

## Playing Doc's Games: The New Yorker 1992

Playing Doc's Games by William Finnegan

New Yorker August 24, 1992

Wise Surfboards, the only surf shop in San Francisco, is a bright, high-ceilinged place flanked by a Mexican restaurant and a Christian day-care center out in the far reaches of a sleepy working-class seaside suburb known as the Sunset District. Bob Wise, the shop's proprietor, was talking to a small group of local surfers one winter afternoon when I stopped in. "So Doc, who can see the surf from his window, calls me up and says, 'Come on, let's go out,'" Wise said. "So I keep asking him, 'But how is it?' And he goes, 'It's interesting.' So I go over there and we go out and it's just totally terrible. So Doc says, 'What did you expect?' Turns out that when Doc says it's interesting, that means it's worse than terrible."

Wise was talking about Mark Renneker, a family-practice physician and surfer who lives in the Sunset District. And so were two young guys I overheard a few days later at a windy overlook on the south side of the Golden Gate. We were watching surf break against the base of the long black cliff beneath us—the spot down there is called Dead Man's, and the tide was still too high for surfing it—when one of them pointed north and howled. Across the Gate, which is a magnificent stretch of water running from the Pacific Ocean into San Francisco Bay, giant waves were breaking in a shipping hazard known as the Potato Patch. Although they were several miles from where we stood, and wind-ripped and horribly confused, the waves had, because they were so big, the three-dimensionality of waves seen from much closer. "Hey, give me your binoculars," one of the young guys said to the other. "Doc's probably out there."

Actually, Mark was working that afternoon at a clinic in inner-city San Francisco, but the kids on the cliff were not misinformed: Mark had tried to surf the Potato Patch—an idea so farfetched and scary that those who knew the area, but had not talked to the witnesses, invariably refused to believe it. Since these guys were not, I knew, San Francisco surfers, of whom there were only a few dozen, their remarks meant that Mark's notoriety was no longer confined to the city.

That morning, I had stood on another overlook—a sand embankment at Ocean Beach, in the Sunset District—and watched Mark demonstrate some of the qualities that gave him his peculiar status among other surfers. The waves were big, ragged, relentless, with no visible channels for getting through the surf from the shore. Getting out looked impossible, and the waves looked not worth the effort anyway, but Mark was out there, a small black-wetsuited figure in a world of furious white water, throwing himself into the stacked walls of onrushing foam. Each time he seemed to be making headway, a new set of waves would appear on the horizon, bigger than the last and breaking farther out (the biggest were breaking perhaps two hundred yards from shore), and drive him back into the area that surfers call the impact zone.

Watching with me was Tim Bodkin, a hydrogeologist, surfer, and Mark's next-door neighbor. Bodkin was getting a huge kick out of Mark's ordeal. "Forget it, Doc!" he kept shouting into the wind, and then he would laugh. "He's never going to make it. He just won't admit it." At times, we lost sight of him altogether. The waves rarely gave him a chance even to clamber onto his surfboard and paddle; mostly, he was underwater, diving under waves, swimming seaward along the bottom somewhere, dragging his board behind him by a leash attached to his ankle. After thirty minutes, I began to worry: the water was very cold, and the surf was very powerful. Bodkin, aglow with *schadenfreude*, did not share my concern. Finally, after about forty-five minutes, there was a brief lull in the waves. Mark scrambled onto his board

and paddled like a windmill in a hurricane, and within three minutes he was outside, churning over the crests of the next set with five yards to spare. Once he was safely beyond the surf, he sat up on his board to rest, a black speck bobbing on a blue, windblown sea. Bodkin, disgusted, left me alone on the embankment.

I knew how Bodkin felt. Mark's joy in surfing adversity had often appalled me. Earlier that winter, he and I had been out together in big surf at Ocean Beach. We paddled out easily—conditions were immaculate, the channels easy to read—but we misjudged the size of the surf and took up a position that was too close to shore. Before we caught our first waves, a huge set caught us inside.

The first wave snapped my ankle leash—a ten-foot length of polyurethane, strong enough to pull a car uphill—as if it were a piece of string. I swam underneath that wave and then kept swimming, toward the open ocean. The second wave looked like a three-story building. It, like the first wave, was preparing to break a few yards in front of me. I dived deep and swam hard. The lip of the wave hitting the surface above me sounded like a bolt of lightning exploding at very close range, and it filled the water with shock waves. I managed to stay underneath the turbulence, but when I surfaced I saw that the third wave of the set belonged to another order of being. It was bigger, thicker, and drawing much more heavily off the bottom than the others. My arms felt rubbery, and I started hyperventilating. I dived very early and very deep. The deeper I swam, the colder and darker the water got. The noise as the wave broke was preternaturally low, a basso profundo of utter violence, and the force pulling me backward and upward felt like some nightmare inversion of gravity. Again, I managed to escape, and when I finally surfaced I was far outside. There were no more waves, which was fortunate, since I was sure that one more would have finished me. Mark was there, though, perhaps ten yards to my right. He had been duck-diving and escaping the unimaginable just as narrowly as I had. His leash had not broken, however; he was reeling in his board. As he did so, he turned to me, with a manic look in his eyes, and yelled, "This is great!" It could have been worse. He could have yelled, "This is interesting!"

Weeks later, I learned that, from a record-keeping point of view, Mark had indeed found that afternoon's surf interesting. He stayed out in the water for four hours (I made the long swim to shore, collected my board, and went home to bed) and measured the wave interval—the time it takes two waves in a wave train (surfers call it a set) to pass a fixed point—at twenty-five seconds. It was the longest interval Mark had ever seen at Ocean Beach. Mark could make this arcane observation—I have never heard another surfer even mention wave interval, let alone measure it—with authority, because he has been keeping, since 1969, a detailed record of every time he goes surfing. He records where he surfed, the size of the waves, the direction of the swell, a description of conditions, what surfboard he rode, who his companions (if any) were, any memorable events or observations, and data for year-to-year comparisons. Thus, the entry for Sunday, December 22, 1985, recorded, among other things, that my leash broke on the twenty-first day of that surf season on which Mark had surfed waves eight feet or bigger, and the ninth day on which he had surfed waves ten feet or bigger.

Mark's logbook also showed that the longest period of time he had gone without surfing since 1969 was three weeks. That happened in 1971, during a brief stint in college in Arizona. Since then, he had twice been forced out of the water for periods of slightly less than two weeks by injuries suffered at Ocean Beach. Otherwise, he had rarely gone more than a few days without surfing, and he had often surfed every day for weeks on end. Jessica Dunne, a painter, with whom Mark has lived since college, says that when he doesn't surf for a few days he becomes odd. "He gets explosive, and he seems to shrink inside his clothes," she says. "And when he hears the surf start to come back up he gets so excited that he can't sleep. You can actually see the muscles in his chest and shoulders swelling as he sits on the couch

listening to the surf build through the night." In a sport open only to the absurdly dedicated—it takes years to master the rudiments of surfing, and constant practice to maintain even basic competence—Mark is the fanatics' fanatic. His fanaticism carries him into realms that are literally uncharted, such as the Potato Patch. "One thing about Doc," says Bob Wise, who has been surfing in San Francisco for almost thirty years. "He keeps open the idea that anything is possible."

With me, Mark for years kept open the possibility that I might rise before dawn on a winter day, pull on a cold, damp wetsuit, and throw myself into the icy violence of big Ocean Beach. I came to dread his early-morning calls. Dreams full of giant gray surf and a morbid fear of drowning would climax with the scream of the phone in the dark. For most surfers, I think—for me, certainly—waves have a spooky duality. When you are absorbed in surfing them, they seem alive, each with a distinct, intricate personality and quickly changing moods, to which you must react in the most intuitive, almost intimate way—too many surfers have likened riding waves to making love—and yet waves are not alive, not sentient, and the lover you reach to embrace can turn murderous without warning. Somehow, this duality doesn't seem to haunt Mark. His conscious life and his unconscious life have a weird seamlessness. His surfing dreams, as he recounts them, all seem to be about recognizable places on recognizable days. He notes the tides and swells in his dreams as if they were going into his logbook. If he's upset when he wakes, it's because he was looking forward to riding one more dream wave. His voice on the other end of the line at dawn was always bright, raucous, from the daylight world: "Well? How's it look?"

Mark can see the south end of Ocean Beach from his apartment. I, during the years I lived in San Francisco, could see the north end from mine. I would stumble, shivering, to the window, peer through freezing, blurry binoculars at a cold, wild sea.

"It looks . . . scary."

"Well? Let's hit it!"

Other surfers also got these siren calls. Edwin Salem, a onetime protégé of Mark's, says he used to be awake half the night worrying that the phone would ring, and then panic if it did: "Doc only called me when it was big and he knew nobody else would go out with him. I usually would."

Everyone who surfs has a limit to the size of the waves he will venture among. The surfers in an area come, over time, to know one another's limits. In San Francisco, this mutual knowledge creates a dense little community, nervous and drawling, in the beach parking lots on big winter days—men pacing back and forth, fists plunged in pockets, discussing the matter with dry mouths, laughing too loudly, while, out at sea, frightening waves rear and collapse. We study the waves, study the channels, trying to decide if the surf is within the range we can conceivably handle. That range is as much psychic as physical, and it is inseparable from the group: if X goes out, that doesn't necessarily mean I have to go out, but if Y goes out, I'll have to follow, because anything within his range is, I know, within mine.

When I lived in San Francisco, the only other surfer whose range approached Mark's was Bill Bergerson, a local carpenter whom everyone called Peewee—an unlikely nickname, left over from the days when he was somebody's younger brother. Peewee is a quiet, intense, exceptionally smooth surfer, probably the best pure surfer San Francisco has produced. His interest in big waves is not, however, indiscriminate. He does not try to surf every big day that comes along; he will ride big waves only when they are clean. Mark, for his part, will go out in borderline madness, when no one else will even consider it. Then he will go out in sheer madness. And come in laughing. Worst of all, he is not shy with other people's demons:

Edwin's, his patients', Wise's, mine.

One of my demons was surfing itself. It had started out as a boyish passion, but it had long since turned into something else. I'd been surfing for nearly twenty years when I moved to San Francisco, in 1983, at the age of thirty. There had been periods when I didn't surf—while I was living in Europe, or Montana, or New York City—but I had always found my way back to it. All in all, I had spent a staggering amount of time and energy looking for and riding waves. In the early nineteen-eighties, one of the surfing magazines (there are several) published a list of what its editors reckoned were the ten best surf spots in the world, and I realized I had surfed nine of them. What was more, the best wave I had surfed was not on the list. That was because only a handful of people knew that it existed. Finding that wave, off an uninhabited island in Fiji, had been the high point of a trek that kept me out of the United States for nearly four years. The search for new waves had carried me to strange and wonderful places—immersing me, once or twice, so deeply in the life of tropical fishing villages that, laid low by malaria, I nearly stayed for good. But it was an odd thing to arrange one's life around. By the time I moved to San Francisco, I had been firmly confining surfing to the sidelines of my life for several years.

