my back on a gurney, looking up at the ceiling, when a doctor leaned into my view. "It looks like you've broken your neck," he told me. I had fractured two vertebrae, C1 and C2, the ones that are so far up they are inside the head, and the doctor wanted to transfer me to a hospital that had a neurosurgeon on staff. In my mind a broken neck meant death or paralysis. I wasn't dead, so I assumed paralysis was coming. The doctor stepped out of view, and I burst into tears, the first time I'd cried since hitting my head.

But it turns out you can break your neck without getting paralyzed. It turns out you can spend three months locked into a metal cage of a brace that immobilizes you from the waist up, preventing you from the slightest twist or turn. And if you can make it through these months of barely moving, and the months of progressively less restrictive braces allowing more and more movement, then a year later you can be back on your surfboard at your home break, catching waves and gliding down them and trying to forget just how close you came to never doing this again.

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Two years after the accident, I returned to Costa Rica and, urged on by Nanci's fearless optimism, I paddled out to the wave at Playa Negra. The accident left me weaker and unable to fully rotate my head, but I'd been surfing on the smaller waves back home. Now, straddling my board on the edge of that notorious wave, watching those mountains of water surge in and crash over, I realized I no longer had it in me to tackle something that massive. I no longer trusted my strength or will or luck or whatever forces had always kept me out of serious trouble. And I no longer desired the excitement that came from pushing myself to a precipice and hurling myself down it. No, I did not even want to ride waves like these, even if I could catch them.

Then, as I was sitting there, bobbing on my board, listening to my fear, a wave came up and caught me. With no time or strength to paddle out of it, or to angle my board properly and get to my feet, I got tossed over the lip and went tumbling down. At the bottom, the wave pinned me underwater, and this time there was no instinctive confidence that of course I'd make it out alive. Like a boxer who becomes a danger to himself because he no longer has the killer spirit, I knew I had to get out of the ring, paddle back to shore. But when I came up for a gulp of air and reached for my board, my hands could not locate it. The leash had broken, the board was gone, and I was on my own, with giant waves heading my way.

Nanci must have seen the panic in my flailing arms, because she paddled right over and gave me her board, so I'd have something to hold on to. Then she swam into shore to get mine, which had bounced up onto the beach, attached a new leash to it, and paddled it back out to me.

We traded boards again, and I sat on mine for half an hour, maybe longer, trying to figure out how to get through these waves and back to shore. I looked, and felt, like one of those overly audacious beginners who has no business being in the lineup at a world-class break. Finally I paddled parallel to shore, to the next beach over, where the waves were smaller, and got myself in without breaking anything.

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On that first trip, the one with the Frenchwoman, when I still thought I was invincible, Nanci, for once, recognized the power of the subtle, quiet word. She was in the water with French a few days after I'd returned to the States. She did not berate French, did not curse her, did not drop in on one of her waves in retaliation. She just paddled in close, leaned over, and said, "That would have been the biggest wave my friend had ever caught."

I like to believe she was telling the truth. I like to believe I was once that woman.

**Frances Lefkowitz** is the author of the memoir *To Have Not*, about growing up poor in 1970s San Francisco, and is currently at work on a second memoir, *When I Was Invincible*, about fear, risk, and surfing. Her fiction and nonfiction appear in dozens of literary and commercial magazines, and her awards include a California Humanities Community Stories Grant and Notable Mentions twice for both the Pushcart Prize and Best American Essays. She is the founder/director and chief bottle washer for the Community Memoir Project, which brings free memoir-writing workshops to public libraries. Find her online at [www.franceslefkowitz.net](http://www.franceslefkowitz.net).