



Coast Range Chronicles 16: “Spring at Dawn”

by

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A crack on the bedroom window jerks me awake. The room is dark. I glance at the clock and groggily realize that I overslept. I stumble to the window. My buddy waits below, about to throw another pebble. I wave a vague apology, lurch through the darkness, grab my surfboard and wetsuit from the garage, and hustle into the spring chill.

I toss my gear into his truck and we drive north on Highway 1. Zeppelin plays on the stereo. We buy coffee at an all-night diner and continue north. The first hints of gray soak the eastern sky.

We park on the bluff above the reef and gaze at the ocean. Waves crash in the distance but the size and shape are indistinguishable in the weak light. An onshore breeze stirs, moist and chilly, then fades to calm. We stamp our feet and exhale into cupped hands. With the persistent onshore flow of spring, the upwelling will be fierce, the water dense and bitter cold.

Light strengthens and the ocean appears before us. There's a windswell running, a bit crossed-up, incredibly short period. Nobody out. The surface is quasi-glassy, but with onshore texture creeping in from the west, it'll be blown out soon enough.

Neither of us admits it but we're reluctant to brave the cold and brutal paddle for marginal surf. We could do the dance of checking endless spots to delay and procrastinate but we know the surfable conditions won't last and based on tide, wind, and swell this reef is the best option. We want hot coffee and a stack of pancakes dripping with butter and syrup; we could be defrosting in the diner in ten minutes. But we know that, if we leave without surfing, we'll regret it for the rest of the day.

We're in a bind. The situation is not clear cut. If the waves were cranking we'd already be out there and if they sucked we'd already be at the diner. But they're okay, worth a go out, but no real shame to decline.

A judgment call.

The sun peeks over the eastern horizon. More light than heat. The hills are green and lush and beautiful. We initiate overtures about leaving, our analysis of the conditions laced with pessimism.

We label a set "weak," though if we really wanted to surf, we'd say: "looks rideable."

We decide to wait for one more set to confirm our analysis. To know, later in the day when we think back to the morning, that we made the appropriate call in leaving.

A set arrives. We watch in silence. It reels across the slab. Not bad. As the set ends we know we can't leave without surfing. Pride and conscience wouldn't allow it. Reluctantly we mumble and nod and suit up in the cold dawn.

My wetsuit is still dripping from a session three days ago. I forgot to hang it up to dry. It feels like slipping on a suit of ice. My buddy heckles me as he slides into his dry and toasty neoprene. I grimace and curse the spring dawn and my lazy stupidity.

We wax our boards and scramble down the bluff. The paddle is arduous. We reach the lineup and trade waves for an hour, constantly fighting the current. We catch numerous waves but none are good. It looked better from the bluff.

The wind kicks up and we head in. Our hands are numb and useless as we struggle from our wetsuits and into dry clothes. We drive to the diner, slide into a booth, order coffee, and slowly thaw.

The chill lingers in our ear canals, sinuses stuffed with saltwater. A poor session by any objective standard. Neither of us can recall a single good ride. But with the day ahead and all the pitfalls contained therein, we had our moment and we're sure of one thing.

We made the right call.