Mark undertook to reverse this trend. He had written to me in New York when he heard I was thinking of moving, sending a photograph of himself on a beautiful, wind-brushed Ocean Beach wave—a wave he claimed was merely "average"—and, once I got to town, he seemed to expect me to be ready to surf at all times. He knew I had another life, but he wouldn't hear "excuses." My ambivalence about the sport drove him nuts. It was heresy. Surfing was not a "sport." It was a "path." And the more you poured into it the more you got back from it—he himself was the exuberant proof of that. I knew I wasn't the only object of Mark's exhortations to take surfing more seriously, and my ambivalence persisted, but his enthusiasm had its effects. It got me out in the water more often than I would have gone otherwise; it also got my attention. Surfing and I had been married, so to speak, for most of my life, but it was one of those marriages in which little is said. I rarely talked about surfing, didn't write about it, didn't even think about it much. It contributed little to how I saw myself. I just did it—less constantly now than before, but no less automatically. Mark wanted to help me and surfing patch up our stubborn, silent marriage. I didn't think I wanted it patched up. Having a sizable tract of unconsciousness near the center of my life suited me, somehow. And yet, over the course of my first winter at Ocean Beach, I found myself beginning to fill notebooks with surf-related sketches, oceanographic observations—and descriptions of Dr. Renneker.

Mark looks, at a glance, and especially when he wears a coat, like some Russian Orthodox monk who has wandered off the taiga—a sunburned young Solzhenitsyn. He has an unkempt brown beard, a large, narrow, sun-reddened nose, hair that falls a good five inches below his shoulders, and small, dolefully down-sloping blue eyes. He even makes a habit of wearing sandals. He seldom wears a coat, though; his wardrobe tends toward T-shirts or aloha shirts or no shirt, even in winter. And his physique does not suggest a life of frequent prayer. Thirty years of surfing (Mark is forty) have left him with a great rack of muscles across his back and chest. He carries less fat on him than a racing greyhound: he stands six feet four and weighs a hundred and eighty pounds. The doleful shape of his eyes is also misleading. Closer inspection usually finds them lit with amusement, and weather-deepened spiderwebs at their corners have clearly been formed by constant laugh action. His laugh is loud and, in quality, falls somewhere between a honk and a roar.

For someone so tall, Mark is remarkably unself-conscious. He carries himself like a ballet dancer, and his walk, in its precision, borders on the feminine. Before he goes surfing, he ritually performs an elaborate series of yoga stretches at the water's edge, and I have never seen him skimp on this warmup—not even when bystanders snickered—or cross the sand with any less precise a swagger. Being tall can be a disadvantage in surfing; few top competitors are over six feet. As in gymnastics, a low center of gravity is crucial to great balance. Mark has a low, almost crouching style of surfing that, while not especially beautiful, is superbly balanced, and compensates effectively for his height. In big waves, where brute strength and stability become critical factors, his height, combined with his hunkered-down style, seems to work to his advantage: he uses it to lever the long, hard, high-speed turns that big waves avail, and to absorb the sharp, powerful shocks that even small irregularities in the surface transmit at high speed.

He has also had to compensate for poor vision. His original nickname in San Francisco was, in fact, Doc Hazard, for he was once considered something of a Mr. Magoo in the water. Mark believes that his nearsightedness helped him develop good wave judgment—"It forced me to concentrate on patterns rather than data," he says—but concedes that when he started wearing contact lenses his surfing "improved a hundred per cent." He loses a lens every now and then in the water. Once, after losing a lens in a vicious wipeout, he felt something odd in his mouth and spat out the missing lens. Another chronic condition that affects his surfing is asthma; Mark has suffered from it since childhood. The worst attacks, which tend to come in the spring, sometimes actually keep him out of the water.

Mark, who grew up in Los Angeles, started surfing when he was ten. His parents had enrolled him in a junior-lifeguard program, and, on a field trip to Arroyo Sequit, a beach north of Los Angeles known to surfers as Secos, he paddled out on a lifeguard's board and rode his first wave. He was hooked. That summer, he subscribed to the magazine *Surfer*, festooned his bedroom with surf posters and decals, and bought every Beach Boys record. It was 1962, the Gidget-era surfing craze was hard upon the land, and Mark, along with ten million other American kids, was going to Surf City. However, he didn't want to get there by the normal, mass-fad route if he could avoid it. Although he had ridden that first wave at Secos on his feet, he did not start with standup surfing. He and his friends instead went in for bodysurfing and, later, bellyboarding and kneeboarding. "We had this arrogant idea," Mark says. "We thought the coolest thing was to surf without a board. A board just got between you and the wave. The board surfers looked down on us, literally, but we also looked down on them."

Mark's parents were divorced when he was thirteen. He lived with his mother, a former fashion model, but he and his father, a psychiatrist, remained close. Even when Mark was a teen-ager, he and his father were always together: golfing, fishing, hiking, camping, travelling up and down the coast. (They even hopped a freight train once.) The news that his father might have cancer—news that came while Mark was in pre-medical studies at the University of California at Santa Cruz—had a profound effect on Mark. He began to study cancer with an intensity that convinced many of his friends that his goal was to find a cure in time to save his father. As it turned out, his father did not have cancer. Mark kept on with his cancer studies. His interest was not, in fact, in oncology—in finding a cure—but in the field of cancer education and prevention. By the time he entered medical school, he was the director of a project called the Biology of Cancer, sponsored by the American Cancer Society; had created, with another student, a series of university courses on cancer; and had co-authored "The Biology of Cancer Sourcebook," the text for a course series that has since been offered to more than forty thousand students on some seventy-five campuses. While Mark was still in medical school he received a National Honors Citation from the American Cancer Society and was named a director at large on the board of directors of the California division of the American Cancer Society. He also co-wrote a second book, "Understanding Cancer," which

became a best-selling university text; it is currently in its third edition, with Mark, who has written a series of updates, now listed as the sole author. Although his medical specialty is family practice, Mark continues to lecture throughout the United States on cancer research, education, and prevention.

"The funny thing is, I'm not really interested in cancer," Mark says. "I'm interested in people's response to it. Heart disease—cardiovascular disease, stroke, arteriosclerosis, heart attacks, hypertension—kills three times as many people as cancer does. But if you ask people what they fear most the answer you hear most is cancer. And when someone actually has cancer it really strips away the bullshit. Akira Kurosawa made a great movie—'Ikiru,' which means 'To Live'—about a man who discovers he has a terminal cancer and who only then finally sets out to live. A lot of cancer patients and survivors report that they never really lived till they got cancer, that it forced them to face things, to experience life more intensely. What you see in family practice is that families just can't afford to be superficial with each other anymore once someone has cancer. Corny as it sounds, what I'm really interested in is the human spirit—in how people react to stress and adversity. I'm fascinated by the way people fight back, by how they keep fighting their way to the surface." Mark claws at the air with his arms. What he is miming is the struggle to reach the surface through the turbulence of a large wave.

The fact that San Francisco gets some of the best waves in California has been, at least until recently, a well-kept secret. Santa Cruz, a college town sixty miles south of the big city, is a surfing center, but only a handful of the thousands of people who surf there have ever surfed in San Francisco. When Mark started medical school, at the University of California at San Francisco, in 1975, he assumed that he would be constantly travelling back to Santa Cruz to surf. He was wrong.

There was a small crew of local surfers, most of them Sunset District homeboys, but the surf-based youth culture that flourishes in so many coastal towns and cities—there are said to be some five million surfers worldwide, a million and a half on the West Coast of the United States alone—has never taken hold in San Francisco. Indeed, native San Franciscans will tell you that there is no surfing in San Francisco. There is surf, of course, but the ocean, they say, is too cold and stormy for surfing. True, the ocean off San Francisco is often too stormy for learning to surf (the nearest beginner breaks are outside the city), which is the main reason the area has been so little known in surfing circles. A high proportion of San Francisco surfers learned their chops elsewhere—in Hawaii, Australia, or Southern California—and, like Mark, moved to the city only as adults. These newcomers, who tend to be professionals, remain distinct in some ways from the homegrown surfers, who tend to be working-class, but all have shared an interest in keeping the secret of San Francisco's great surf. And it was this obscurity—the unmappedness of Ocean Beach, especially—that, along with the size and quality of the waves, made it an ideal home break for Mark.

"Mark has this deep need to be different," Dr. Michael Rowbotham says. Rowbotham, a neurologist and surfer from Los Angeles, went through medical school with Mark. San Francisco, he says, with its vast tracts of *mare incognitum*, provided Mark—who when everyone else was surfing standing up was kneeboarding or bellyboarding or bodysurfing—with endless opportunities to be different: to surf previously unattempted spots, or previously unattempted conditions, in previously unimagined ways. "Making a place yours—that's a lot of what surfing is about," Mark says. As a teen-ager, he remembers, he used his surf travels as a mental-relaxation technique. "I would run my mind up the coast, surf spot by surf spot. I'd start somewhere down in Mexico, and then try to remember one moment, one wave, one detail of every place I had surfed, working my way north. By the time I was in

college, I'd surfed hundreds of places. Still, I'd sometimes get all the way to Santa Cruz. It was a great way to hit on secure, happy places inside myself."

Mark had, in other words, already made a lot of places his before he got to San Francisco. Yet he took on the city's surf on a new scale. Even in medical school, he found time to surf virtually every day. "I made a point of never scheduling an appointment with a professor on an outgoing tide," he says. He also made a point, whenever he was in the anatomy laboratory, which is on the thirteenth floor of a building at the U.C. San Francisco Medical Center, of getting up on the cadaver tables to check out the surf at

Ocean Beach, three miles distant but visible through the lab's upper windows. Often, the day's dissection had to be postponed until evening because of clean waves. He and Jessica eventually moved into an oceanfront apartment. Mark had always been prone to dream up rituals and rules to surf by—to generate a stream of postulates and hypotheses about waves and weather and surfing—but the freezing wilds of Ocean Beach gave his theorizing new range. He took to mapping its every sandbar, its every shift and subtlety.

