**Stonefish**

**Ali Francis** is an Australian writer living in Brooklyn. Her work appears in print and digital publications like *Bon Appétit, Vogue,*and*SELF*. In this account, she recalls how a painful encounter with a Caribbean stonefish - the world’s most venomous fish - convinced her to stop working so hard and search for a different, slower-paced kind of life.

I spent years practically glued to my computer. Then one heart-stopping encounter left me thankful to be alive – and made me realise I wanted to live much differently…

My body was convulsing[[1]](#footnote-1), my mind slipping in and out of consciousness with each contraction. It had taken all of my strength just to run the couple hundred metres from the surf spot back to camp. I could hear my heart: thump-thump, thump-thump. Each beat was pushing the poison further around my body. I imagined my blood mixing with the toxin, shaken together like a deadly cocktail.

Jay, who owned the surf camp, had seen this before. He kept one arm wrapped around my shoulder while the other held my leg still. “The venom is nearly totally protein, so we basically have to cook your foot alive,” he said, rubbing my shaking shoulders. “If the water isn’t hot enough, the poison’s going to spread further.”

I was sitting in a rusted-out wheelchair, swathed[[2]](#footnote-2) in a towel like a new-born baby, with Jay’s enormous straw gardening hat flopped crooked on my head. I didn’t understand why he’d bothered with it - I wasn’t sure I was going to live long enough to worry about a sunburn.

My breathing was that awful, ragged kind: five short gasps in for every breath out. And my foot, swollen to the size of my thigh, was plunged into a heatproof vinyl bag filled with hot water and vinegar. When I say hot, I mean that Jay was boiling kettle after kettle of water and pouring them into the bag. And I was doing my best to bear it, making these guttural[[3]](#footnote-3) croaking noises like some kind of distressed tree frog.

“Jay?” I asked. “Am I … dying?”

He didn’t reply. Which, everybody knows, means: Yes, you’re a goner.

It had all started months earlier. I went on vacation to Barbados right after deciding to start a marketing agency with a friend back in New York, who’d quit his stable, well-paying job to go into business with me. Before I’d moved to the U.S., surfing had been my anchor, my therapist and my joy. And that’s how I became the kind of person I never thought I’d be: the kind who almost dies on a surf trip to Barbados.

I spent the previous five days lazily circumnavigating[[4]](#footnote-4) the island, bookending them with surfs. I stared into the impossibly powerful waves in the north, watching as they filled and drained a network of tidal sea caves, and wandered through the local farmers’ market, which was dappled in sunlight, sampling fresh turmeric drinks, fish patties and coconut bread. One evening I met a 70-year-old woman named Margaret, and we danced until the sky blistered and the sun dipped behind the ocean. But most afternoons I’d fall asleep under the palms, a book splayed open on my chest. It had been heavenly!

My last morning had started like all the others: eating Weetabix and banana in my toucan-themed apartment, fuelling up for a final surf. While I squeezed the last blobs of toothpaste from my travel tube of Crest, I noticed in the mirror that my nose had started to peel and the tips of my hair was crunchy and sun-bleached. I laughed, imagining this woman in the mirror sitting next to my new business partner at a boardroom table of suits back in the city.

Freights Bay, a little point break on the south coast of the island, looked like a mirage that morning. The beach was a 30-second barefoot trot from my Air-BnB and a five-minute walk from Oistin’s Fish Fry - my favourite place to order a steamy slab of grilled tuna and a rum punch. The wave at Freights is the longest left on the whole island, and that morning the lines were so clean, they looked moulded from turquoise jelly. I watched for a while, my longboard and towel stacked on my head, as ripples of southeast swell wrapped around the point and broke on the soft, sandy reef below.

I felt a little melancholy climbing down the slippery stone cliff face and into a small tidal sea cave. In just a few hours, I’d be on a plane back to the city, back to a life I knew I should be grateful for, yet somehow felt didn’t belong to me. Foamy water lapped at my ankles, and the rocks were sharp underfoot. My arms throbbed after a week of paddling, but through the cave and straight into a breaking wave was really the only way into the bay.

The curling cliff face that borders Freights was sending a light offshore wind up the face of each wave, like a hairbrush smoothing flyaway hair into place. Just as I took off on my twentieth wave or so, each one supposed to be the last one, I noticed Zac, a local surf instructor I’d befriended on the trip, bob over the top of a peak in front of me.

I paddled back out, weaving through the trail of beginner surfers he was leading on a lesson, like a Pied Piper of the sea. “You’re up early today - paddle, paddle, paddle, now stand!” Zac screamed at a greying, terrified-looking woman who was pawing at the water to our right.

“Honestly, I swear some people don’t even wanna surf, man. It’s like they’re on this island and they just think they should do it or something,” he said to me.

That morning the ocean was alive with somersaulting turtles. I could see their mosaicked[[5]](#footnote-5) little faces gliding through the wave as I paddled hard into the pocket, felt the familiar lift, and pounced to my feet. The face opened into a long, smooth hallway, guiding me inside. I felt giddy with excitement. My wet hair whipped my back as I breezed down the line.

I was furious at myself for all the wasted years I’d spent barely looking up from my computer. Here I was, a grown woman, doing exactly what I wanted. All along there’d been nothing to worry about, no one standing by ready to judge my senseless impulses. I was certain that I had just had the revelation that would change the rest of my life.