Although U.C. San Francisco is one of the best medical schools in the country, and Mark was one of the top students in his class, there was no chance of Mark's becoming a "society doctor," Mike Rowbotham says. "Not with the way he looks and the way he insists on keeping large blocks of time free to surf." Mark did his family-practice residency at San Francisco General Hospital, and today he is an assistant clinical professor at U.C. San Francisco, a staff physician working with inner-city families at a clinic called the South of Market Health Center, and a specialist in cancer prevention and education at Summit Medical Center in Oakland. He also pulls one overnight shift a week at another local hospital and does a great deal of writing and editing, including a medical-advice column for *Surfer*, and lecturing. "But I do everything I can not to accept a speaking engagement out of town in January," Mark says. January is the best month for big, clean waves at Ocean Beach. When he can't manage a view of Ocean Beach on his daily rounds, he will try to catch a glimpse of the Golden Gate, to see if the surf is showing white against the cliffs on the north side. Because accurate surf prediction helps keep waves missed to a minimum, Mark is a passionate amateur meteorologist, and because the most important element of surf forecasting besides the obvious local variables, like tide and wind, is the weather out at sea, he carries a marine-weather radio with him in his van while he is on his rounds. Infrared satellite photographs of the West Coast decorate the walls of his and Jessica's apartment, and two satellite pictures clipped from newspapers, each showing huge North Pacific low-pressure systems that generated memorable swells—"January 9, 1983," Mark says dreamily, "and February 16, 1986"—are taped to the door of his study. Another newspaper photograph on the door shows a surfer on a wave, with the caption "Some Easterners think surfing is done with trick photography." I once read this caption out loud, and it reminded Jessica of a visitor from New York City who stood at their living-room window and, gazing out on a scene of fearsome, fifteen-foot Ocean Beach surf, said, "Now I see why they call it the Pacific. The ocean is much wilder back East."

Before the arrival of Europeans in the Pacific, surfing was practiced throughout Oceania—in Hawaii, Polynesia, New Guinea, even New Zealand. Captain James Cook, the British explorer, saw canoe surfing and bodysurfing in the Society Islands in 1777 and standup board surfing in the Hawaiian Islands in 1778. Cook was fascinated, and so were many of the traders, missionaries, and journalists who followed him, including Mark Twain and Jack London. In Hawaii, surfing had religious significance—after prayers and offerings, skilled craftsmen made boards from sacred koa or wiliwili trees—and it was practiced by

men and women, young and old, royalty and peasantry. As Leonard Lueras notes in "Surfing: The Ultimate Pleasure," the sport allowed for fashion statements; a visiting British sea captain, a cousin of Lord Byron, wrote that "to have a neat floatboard, well-kept, and dried, is to a Sandwich Islander what a tilbury or cabriolet, or whatever light carriage may be in fashion is to a young English man." When the surf was good, "all thought of work is at an end, only that of sport is left," wrote Kepelino Keauokalani, a nineteenth-century Hawaiian scholar. "All day there is nothing but surfing. Many go out surfing as early as four in the morning."

This was not what the Calvinist missionaries who began arriving in Hawaii in 1820 had in mind for the islanders as a way of life. Hiram Bingham, who led the first missionary party, which found itself in a crowd of surfers before it had even landed, wrote, "The appearance of destitution, degradation, and barbarism, among the chattering, and almost naked savages, whose heads and feet, and much of their sunburnt skins were bare, was appalling. Some of our number, with gushing tears, turned away from the spectacle." Twenty-seven years later, Bingham wrote, "The decline and discontinuance of the use of the surfboard, as civilization advances, may be accounted for by the increase in modesty, industry or religion." He was not wrong about the decline of surfing. Hawaiian culture had been destroyed, and the people decimated by European diseases; between 1778 and 1893, the Hawaiian population shrank from three hundred thousand to forty thousand, and by the end of the last century surfing had all but disappeared.

A few Hawaiians kept the sport alive during the early years of this century, and a young Irish-Hawaiian named George Freeth, whom Jack London had made famous as "a brown Mercury" in his book "The Cruise of the Snark," went to Southern California in 1907 to give public surfing demonstrations; he travelled at the expense of Henry Huntington, who wanted to publicize a new line to the beach on his Pacific Electric Railway. Freeth rode an eight-foot-long, two-hundred-pound redwood board, and later gave his "aquatic performances" at beaches up and down the coast. Surfing caught on in California in a small way, and it began to revive in Hawaii—particularly after Duke Kahanamoku won a gold medal for swimming at the 1912 Olympics, became an international celebrity, and began giving surfing exhibitions around the world.

The heavy, solid-wood boards in use before the Second World War allowed for little maneuvering. The emphasis was on perfect posture, long rides, and gentle breaks that could be ridden more or less straight toward shore. Duke Kahanamoku's thousand-yard ride at one of the "cloud breaks" off Waikiki is the totem story of this era. After the war, the handful of board-makers in Southern California began to experiment with new materials, like catalyzed resin, polyurethane foam, and fibreglass. The result was a dramatically lighter, more maneuverable surfboard and an array of new moves in the surf. The small circle of serious surfers began to grow and—in Southern California, at least—to spawn its own subculture, with vague links to the Beats. The cult hero of this generation among surfers was a Malibu based stylist named Mickey Dora. Dora surfed with consummate elegance, talked philosophy on the beach with Henry Miller, and scorned mainstream society with a dark, existential wit, making no apologies for a life that revolved purely around surfing.

In the late fifties a Los Angeles writer, Frederick Kohner, turned his daughter Kathy's stories about the Malibu beach crowd she hung out with into "Gidget," a trashy best-selling novel, which, in 1959, was made into "Gidget," a trashy successful movie, starring Sandra Dee and James Darren. The national craze, which had more to do with music, clothes, and sex than it did with the ocean, was launched. Hollywood cashed in with a flurry of "Gidget" sequels (and a "Gidget" television series), a string of "Beach Party" movies starring Frankie Avalon, Annette Funicello, and Don (Big Drop) Rickles, and, in 1964, "Ride

the Wild Surf," starring Tab Hunter, Shelley Fabares, and Fabian. The pop charts were full of would-be surf groups: the Ventures, the Beach Boys, Jan and Dean. Even Bo Diddley had to get wet ("Surfin' with Bo Diddley"). Surf fever ran high in landlocked areas, where it could do no harm, but it also sent hundreds of thousands of young fad lemmings rushing into the waves. Crowds became a problem at the better-known breaks. For those who had come before, it was the end of a golden age of unlimited waves with a few friends. That didn't stop stars like Dora, who took the invasion as bitterly as anyone, from trying to profit by it all: he stunt-doubled for Fabian in "Ride the Wild Surf."

Neither did all the schlock stop the growth of the subculture. Surfer, which started in 1960 as a surf-movie program, became within ten years a slick, professionally edited monthly with a circulation of nearly a hundred thousand. While Hollywood produced entertainments like "How to Stuff a Wild Bikini," hard-core surf films—gritty, plotless, low-budget—boomed. These films toured the known coasts, selling out high-school auditoriums, entrancing audiences with great surfing, and, above all, bearing the word about the avant-garde: the leading board builders, the top surfers, what kind of waves they were riding, and how they were riding them. In the late sixties, a confluence of design innovation and psychotropic drugs produced "the short-board revolution." Where the average surfboard in 1964 had been ten feet long and weighed thirty pounds, the average board in 1971 was six and a half feet long and weighed less than ten pounds. The evolution from the regal, straight-in style of the early modern surfers toward a more kinetic, sharp-cornered style accelerated fantastically with the arrival of short boards. In Australia, surfing had become a national pastime and aggressive surfing the only type permitted, and Australia's ascendancy to the dominant position in competitive surfing coincided with the emergence of short boards.

Twenty years into the short-board era, Mark Renneker and I leaf through surf magazines—there are at least a dozen now—in Wise's shop, shaking our heads. The photographs in the magazines depict sawed-off thicks in pink wetsuits flying through the air on garishly colored, skateboard-size boards. Often there is no wave in sight—just a splash of spray in the lower half of the picture to indicate that this "rad aerial" did begin on a wave. Mark and I are nonplussed. We belong to an earlier school—one in which the wave is not only important but, ideally, the main event. Where we come from, the goal is simply to ride fast, powerful waves with skill and grace, staying as close as possible to the breaking part of the wave. The finest moments are those spent riding "inside the tube"—that is, enclosed in the chamber that some waves form as they break. Hard turns, even gravity-defying maneuvers, are O.K. We ride high-performance boards. We have no truck with the long-board backlash that has developed in Southern California—defiant dinosaurs taking over certain nostalgia-inducing breaks on nine-foot boards, "hanging ten" and yelling "Cowabunga!" We just don't devalue the wave. Or wear pink wetsuits.

Mark and I paddle out at Ocean Beach on a clear, chilly day in early November. It's the first day of a small north swell, and the surf is confused—lumpy, harsh, inconsistent. Mark has convinced me that, before the waves have time to calm down and clean up, northwest winds—which, according to his weather radio, are already blowing twenty-five knots in the Farallon Islands, twenty miles offshore—will be here. Those winds, when they arrive, will wreck the waves completely, so this may be our only chance to surf this swell. Yes, Mark concedes, we are the only surfers in sight, but that's because the others are expecting it to get better later, on the outgoing tide. They don't know about the northwesterlies.

"Or maybe they have jobs," I pant.

"Jobs?" Mark laughs. "That was their first mistake."

It's late morning, and still nearly windless. My hands burn with cold, but, because there is a fierce current running, I find no opportunity to sit and warm them in my armpits; we must paddle constantly, even when there are no waves, just to stay in the same place off the beach. The four hundred square miles of San Francisco Bay drain and fill through the Golden Gate twice a day with the tide, generating tremendous side-coast currents along the nearby beaches. We are at the south end of Ocean Beach, a good four miles from the Gate, but we are being sucked north so fast that we are compelled to look only for rights—waves that, on a west-facing coast like California's, break from north to south—in order not to lose ground while we surf. The waves turn out to be better than they looked from shore, and we both get a series of short, fast rides on good-sized waves. Their lumpiness gives them odd, unexpected speed hollows. Mark comes flying out of one thick-muscle closeout (a wave that breaks all at once, leaving a rider nowhere to go) chattering about needing a longer board.

In the moments when the roar of the surf subsides, we can hear monkeys howling at the city zoo, behind the beach embankment. But really San Francisco might as well be in another hemisphere. Ocean Beach in the winter is a wilderness, as raw and red-clawed as any place in the Rocky Mountains. We can see traffic on the coast highway, but it's unlikely that the people in the passing cars see us. Many of them would undoubtedly say, if they were asked, that there is no surfing in San Francisco.

Ocean Beach is four miles long, ruler straight, and, except on the rare warm days, mostly deserted. Winos sprawl in the few small sun traps along the embankment; the homeless sometimes camp there briefly, before the wind and cold drive them away. At high tide, Korean fishermen in rubber boots wrestle with surf-casting rigs. Looking south from the Cliff House, at the north end of the beach, the first mile of shorefront abuts on the west end of the Richmond District—a less seedy version of the Sunset—and the west end of Golden Gate Park, which presents itself as a dense cypress windbreak. The Sunset starts below the park and extends southward for roughly three miles, to Sloat Boulevard, beyond which sandy bluffs begin to rise and the urban oceanfront—Ocean Beach—ends. This morning we paddled out from the base of Sloat Boulevard, and we are fighting the current to stay within sight of it. From the water, especially when the surf is big, the streets running inland become lineup markers—they tell you where you are. In the Sunset, they are named in alphabetical order, from north to south: Irving, Judah, Kirkham, Lawton, Moraga, Noriega, Ortega, Pacheco, Quintara, Rivera, Santiago, Taraval, Ulloa, Vicente, Wawona, and then the oddball, Sloat. You don't say you surf Ocean Beach—you surf Judah or Taraval or Sloat.

Although every block constitutes, for local surfers, a distinct "spot," with a distinct character, Ocean Beach is what surfers call a beach break, meaning that it has no point of land—no reef or river mouth or pier—to define it, and the shape of the waves therefore depends largely on the configuration of the offshore sandbars. That configuration changes constantly—with the tide, the swell, the season, the wind, and an infinite number of other factors, too subtle, too local, to have names. All ocean waves are too complex to predict in any detail, even in laboratory conditions, but beach breaks are, among surf spots, an especially unpredictable species, and Ocean Beach, which receives an unusual amount of groundswell, mainly from the North Pacific, and is also raked daily by great tidal currents, is as complicated a proposition as any surf spot I've seen. A generalization that is nonetheless safe to make is that the surf gets more intimidating as you move south. For that reason, Kelly's Cove, a relatively gentle break at the north end of the beach, and VFW's, a break off the end of Golden Gate Park, see many more surfers than the outscale wildness off Taraval does.

Mark can't resist a large, wrapping left. He takes off and, in a matter of seconds, rides halfway to Ulloa. I

catch the next wave, also a left, and am carried even farther north. Paddling back out, we are both driven still farther north by a set breaking south of us. We are now so far downcurrent that we decide to abandon Sloat for Taraval. The peak breaking over the sandbar at Taraval is shifty and sloppy, however, and we stop catching waves. A better peak seems to be breaking at Santiago. Mark has an idea: Let's quit fighting the current. When it is this bad on an incoming tide, it turns into the Sloat-Kelly's Express. Let's just ride it north, he says, surfing whatever we find. I am exhausted, and therefore agreeable. We stop paddling south, and soon the beach starts streaming past. It's a goofy, hapless feeling, letting the sandbars come to us, instead of struggling to reach a takeoff spot and stay there. Water flows off a sandbar, and can make it difficult to maintain position at the bar's outside edge, where waves will prepare to break, but the rushing, sinuous current is carrying us across all sorts of spots, at all sorts of angles, willy-nilly.

Mark, who loves half-uncontrolled experiments like this, provides a running commentary on the bars we're traversing. Here is where that great peak broke last year—at Outside Quintara. And this is the lineup on giant days at Pacheco: See that cross on the mountain? You have to keep it above the church. And here you can see that Noriega is starting to do something interesting: "On these pushy swells, it's not really breaking outside and it's not really breaking inside. The inside bar swings out here now, so that it's breaking in the middle, and peeling off in both directions."

Mark is right about the sandbars at Noriega. Surf is no longer breaking on the outside bars that we've been drifting among. We swirl slowly through a wide, waveless blue field. An otter pops up ahead of us, swimming on its back. It has a small, shiny red-brown head, with huge dark eyes. Otters aren't common at Ocean Beach; it's as if this one had been summoned by our peculiarly passive behavior. A certain quietism, a sort of poised patience, is actually essential to surfing. In that sense, it's like hunting. You watch, you wait, and your understanding of your quarry—of, in the surfer's case, waves—is inextricably linked with your physical skill, and thus with your performance. But we are overdoing patience here; the current is now carrying us out to sea. I suggest that we paddle toward shore. Mark reluctantly agrees to abridge our drifting experiment.

On the inside sandbar, as we continue our progress toward Judah, we find short, thick waves breaking with surprising power. I like the quick, steep drops, and catch three straight high-adrenaline rights before stroking into a head-high mistake. My board sticks for a moment in the wave's lip, and then I am launched into space. I try to get away from my board, but dare not dive straight down—the inside bar is shallow. I hit the water awkwardly, twist, and hit the bottom, softly, with one shoulder. I feel my board flash past, actually brushing my arms, which are over my face, in the moment before the wave lands on me. I get thoroughly thrashed, and finally surface, gasping, with what feels like several pounds of sand inside my wetsuit. I've been lucky—I could have been hurt. I scramble back out, head ringing, nose streaming. Mark is fifty yards south of me now. He has started surfing more cautiously. "When it's dredging over a shallow sandbar, that's when you break your neck," he often says. It's a paradox—that someone known for taking the most extreme risks is at the same time so prudent—but it's also true that Mark "makes" a higher percentage of his waves (that is, exits from the wave still on his feet) than any other surfer I know. He simply doesn't take off on waves that he doesn't believe he has an excellent chance of making, and once he commits himself to a wave he hardly ever makes a careless or ill-considered move.

We reconvene after Mark catches a right and I get a long left. As we paddle back out, he announces, "November is big and stupid." What he means is that the surf at Ocean Beach in November is often large but rarely well ordered. But before he can say more we get separated as we rush to avoid an

approaching set. A few minutes later, we are again in conversation range. Mark goes on, "The correspondences between what you see on the weather map and what actually arrives at the Beach aren't really established yet." Ten minutes later: "And the same thing is true in the spring. The transition from winter to spring isn't a function of the sandbars changing, the way a lot of people think, but of a change in the prevailing winds about a hundred miles offshore. Out there, heavy northwesterlies start to blow in February, and they tear up the big swells in the open ocean, causing them to show up here in odd fragments that strike the bars at skewed angles. When the clear correspondences between what you see on the weather map and what you see actually arrive at the Beach break down, that's springtime at the Beach."

The effort to understand the seasons is, among surfers, constant and occasionally contentious, but at Ocean Beach there is no disputing that winter is when the waves are best. There are great days in the fall, when the first north and west swells of the season meet the first offshore winds. Offshores—winds that blow from land to sea—are the wonder drug of surfing. Because they cross so little water before they reach the waves, they create no troublesome chop, and because they strike the waves from the front they don't force the waves to topple prematurely and haphazardly, the way onshores do, but instead delay their breaking, letting the power of a wave rise, gather, and concentrate in the crest before it can overcome the wind's resistance. Offshores thus make waves hollower (more concave) and cleaner (more regular) and faster. And yet the sum effect of offshore winds is greater than any of its parts. On a good day, their sculptor's blade, meticulous and invisible, seems to drench whole coastlines in grace. In San Francisco, the winter offshores start to blow after the first snowfall in the High Sierras. Fall surf benefits in the local estimation from the inevitable comparison with the months of fogbound, onshore slop that an Ocean Beach summer entails. And the first large swells of the season actually do arrive in November, often before the sandbars are ready to turn them into rideable surf. In December and January, though, the combination of huge winter storm swells and local beach and weather conditions frequently produces waves that beggar description.

Water temperatures range from the high forties to the mid-fifties; the air on winter mornings can be below freezing. Surfers wear full-length wetsuits all year round, usually with booties, sometimes with a hood and gloves. Hypothermia is, indeed, the greatest single hazard of surfing in San Francisco, particularly in bigger waves, when a broken ankle leash and adverse currents may oblige one to swim for hours. Under any circumstances, the cold is intimidating. The sea takes on a gelid hardness that makes falling waves feel as if they were made of concrete. The surface becomes difficult to penetrate—a painful problem when you need to escape a wave on short notice. "Ice-cream headache" can get so intense you think you're going to faint. Hands and feet lose sensation; I have often had to ask strangers to open my car door and put the key in the ignition, my own manual dexterity having been obliterated by a frolic in the surf. The passage of time itself is distorted: a couple of long sessions in cold water, hard winds, and big waves can make two days seem like two weeks. Mark has a theory: that the sense-deprivation involved in cold-water surfing can throw the body into a state resembling insulin shock, which causes a similar distortion of time. Mark also has a rule: "For every hour you surf in San Francisco in winter, add one hour of sleep." The rule has an exception: for Dead Man's, which has an especially ferocious current, Mark says, "Add two."

We're now coming up on VFW's, where the sandbars are a mess. We've drifted about three miles: Mark is delighted. But the tide is almost high; the current seems to be slackening. We've been out for at least two hours, my hands are numb, and no amount of mashing them under cold rubber wings will bring them back to life; I'm ready to go in. Mark wants to see if we can drift all the way to the Cliff House. I'm pleased that he persuaded me to come out—I know that for the rest of the day I'll feel the sweet,

subcortical rush of the more intense waves I rode, not to mention the deep calm that comes from being worked over, and chilled to the bone, and then having a hot shower—but I've got work to do. Mark is noisily scornful of this "excuse." While he plays Maynard G. Krebs, I feel like Hiram Bingham: "The decline and discontinuance of the use of the surfboard, as civilization advances . . ." But then I notice that we have stopped moving north. The windmill at the southwest corner of Golden Gate Park—a lineup marker when VFW's is big—has not moved, from our vantage point, for several minutes. Mark watches the windmill suspiciously. Finally, he says, "I never liked VFW's anyway," which is true, and we catch waves in.

We decide to hitchhike back to Sloat rather than walk. As we climb the embankment to the highway, Mark suddenly turns and says triumphantly, "Feel that? Here come the onshores." He is right. A sharp, dark wind line is already moving into the surf on the outside bars, tearing off the tops of the waves. "Those other guys blew it," Mark crows.

Mark and Jessica live on the top floor of a khaki-colored three-story building on the Great Highway. Across the street, next to the path to the beach, is a sign that reads, "Drownings occur annually due to surf and severe undertow. Please remain on shore.—U.S. Park Police." Mark and Jessica's garage is filled to the rafters with surfboards. The last time I was in there, I found ten boards, most of them still in use. There were three bright-orange "thrusters" (a three-fin design), all shaped by Tom Eberly, a board builder in Southern California. The Eberlys ranged in length from five feet eleven inches to seven feet—they were for smaller waves, and, judging from the amount of dirty wax on their decks (wax is rubbed on the deck for traction, usually before each outing), they had all seen a lot of action. Mark's favorite all-around board at the time was a pale-red ultra-light six-six thruster, shaped by Dennis Pang, of Hawaii. One half of its predecessor ("a truly great board," Mark said sadly), lime green but otherwise identical, was also in the garage; the other half had been lost at sea after an Ocean Beach wave lip split the board in two. A yellow six-two thruster completed the quiver of small-wave boards.