But as the wave petered out and my board skimmed to a standstill in the shallows, I jumped into the water and landed, heel first, on something that felt like a staple gun. I would have mistaken the pain for a run-in with a jagged patch of coral, only it seemed to be getting worse by the second. I stopped paddling, sat up on my board and pulled my tingling foot in close to my face, like you see baboons do in nature documentaries. My foot looked like a foot, and I couldn’t figure out what had happened. Then I saw Zac screaming my name and power-paddling toward me. What did he know that I didn’t?

He wrapped his arm around my waist and snatched my ankle from my hands.

“OK, listen to me,” he said. I’d never seen him look stern before. He squeezed my heel and a little stream of blood trickled from a tiny red dot under my foot. “Yep, that’s what I thought; you’ve stepped on a stonefish.”

Stonefish? No. Even the word seemed foreign, incomprehensible. Growing up in Australia, we’d been told that an intimate encounter with a stonefish means you have exactly fifteen minutes in which to be injected with some anti-venom before what is known to be an excruciating and inevitable death. I had no idea why Zac wasn’t freaking out.

This has to be a mistake, I thought. I’m not supposed to die yet! My body stopped fighting the news sooner than my mind - even in the water, I could feel myself sweating. My heart seemed to quit beating, in that same immediate way it does during one of the five hundred or so times a year I think I’ve lost my wallet.

“This is going to start hurting like mad any minute,” Zac continued calmly. “Get back to the camp, as fast as possible, and tell Jay what happened.”

I sat there, considering my two options: Lay down in corpse pose and die here, floating on my board like some kind of Viking king, or try to make it to camp and die somewhere along the road, face down on the tarmac. I didn’t understand what getting back to camp had to do with my survival. As far as I could tell, it was game over.

“Go!” Zac yelled.

I lay flat to the board, my arms vibrating, trying to remember how to paddle. I kicked my feet up in the air behind me for extra momentum, the tainted[[6]](#footnote-6) one burning from the inside out. The whole way in, I don’t remember taking a single breath. But I do remember thinking, ‘Well, at least I’ll die doing something I love’.

By the time I stumbled back up the cliff to Jay’s surf camp - a shipping container filled with boards and sunscreen - I was ready for amputation. I threw my board to the ground, having deliriously[[7]](#footnote-7) lugged it all the way back. One usually leaves one’s personal belongings behind in this kind of emergency, but I wasn’t exactly thinking straight, and I figured the last thing my family would need, grief stricken from my sudden death, was to hear they also owed four hundred dollars for my lost rental board.

“Surf that bad, my lady?” Jay winked at the board, which was still rocking back and forth on the ground. “What’s wrong with you? Need a coffee?”

I was doubled over, panting hot air into my kneecaps. “Stonefish,” I gasped, dropping to all fours. And that’s when Jay manhandled me into a wheelchair and insisted on pouring boiling water all over my foot.

In what I assumed were my final moments, there was no grainy montage[[8]](#footnote-8) of beautiful memories. No hazy scenes of my dad lifting me onto a horse as a kid, or my mum placing a cool hand on my brow while I was sick.

I didn’t see the smiling faces of my loved ones flicking by, the way people say they do at moments like this. Instead, I felt angry. I’d only just started my new life, in which I was going to be free of all of all the things that had ground me down. And it had already been cut unfairly short at the hands (er, spikes?) of the world’s ugliest fish.

I thrashed around dramatically for several hours, teeth rattling, tears of excruciating pain rolling down my face, until Zac’s dad arrived with a pill that turned the clouds pink. I can’t believe they didn’t tell me that there were stonefish here, I kept thinking, over and over.

“You know,” Jay said, my wrinkly hand nestled in his leathery ones. “The good news about Caribbean stonefish is that, unlike those Australian ones, they probably can’t kill you… unless you’re, like, a baby or very old. Are you either of those?”

With the kind of optimism bestowed only after a brush with death, a hallucinogenic painkiller, and the realisation that I was “probably” never in any real danger, I saw that my tiny spark of a life had been saved. I’d been given a much-needed wakeup call, and I knew what I had to do next.

I made it to the airport twenty minutes before my flight took off. I shakily boarded the plane, hobbling down the aisle and sat grinning at the ceiling. The hostess, wearing that limp yellow life jacket around her neck, peered down at me and asked, “How was your trip, Madam?”

“Honestly?” I slurred. “Life changing.”

When I got back to New York, I exited the business I’d only just started with my friend. I left him and our new roster of clients completely hanging. I knew I’d betrayed him. I’d brought him into my mess to help me stay afloat, only to leave him treading water. But I was certain there was more than clever taglines waiting for me on the other side. I didn’t know exactly what I wanted. But if I didn’t try to find out, I was sure I’d drown in that sea of “should haves.”

My mid-surf revelation, and all the immense pain and pleasure that came with the aftermath, had helped me see how far I still had to go. I’d been splashed in the face with my own mortality in Barbados - given a chance to finally unravel the coil.

So I took a low-key, part-time job for a while. It was enough to pay the bills, and gave me a four-day weekend to fill with all of the thoughts and desires I’d never taken the time to explore. I painted and wrote and Googled pictures of stonefish. I thought about the insidious[[9]](#footnote-9) nature of those gnarled, prehistoric-looking venom traps: how freaky it is to think that they’re always there, perfectly still, camouflaged in the coral. Waiting for you to hit rock bottom. How sometimes the most unavoidable pain comes from the things that are hardest to see.

1. shaking [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. wrapped [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. rough [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. circling [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. pattern made up of small shapes [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. contaminated [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. wildly / frantically [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. collection of images [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. sneaky [↑](#footnote-ref-9)