Then, there was a collector's item: a seven-foot single-fin, with pink rails and a yellow deck, shaped and originally ridden by Mark Richards, a four-time world champion from Australia. "It's like owning Jack Nicklaus's old golf clubs," Mark said. The Richards would be instantly recognizable to any reader of surf magazines. Mark Renneker hadn't ridden it in years.

Three boards built for bigger waves were also stored in the garage: a seven-eight thruster, an eight-foot thruster, and a seven-ten thruster shaped by Ken Bradshaw, a well-known big-wave rider. The Bradshaw had a number of notches, called "wings," in the rails, and a very narrow swallowtail. It was an unusually serious surfboard, and it had been built with Sunset Beach, an unusually demanding Hawaiian big-wave spot, in mind. Both halves of a cherished seven-four Bradshaw, shattered on a big day at Sloat, were also carefully stored—"for reference," Mark said.

The garage was so full of surfboards that five more boards were standing on their tails in the stairwell. Two were museum pieces: enormous round-nosed designs from before the revolution in shaping, in the late nineteen-sixties. Mark had almost never ridden them. Then, there was a wooden board. Virtually all modern surfboards are constructed of the same materials—a core of polyurethane foam wrapped in lightweight fibreglass—but this board, shaped by Bob Chatfield, of Santa Cruz, was made of teak, with a mahogany veneer. Mark had had it custom-built for surfing a favorite spot in Big Sur, and it was the best-looking board he owned—that was one reason it stood in the stairwell—but it was really too heavy for

high-performance riding. Finally, there were two boards for days of the kind that Mark likes to

call "epic." One was a nine-foot-six-inch single-fin, shaped by a legendary Hawaiian board builder named Tom Parrish. The board had been made for Otis Chandler, the former publisher of the Los Angeles Times. Chandler is a dedicated surfer, but when the Parrish was delivered he took one look at it and, according to Mark, said, "I will never ride a wave big enough to need that board." Mark was still waiting for Ocean Beach to present him with a wave big enough to need it. The other rhino chaser in the stairwell was a breathtaking ten-foot-six-inch Bradshaw. Mark had ridden it once, on a giant day at Sunset Beach, where he found that it cut straight through the chop on the face of the waves. For that reason, he called it the Slam Dancer, and he was counting on its extreme stability for his next attempt on the Potato Patch.

Mark's study overlooks the surf. The bookshelves are filled with medical textbooks ("Cancer Epidemiology and Prevention"), nature guides ("Mexican Birds"), books on the ocean, the weather, psychology, and anthropology, and hundreds of murder mysteries. On the walls are pictures of waves, and of Mark and friends surfing—in Mexico, Portugal, Hawaii, and Big Sur as well as in San Francisco. There are fading posters for old surf movies—"The Performers," "The Glass Wall." A collection of surf magazines, going back nearly thirty years, is carefully stacked and catalogued. Mark sometimes advertises to fill the few gaps that remain in his collection, which numbers in the thousands. The desk sits in front of an ocean-facing window, so that Mark, batting out his medical papers and articles, usually with punk rock blasting on the stereo, and the weather radio barking the latest buoy data, can keep an eye on the waves.

I leaf through old surf magazines while Mark talks to Bob Wise on the telephone. Wise is suffering from a rare blood disease, and he and Mark are talking about drugs that might allow him to quit taking steroids, which are demineralizing his bones. Mark is the "health adviser"—a term he prefers to "doctor"—to dozens of surfers in and around San Francisco, but Wise is probably his most demanding advisee. Because his disease is so rare that even many hematologists have never seen it before, he and Mark have had to do a great deal of research themselves. Few, if any, other surfers think to pay Mark for his medical help, but Wise has tried over the years to keep accounts straight by selling Mark surf gear—wax, wetsuits, boards—at cost. He has also procured, from an obscure company in Texas, oversized fins for one of Mark's big-wave thrusters.

Mark hangs up and announces that Wise now has in his shop exactly the new board I need. I didn't know I needed a new board; I like the one I've got. Mark is incredulous. How can I be content with just one surfboard? And a battered, secondhand, seven-foot single-fin at that! I don't know; I just can. I have, on occasion, owned two boards—while I was living in Australia, for instance, where used boards were cheap and I was surfing intensively—but usually I've stuck with one fast, versatile board. Mark takes this as another sign of my lack of seriousness about surfing, and in a sense he's right. Most surfers can discuss board-design subtleties for hours; I've always shunned such discussions. Mark's own interest in the subject is inexhaustible, and that is part of how he comes to own so many boards. He even tinkers with the features of the boards he owns—sliding fins backward and forward, if they happen to be adjustable, or trying out experimental "boomerang" fins—and claims to be able to feel, while surfing, the effects of every minute adjustment. I, meanwhile, believe that a hydrodynamic dinner plate would probably work just as well in most situations as the finest fin made. Things happen fast and unpredictably on a wave, and the effort to trace the success of one maneuver or another to some subtle feature of board design usually strikes me as vain. I'm willing to concede that, everything else being equal, a three-fin thruster turns better than a single-fin does. But I like my board. Anyway, I'm broke.

Mark sighs impatiently. He asks if I will be coming to the horror-movie double bill tonight in the Mission

District. He is a hardened horror-movie connoisseur, and he has got several other surfers into the habit lately. He calls it the San Francisco Men's Movie Club. They sit in the front row and cackle at the bad acting. I doubt if I'll be able to make it. Mark taps at the keyboard of his computer. He shakes his head. "You're funny," he says, finally.

What keeps the crowds away from Ocean Beach more than anything else—more than the cold, the currents, the size of the surf—is the sheer difficulty of paddling out, of getting from shore to the waves. Most surf spots have recommended routes; many have channels where no waves break. Ocean Beach has channels, but it is an essential part of its mysto beach-break unpredictability that the channels rarely stay put. You may stand on the embankment for hours, charting where the waves are breaking, and devising a surefire course—all the water rushing in has to return to sea somehow, and it will presumably dig a channel along the course it takes, where fewer waves will presumably break—and then rush to paddle out there, only to find conditions so quickly changed that you never get past the shore break. On smaller days, perseverance is usually rewarded in the end, but on bigger days a percentage—sometimes all—of those who try will be defeated, washing back up on the sand in advanced states of rage, relief, and exhaustion.

On bigger days, when you're looking out from the water's edge across a stepladder of six or seven walls of cold, growling, onrushing white water, the idea of paddling out actually carries with it a whiff of lunacy. The project looks impossible, like trying to swim up a waterfall. It takes a literal leap of faith to start. You throw yourself into the icy torrent and start plowing seaward. The waves, as they approach, sound like bowling balls rumbling down a lane, and then like the crashing of pins as they slam into and roll over your bowed head and shoulders, producing instant ice-cream headache. Long, strain-filled minutes pass, little or no progress is made, and the frisky, punishing waves come on and on. Your breathing turns to gasping, then rasping, and your mind begins to play ever-shorter loops, turning over the same half-nonsensical questions: Is virtue rewarded? Is it even recorded? The fact that surfers call the white water of a broken wave "soup" suddenly rankles. This soup is cold.

Meanwhile, underneath all this aimless, half-hysterical activity, your mind struggles to detect the underlying patterns in the surf. Somewhere—upcoast, downcoast, or perhaps just beyond this next sandbar—the waves may be weaker. Somewhere, the current must be running in a more helpful direction. The best available route would be obvious from almost any other vantage—from the embankment behind the beach, or from that pelican's airborne perspective—but from down in the maelstrom, where you sometimes spend more time underwater than out in the visible world, and often get just one foam-edged breath between waves, it merely dances cruelly in the imagination: the theoretical solution to an impossibly complex problem.

And when success comes, if it comes, and you find yourself outside, beyond the breaking waves, lolling in the improbable calm, your arms limp ("noodled"), your sinuses slowly draining, your vision slowly clearing, you try to recall exactly what it was that worked, where it was that you "punched through," what patterns proved to be real. This being Ocean Beach, the channel may move within minutes, but every addition to the intuition's map of the Beach's sandbars and caprices helps.

Before the advent of the ankle leash, in the early seventies, the paddle-out at Ocean Beach was worse. Then any wave that stripped your surfboard from your hands was the end of that paddle and the beginning of a very cold swim. You often battled out to the last line of breaking waves before a big set

took your board, or you fell off and lost it on your first wave of the day. Punishments are less severe today, but the paddle-out remains a great equalizer. A world-champion surfer may be subjected, on a difficult day, to the same humiliations as a surfer of middling or no talent; hence, perhaps, the infrequent appearances of world-champion surfers at Ocean Beach. Luck always plays a role, but it's ultimately secondary to local knowledge, paddling skill, strength, endurance, dauntlessness, and the ability, above all, to present the least possible resistance to obstreperous walls of soup. Mark excels in each of these categories—and also in sheer stubbornness. That is how he comes by his reputation for being able to get out at Ocean Beach when no one else can. "Doc's like Moses," Edwin Salem once told me. "The oceans just part wherever he goes."

Edwin and I were out at Sloat when he said that. It was a cold late-winter morning; there was no one else out. The surf was powerful but mediocre. Edwin and I had both got pounded while paddling out—hence our conversation about someone who has suspiciously good luck pushing through—and we were sitting outside catching our breath. The smell of fresh doughnuts drifted across the water from a bakery near Wise's shop. On the horizon, a container ship was steaming toward the Gate. Although Edwin, who is thirty-two, was born in Argentina, he learned to surf in San Francisco. He later returned to Argentina. As we began paddling back in toward the takeoff area, gliding watchfully over the swells, I asked Edwin about the surf in Argentina. He laughed. "After this place, I couldn't believe how easy it was to surf there," he said. "The water was so warm! The waves were so mellow! There were girls on the beach!"

On a very big day, the city itself looks different. The streets and buildings seem glazed and remote, the lineaments of an exhausted sphere: land. The primal action is at sea. One January morning in 1984, Ocean Beach was so big that as I drove the few blocks from my apartment to the coast San Francisco might have been a ghost town. It was a dark, ugly day, drizzling and cold. The ocean was gray and brown and extremely ominous. There were no cars at Kelly's or VFW's. I headed south, driving slowly, so that I could watch the surf. It was impossible to say how big it was. Wave measurement is an inexact science at the best of times, and there was nothing—no one—out there to provide any scale. It was twenty feet, at least, probably bigger.

Sloat looked totally out of control as I pulled into the parking lot. The waves breaking farthest out were barely visible from the shore. Paddling out was unthinkable. Fred Van Dyke, an early San Francisco surfer who moved away to Hawaii, where he became a renowned big-wave rider, once wrote that surfing thirty-foot waves at Waimea Bay, on the North Shore—the North Shore of Oahu, in Hawaii, is the big-wave capital of the surfing world—was easier than surfing fifteen-foot Ocean Beach. Van Dyke mentioned only the paddle-out, but others who have ridden both Ocean Beach and the North Shore mention other factors. "The way the waves on a big day at the Beach can suddenly shift fifty or a hundred yards down the coast—that doesn't happen on the North Shore," Mike Rowbotham says. "On the North Shore, the spots are mapped out. There are established lineup markers. There are reefs and boils, and plenty of people around who know the spots cold. You're not out there by yourself among these shifting mountains of water."

There was no wind at Sloat, but the largest waves were feathering slightly anyway, from the sheer volume of water they threw forth as they broke. And the explosions of soup that followed were unnaturally white. They looked like small nuclear blasts; watching them made my stomach churn. When Mark phoned me half an hour before, he had said simply, "Sloat. Be there or be square." But Sloat was out of the question. Mark pulled into the parking lot a few minutes after I did. He turned to me and

opened his eyes wide—his way of saying that the waves were even bigger than he had thought—and cackled darkly. We agreed to look at the surf on the south side of a temporary construction pier that the city had built half a mile below Sloat. As we were leaving, Edwin Salem pulled into the lot. Mark had also roused Edwin at dawn. The three of us drove into the dunes south of Sloat.

The swell was coming from the northwest—it was being generated by a major storm in the Aleutians—so the pier, which was four or five hundred yards long, was significantly diluting the power of the surf to its immediate south. The waves there looked barely half the size of the gargantuan stuff on the north side, and almost manageable. There was still the question of getting out, however. People sometimes paddled out underneath the pier—a regular rip current, carrying water that the surf had piled up near the beach back out to sea, had dug a deep trench under the pier, so that waves rarely broke there. But it was nasty under the pier. There were loose cables dangling, and huge iron sheets sticking up at odd angles under the water, not to mention the pilings themselves, which were closely spaced and did not budge when the surf slammed you into them. I had paddled out under the pier a few times, on days when getting out at Sloat had been beyond me, but I had sworn not to do it again. In any case, even paddling out under the pier looked impossible this morning. Broken waves were rumbling through the pilings like small avalanches through an iron forest. The only non-lethal way to get out today would be to sneak past the guard on the construction project, run out on the pier, and jump off the end, which was safely outside the surf.

“Let’s do it,” Mark said. The three of us were now sitting in his van—a brawny, battered, trek-outfitted 1975 Dodge—parked on a dirt road just south of the pier. No one had said anything except “Oh, my God!” and “Look at that!” for ten minutes. I had absolutely no desire to go surfing. Fortunately, my board was inadequate for these conditions; even Edwin’s eight-foot “gun” didn’t look big enough. Mark had two big-wave boards, both over nine feet, with him. He said that one of us could use one of them. “This is why I don’t own a board over nine feet,” Edwin said. He gave a nervous laugh. In fact, this was why most surfers didn’t own a board over eight feet: it might raise the question someday of actually going out in conditions that required that much surfboard. Once, in Wise’s shop, I had heard a surfer mutter, as he and his friends studied a ten-foot gun on display, “This one comes with a free pine box.” The market for boards that serious was minuscule.

Mark jumped out of the van, went around to the side door, and began changing into his wetsuit. For the first time since I’d moved to San Francisco, I was ready to refuse to go out, and Mark seemed to realize it. “Come on, Edwin,” he said. “We’ve surfed bigger waves.”

They probably had, too. Mark and Edwin had a pact, informal but fierce, having to do with surfing big waves. They had been surfing together since they met, in 1978, in Argentina. After Edwin moved to San Francisco to live with his mother, Mark and Edwin became friends. They surfed together often, and Mark started taking an interest in Edwin’s welfare: counselling him about how to get along in the United States, encouraging him to go to college. When Edwin passed his first semester of junior college, Mark took him out for lunch to celebrate. Edwin treasured Mark’s foster-paternal guidance, which came to include a running pep talk on the subject of big-wave surfing. Over time, Mark persuaded Edwin that he was capable of surfing much larger waves than he thought he was. Edwin had the physical equipment for big waves; he was powerfully built, a strong swimmer, a good surfer. He also had steady nerves, and a major endowment of youthful blitheness. Finally, there was the fact that he trusted—even worshipped—Mark. That made him an ideal apprentice in a program that, over several winters, had got him out into bigger and bigger—eventually, into some very big—waves. Mark and Edwin’s pact consisted mainly of an unspoken understanding that Mark would not take Edwin out on days when he would probably drown. It

was the cumulative intensity of the situations they had survived together that gave their pact its fierceness.

Edwin was shaking his head lugubriously, unzipping his down-filled jacket. In most company, Edwin would make an unlikely Sancho Panza—he is over six feet tall, with curly black hair, merry green eyes, and square-jawed, leading-man looks—but it struck me, watching the two of them clamber into their wetsuits, that Mark could make any companion seem like a sidekick.

While Edwin fiddled with a leash that he was transferring from his board to the board Mark was lending him—a hefty, pale-yellow nine-six single-fin gun—Mark showed me how to use his camera. Then he took the board that he would ride—a magnificent, narrow, nine-eight three-fin—out on the dunes, methodically rubbed wax on the deck, and then did a series of deep yoga stretches, all without taking his eyes off the surf.

“Why do we do this?” Edwin asked me. His nervous laugh rose and fell.

Finally, Edwin was ready, and the two of them set off, trotting lightly past the guard’s trailer, disappearing behind stacks of mammoth sewer pipe, then reappearing a minute later out on the pier, still jogging—two lithe silhouettes, their big boards dramatic against a whitish sky. Beyond the pier I could see waves breaking off Sloat where I had never seen them break before. Beyond Sloat, the ranges of gray-beige swells and white walls were a scene out of my surfing nightmares. The waves scared me even as I sat, warm and dry, in the van. I was scared, too, for Mark and Edwin. The cardinal rule of safe surfing is that one should never surf alone. But the rule is all but useless at Ocean Beach when the surf is big, because there are usually no deep-water channels from which those who are paddling out can see what is happening to those in the impact zone. In my experience, there had rarely been anyone in sight, let alone in a position to help, when things got heavy. Today, even south of the pier, everything inside the area where the biggest waves were breaking was impact zone. If either of them got into trouble, Edwin and Mark would be of no use to each other.

At the end of the pier, they climbed down a ladder, flopped on their boards, and started paddling back toward shore. Their approach gave scale to the waves, which turned out to be less monstrous than I’d imagined. When Edwin quickly took off on a meaty left, it stood up about three times his height. The wave was mud-brown and hungry-looking; I started snapping pictures. Edwin pulled into it well, but the wave suddenly lined up all the way to the pier, fifty yards north, and he was forced to straighten off. The soup exploded and engulfed him. A moment later, his board came cartwheeling out of the white water; his leash had snapped. The waves were breaking close to shore—there was no outside bar on the south side of the pier for several hundred yards—and Edwin washed in to the beach in a couple of minutes. He came chugging up the dunes, and he grinned when I told him that I’d taken several shots of his ride. “It’s not too hairy out there, I don’t think,” he said. “Kind of closed out, maybe.” He wanted to borrow the leash from my board. I gladly gave it to him. The waves looked more than kind of closed out, and it was not getting any warmer—the air temperature was in the forties—and I still didn’t feel like surfing.

While Edwin started back out to the pier, I noticed a tremendous set breaking on an outside bar perhaps two hundred yards to the north. With people in the water, it was now possible to say that Sloat was indeed twenty feet plus. But the set on the bar near the pier was more than gigantic—it was also phenomenally violent. The waves seemed to be turning themselves inside out as they broke, and when they paused they spat out clouds of mist air that

had been trapped inside the truck-size tubes. I had never seen anything like it before, even on the North Shore: twenty-foot spitting tubes. Edwin was gesturing to Mark, trying to show him where a set on the horizon on the south side seemed to be planning to break. The thunder of the waves under the pier drowned out the roar of the larger waves farther away, and Edwin never glanced north, where the view would have stopped him cold.

Mark caught a couple of peaky ten-foot rights, both of which he made. I didn't have a good angle on the rights for shooting pictures, though. And, photographically speaking, the situation south of the pier began to deteriorate after Edwin got back out. It started raining in earnest, and Mark and Edwin, whom I could barely see through the mist, caught no waves for half an hour. I stowed Mark's camera, locked his van, and went home.

Shortly after I left, Edwin told me later, he caught another left. He made this one, but the following wave, a fifteen-foot peak that came crashing through the pier, caught him inside. His leash snapped again, but this time he did not wash in to the beach. Instead, he was seized and carried by a powerful current straight into the pier. Terrified, he fought his way through the pilings, and came out unhurt on the north side. But there the current turned seaward, and began to carry Edwin toward the outside bar—the same bar where I had seen twenty-foot tubes turning inside out and spitting. Edwin swam toward shore, but the current was far stronger than he was. He was already hundreds of yards offshore, weak with panic—but still south of the killer sandbar—when a freak fifteen-foot, deep-water set broke outside him. These were much weaker waves than the ones breaking where he was bound, so Edwin stayed on the surface and let them hit him. The set washed him to the inside edge of the rip. There he managed to swim into the path of the soup rumbling in from the killer bar, which washed him farther inside. When he reached the beach, somewhere near Sloat, he was too weak to walk.

Mark found him there. Edwin was too shaken up to drive, so Mark drove him home. I don't know whether he mentioned to Edwin what he had been doing while Edwin was fighting for his life in the water and then lying gasping on the sand, but Mark later told me that he had grown bored with the long lulls south of the pier and had paddled through to the north side. He had stayed outside the killer bar, but had caught a couple of gigantic waves at Sloat, he said, before heading back south to look for Edwin. He had been worried after he found the board he'd lent Edwin somewhere south of the pier, and very relieved when he finally found Edwin himself. Edwin, after Mark took him back to the apartment he shared with his mother, stayed on land for several days. He surfed little the rest of that winter, and I've never seen him out in very big waves again.

I once asked Edwin if he had ever seen Mark scared. Edwin thought awhile, and finally said, "Once. In Argentina. We were on a train, and he seemed like he was scared of the cops, and of the Army. He had good reason to be scared, too. They were incredibly dangerous, and Doc could sense it. He could sense the repression."

When Mark talks about surfing big waves, he as often as not talks about how stress releases adrenaline, increases galvanic skin response, causes the eyes to dilate for greater acuity of vision, and causes the liver to release certain chemicals that increase endurance, certain other chemicals that decrease the perception of pain, and certain yet other chemicals that enhance fast-muscle fibres. This is not how other surfers talk about big waves. Mark says things like "Breath-holding duration is inversely proportional to energy expenditure, which means oxygen consumption." He gives the impression, in other words, that he

actually knows what is going on physiologically in situations of abject terror—that he knows, say, what it really takes in the way of oxygen denial to cause a blackout. This scientific approach to the subject is, I think, essential to his ability to control fear in big surf.

Small-wave surfing and big-wave surfing are, in Mark's words, "like different sports. The timing is completely different—the distances, the emotions, the objectives." Actually, only a tiny percentage of surfers ride very big waves. Although the reasons for that seem obvious, Mark believes they're unfounded. Just as people are more afraid of cancer than of heart disease, despite the fact that heart disease kills many more people, surfers are more afraid of big waves than of small waves, despite the fact that small, crowded waves injure and kill many more surfers than big waves do. Still, big waves are scary, and the bigger they are the scarier they are.

And yet it is true that on big days at Ocean Beach the biggest waves are not necessarily the scariest waves. Mark believes that the most dangerous place at Ocean Beach is the inside bar around Quintara and Pacheco in February and March. The inside bar is a shallow sandbar that often forms about halfway between the shore and the outside lineup. Soup from the waves breaking on the outside bar "backs off," leaving the swell to stand up and break again on the inside bar. The waves on the inside bar tend to be not tall but terribly thick, and they can harbor a fantastic concentration of violence. Powerful seaward currents suck you onto the bar and, in winter, after a terrifying wave or two, usually drag you off, light-headed and choking, into deeper, safer water. But when the current that carries you to safety stops running—this has something to do with the flattening of the beach in the spring, Mark thinks—there forms what Mark calls "the Hole." "You can't go in and you can't go out," he says. "The bar becomes this maelstrom that sucks you toward it, then blasts you backward with every wave. You never get close to the trough behind the bar. It takes all your strength to dive under the waves, fight back to the surface, get a breath, and dive again. And the whole time you never move. You're just right there in the impact zone. That's the Hole."

Mark can describe a desperate struggle on the inside bar ("I could feel my body going to sleep") and its aftermath ("I was off kilter all day; I was nauseated") in metaphors that convince. He knows that a long hold-down underneath a wave automatically produces in the mind "about a thousand different great reasons to go in." He can even talk from what sounds like experience about what it feels like to panic in big waves: "Strength just drains out of you, like gas out of a hole in a tank." All these observations, of course, undermine his blithe suggestion that surfing big waves is safe.

But Mark also talks about the ocean's behavior in extreme conditions in the same scientific way that he talks about fear. When I think of him trapped on the inside bar, I imagine him formulating theories about how the Hole works, or perhaps refining his ideas about what really signals the transition from winter perfection to spring thuggishness at Ocean Beach. I once heard him say, in a college lecture on cancer prevention, "The goal is to replace fear with understanding. Fear is paralyzing; understanding facilitates."

When I asked Mark about his ability to keep his wits about him in big surf, to be timing wave intervals in situations where other surfers are struggling with panic, he shrugged, and offered a theory: "I've been taking hits of pure adrenaline all my life, through my asthma inhaler. So maybe I'm used to those giddy jolts that you get in acute, life-threatening situations like big waves. Maybe the fluttery sensations of the adrenal gland opening don't bother me the way they do most people."

Bob Wise says, "The only thing different about big-wave riders is that they can hold their breath longer than other people." This might be a satisfying theory for surfers wondering why they cannot handle

bigger waves, but it doesn't hold in Mark's case: his lung function is permanently compromised by his asthma. On bad days, and on some big days, and on all big days when he is going out alone, he takes his asthma inhaler out in the water with him, carrying it in his wetsuit. He regularly tests his own pulmonary capacity on something called a spirometer, and he has been known to exult when his forced expiratory volume goes over eighty per cent of his forced vital capacity. Where most people see little beyond primal horror when they get very low on air, Mark sees bronchial plugs and carbon-dioxide buildup. It isn't that he doesn't understand the emotions associated with suffocation. "Faintish—paroxyic—jolting—fatiguish pangs of fear," Mark once wrote, describing an asthma attack. "Everything I see becomes a hellish, deadened autism. Asthma is Hell." Mark simply understands the many gradations between being a bit out of breath and being seriously out of breath. Indeed, much of asthma, he says, is psychosomatic. "Every February, when the great swells stop, my chest immediately tightens up."

Of course, no amount of scientific understanding gets you down the face of a big wave. (Isaac Newton don't surf.) In Mark's case, a lifetime of practice, physical courage, and simple athletic skill also figure. He benefits, moreover, from a fair share of monkey-see, monkey-do, for he spends a couple of weeks on the North Shore each winter. Besides being an occasion to ride big, famous waves and to order surfboards from top-flight shapers, this annual trip is his chance to see the best big-wave surfers in the world go about their business. There are a handful of surfers, most of them Hawaiian, who on certain serendipitous days manage to ride very big waves in ways that expand all previous notions of what is possible. These breakthroughs occur far more often on the North Shore than anywhere else, and Mark usually returns to San Francisco inspired, keen to apply to the wild obscurity off Ocean Beach the advanced techniques being developed in the Hawaiian spotlight. His technical ardor is also, however, palpably artistic. He is helplessly drawn to the wave face, like the painter to the canvas, to write his name, again and again. Mark is not the Picasso of surfing—he doesn't have that order of talent—but he does have that order of passion, and much originality.

Geoff Booth, an Australian physician, journalist, and surfer, says, "Mark definitely has the death wish in him—some extreme driving force, which I really think only a handful of people in the world would understand. I've met one other person who had it—José Angel." José Angel was a great Hawaiian big-wave surfer who disappeared while diving for black coral off the island of Maui in 1976. "Angel was quite low key," Booth says. "He was completely rational. But he really had an aura. You could just see that he had this extraordinary drive, this lust—this deep, legitimate desire for absolutely huge surf."

Edwin's theory is that Mark is driven to surf big waves by the rage and futility that he feels when his patients die. Mark says that's ridiculous. Edwin's other theory is Freudian. (Edwin, remember, is from Argentina, where psychoanalysis is a middle-class religion.) "Obviously, it's erotic," he says. "That big board's his prick." I haven't run that one past Mark yet.

On a cold, sunny January morning at Sloat, with half a dozen people out in eight-foot, high-tide glass, I'm on shore, warm and dry and taking pictures, hors de combat since tearing up my ankle in a free fall at Dead Man's two weeks before. The peak shifts south, taking the crowd along with it, and my subjects dissolve in a glittering field of light. Although I'm comfortable where I am, slumped in the passenger seat of Mark's van, I should move south with them. I drag myself into the driver's seat, start the engine, and feel, suddenly, like a kid wearing his dad's overcoat the sleeves fall to my knees, the hem brushes the floor. Mark is actually not much bigger than I am—a couple of inches taller, perhaps—but the seat feels strangely vast, even the steering wheel seems oversized, and the van itself feels less like a car than like

some high-bridged, sure-ruddered freighter as I steer it through the puddles and potholes of the Sloat parking lot. From the driver's seat, the van, its bed stacked high with beloved surfboards, seems suffused with a great, big-cat-stretching sense of power, of rangy well-being and good health. From this surf-rinsed, king-of-beasts view of the world, I think, I, too, might be inclined to evangelize.

That evening, Dr. Renneker sits cross-legged on his bed at home, watching the weather on TV while fielding a steady barrage of phone calls. What will it be like tomorrow? Do the buoy data from Point Arena justify a late-night run up to Mendocino County? Who got the biggest wave out there today? What about a movie tonight? Should "The Terminator" be admitted to the Men's Movie Club's all-time Top Ten list? Who is the most improved surfer at the Beach this winter? Mark both asks and answers these questions, but the formulations are all his. The callers are mainly local surfers. Most know each other but are friends only insofar as they connect through Mark. He teases, cajoles, and exhorts them, effortlessly issuing edicts on waves, weather, movies. The award for Most Improved Surfer is his invention, naturally, and he alone will decide who deserves it, but I can think of several guys who, even if they were to scorn it publicly, would privately treasure it. Mark loves to spin his myths of guts and glory, and many a surfer finds his way into their web. Edwin says, "If you want to hang out with Doc, you've got to play Doc's games."

Mark, still on the phone, laughs raucously, then makes a disgusted face. "Another one bites the dust," he says. "You know the rule about guys getting married: their readiness to ride big waves goes down one notch immediately. And it goes down another big notch with each kid. Most guys with three kids won't go out in waves over four feet!"

I'm reminded of what Mark said to Mike Rowbotham when Rowbotham announced that he was getting married and suggested that Mark and Jessica make it a double ceremony. "You paddle out," Mark said. "And if I see you get a good wave I'll come out." This is what surfers say to each other when they don't like the look of the waves. It neatly staved off Rowbotham's suggestion. It said nothing, though, about Mark and Jessica. I once asked Mark why they didn't get married. We were standing in a group of surfers; the others fell silent. Mark paused, then said, "I don't know her well enough yet." He chortled, giving a nasal yip that he and Jessica do identically. They had been living together, at that point, for thirteen years. The truth was that Mark was ferociously devoted to Jessica—they were more married than most married couples I know.

Rowbotham, after finishing medical school, moved to Boston to do his residency in neurology. Mark never tired of expressing his astonishment that any surfer would choose to live in Boston, so far from decent waves. But Rowbotham's move made sense to me, quite apart from professional necessity. During the years when he and Mark were constant companions, the same surfers who had given Mark the nickname Doc Hazard began referring to Rowbotham as Mini-Hazard.

It's decided: the Men's Movie Club is going to see "Friday the 13th Part V." Mark can't believe I'm not interested. How can I not be interested in sitting in the front row of some rank downtown theatre with a bunch of middle-aged guys in aloha shirts and howling as the movie blood splatters? I can't explain it. I know: I'm funny.

But then, a few weeks later, Tim Bodkin's wife, Kimberly, lets me know where I really stand. It's a fine spring morning, and I'm waxing my board on the sidewalk in front of her place on the Great Highway. Several surfers, also summoned by Mark, are already heading through the Taraval tunnel. Kimberly has her infant son on her hip. She's bouncing him lightly in the sunshine. (Mark has already predicted that

Tim will stop surfing big Sloat next winter.) "So is the whole Doc Squad going out?" she asks me.

"The what?"

"The Doc Squad," she says. "Don't tell me you haven't heard of it. You're a charter member."

It's a very big late-winter day at VFW's. Tim Bodkin and Bill Bergerson—Peewee—are the only people out. From the beach, the sea is just a blinding, colorless sheet of afternoon glare, intermittently broken by the black walls of waves. Mark was out earlier. When he came in, he called it ten to twelve feet and the northbound current "a killer." A light northwest wind has come up since he left, marring the surface and rendering the waves a notch more dangerous and difficult to ride. Bodkin and Peewee are catching few waves. Most of the time, they're invisible in the glare. The waves they do manage to catch are all massive lefts, breaking on an outside bar I have rarely seen break and have never before seen rideable. I don't normally think of VFW's as a big-wave spot. On small, clean days, it's usually the most crowded stretch of the Beach. But this is the kind of day when Bob Wise says he gets a lot of phone calls from guys asking hopefully, "Is it small?" And when he tells them, "No, it's huge," they suddenly remember all the business they have in far-flung parts of the Greater Bay Area.

Eight or ten surfers watch from the seawall, nervous and grumpy. All seem to agree that the wind has ruined the surf, that there's really no reason to go out now. An unusual amount of profanity—unusual even for surfers—is being used to discuss the waves, the weather, the world. And then Edwin, who has been silently watching the ocean from behind mirrored sunglasses, erupts. "I have an idea," he announces. "Let's form a support group. I'm not going out there, because I'm scared to go out there. Why don't we all just say that? 'I'm not going out there, because I'm scared to go out there.' Come on, Domond, you say it."

Domond, a noisy tough who works in Wise's shop when he's not driving a taxicab, turns away in disgust. So Edwin addresses himself to another homeboy, known as Beeper Dave, but he also turns away, grumbling and shaking his head. Everybody then ignores Edwin, who just laughs easily and shrugs.

"Set," somebody growls. All eyes swing to the horizon, where the blazing sheet of the sea is beginning to lift in sickeningly large gray lines. "Those guys are dead."

In the spring and summer, when the surf at Ocean Beach nearly always stinks, Mark heads south, to Big Sur, where his favorite spot is a reef break known as Fuller's. Fuller's is on a wild stretch of coast where west and south swells—California's summer swells—hit with unusual, open-ocean force. During a good swell, Mark will camp in his van for as long as it lasts, in a precarious turnout on Highway 1 that looks directly down on Fuller's, some seven hundred feet below. He gets up at dawn to check the waves. From the road the pattern of approaching swells is wonderfully clear—the peaky scallops of a west swell, the great stone walls of a south, silently lifting the kelp beds as they advance—but it never looks as big as it actually is. If conditions are likely to improve, Mark may curl up in his van all morning, reading a murder mystery or a medical paper, stirring his tea with a tiny fin from one of his thrusters, keeping an eye on the surf. When the waves begin to clean up, and he heads down the trail, his board under one arm, he wears a big canvas glove on his board-carrying hand—for protection against the poison oak that clogs the

trailside. He carries a backpack stuffed with wetsuit, sunblock, food, beer, a spare leash, a spare fin, duct tape, a book, a knife. As he descends, the waves seem to change—growing, gathering detail, shifting with each shift of perspective. If a good set rolls through, his step quickens. At the bottom of the trail, he turns and hikes north along a narrow, bouldered beach to the base of a high, white, wispy waterfall, where he buries two cans of beer in the cold stream. He changes into his wetsuit, studying the surf from the low, dramatic angle of the left-shoulder shore break, then begins his series of stretches.

The last time I surfed Fuller's, it was big and clean, but I had a bad time. From the water, the waves make much less sense than they do from the mountain (the mountain, on the other hand, becomes, once you paddle out, a magnificent vertical triptych, with rocky, waterfall-threaded scree below, a band of arid, delicately colored brush in the middle panel, and a paradisaical vision of golden grass and redwood groves rising into the sky), and I was having trouble lining it up. I had been travelling—working, to Mark's horror—and hadn't surfed in several weeks, so my paddling was weak, and the lost half stroke kept betraying me as I misjudged shifting peaks or got tangled in the kelp. Mark, meanwhile, was having a great time. "This kelp is nothing," he said. "Last year, one huge day, it started breaking out in the middle of the kelp bed. That was heavy. One year, the bed got so thick the herons started standing on it. They were walking across it! You could practically lie down on it! This year, it's so sparse it's letting in the wind chop."

My real problem wasn't the kelp, however, or my paddling, but the crowd. It was the second day of the swell, word was out, and there had been at least a dozen people in the water all day. This was not the sort of edgy, anonymous, L.A.-freeway crowd where the hassling is silent and vicious and fights are always threatening to break out. In fact, everybody seemed to know everybody else, and spirits were conspicuously high. They just weren't about to let anybody they didn't know have any waves if they could help it. It was a strange crowd—strange because it seemed to be an even mixture of grizzled Big Sur craftsmen and rich brats down from their parents' villas in Carmel, with only Fuller's and a certain amount of outlaw attitude in common. The crowd was older and more skillful than the California average. Still, it reminded me, unhappily, of how little I normally liked my fellow-surfers. The superciliousness, self-absorption, and hostility to strangers among the Fuller's crew were highlighted, perhaps, by the beauty and drama of the place, but they were not unusual. This was a disjunction—between the natural-aesthetic glories of surfing and the ugly chauvinism of many surfers—that had distressed me since I was a kid. The patch of unconsciousness where surfing and I had met down the years helped conceal, among other things, my disaffection—my alienation from other surfers.

Of course, my high-minded distress would have been immaterial if I had been holding my own there at Fuller's. But I kept getting outpaddled, and snubbed, and the best wave I caught all morning—a beautiful double-overhead left, from the deepest part of the peak—was ruined by a local hotshot who grimly spun around and dropped in on me, delaying his first turn just long enough to stuff me under a lip, the impact of which made my ears ring for an hour. I was reduced to riding the inside, the scraps, to drifting on the shoulder watching others rip the cracking silver-green caverns of the sets.

"That board's too slow," Mark said, churning past me. I was actually riding the thruster that he had finally persuaded me to get. But Mark had recently started saying that I needed another board—a longer, narrower thruster—for bigger waves. I watched him sprint-paddle toward the peak, hooting down the line at a burly local who was tearing apart a tricky, looping white-water left. Mark was on good terms with the Fuller's crew. Among the few intrepid surfers who ventured down here from San Francisco or Santa Cruz, only two, I had heard, had ever been really accepted by the locals. Mark had sealed his status by paddling out on days when even the most stout-hearted natives stayed on the beach.

The other honorary Fuller's local was Peewee. He had been at Fuller's the day before, carving immaculate lines in big, lumpy, disorderly rights. Although Mark had been predicting, on the strength of the reports on his marine-weather radio, that the swell would clean up today, Peewee had not stayed the night. He had said he had to go to work. Peewee was a job steward in the carpenters' union. When I had seemed indecisive about whether to stay or go, he had said dryly, "Better stick around. Doc's always right."

Things didn't improve that afternoon. The wind came up, and a nasty little northwest cross-chop began to make its way through the kelp. I finally just paddled in, rinsed off in the waterfall, drank one of the stream-chilled beers, and took a nap behind a windbreak of boulders. At last, Mark came in, and we staggered up the trail in the twilight. On the highway, among a scatter of trucks and vans, shivering surfers dressed, drank beer, smoked dope, hooted. Mark went off to talk to somebody. From the passenger seat of his van I watched him disappear into the gloom. I remembered what Edwin had said when I asked if he had ever gone along on one of Mark's surf-camping trips to Mexico. He said, "No. I couldn't handle it, being someplace where I would have no idea what's happening, where I'd have to depend on Doc for everything. It's bad enough here in the city." I stared into the darkness settling on the ocean below, trying to see what the surf was doing now. Fuller's, I thought, was not a place that I had ever made mine.

And surfing was no longer where I thought it belonged—on the sidelines of my life. Neither, however, was it stage center. It felt rampant yet usurped, displaced, half vicarious. I realized I had let Mark thrust himself between me and it, anticly filling the foreground, haunting my dream life with his fantasies, rending my winter night's sleep with a screaming phone. In fact, surfing now seemed less connected than ever to the rest of my life. Mark wanted me to make that connection. Sometimes I thought he wanted to be that connection. I seemed to be content, however, to coast on his momentum, to buy the board he said I should. I even let him preside over primordial moments, his Mephistophehan cackle providing a lifeline from the yawning space of my fear in big waves to some rock face where the psychic crampons held. It was a reporter's learned passivity, this yielding to an alter ego, but on this story it was disfiguring. I hardly recognized myself in the mirror of the Doc Squad. The rain puddles are like small powder-blue windows scattered on the muddy farm road as I hurry down to the beach at Four Mile. It's a soft, clear morning, with not a breath of wind, and a north swell looks to have sneaked in overnight. Remarkably, there's no one around. Four Mile is a reef break in a pristine cove between San Francisco and Santa Cruz. The break isn't visible from the highway, but it's a short walk from the road to a vantage point, and the spot is popular with surfers from Santa Cruz. I have caught Four Mile good before, but have never surfed it alone. While I pick my way across a creek behind the beach, I find myself listening anxiously for howls from the hillside behind me—other surfers arriving and seeing the swell. But the only sound is a tractor chugging down long rows of Brussels sprouts that stretch away to the south.

A deep, reliable channel runs out through the middle of the cove at Four Mile; the wave is on the north side. It's a quirky right, with sections that change with the tide or with any shift in the size and direction of the swell. It can get quite big, and very spooky, but the surf this morning looks benign. I paddle out through the channel, hands stinging, and my heart starts to pound when a good-sized wave hits the outside reef, stands up—bottle-green against the pale-blue sky—pitches out, explodes, and begins to wind down the reef in fine, peeling sections. This may be the best wave I've ever seen break at Four Mile. Two more nearly as good follow, and I take deep breaths to try to control a flurry of adrenaline. Carried on the back of a swift seaward current, I reach the lineup with my hair still dry. I move along a

line of broad boils, paddling slowly, watching the horizon for a set, looking for a likely takeoff spot near the head of a chunk of reef, checking my position against a cypress tree on the bluff. Still nobody in sight on shore. Just one wave, I find myself praying, just one wave.

A wave comes. It swings silently through the kelp bed, a long, tapering wall, darkening upcoast. I paddle across the grain of the water streaming toward the wave across the reef, angling to meet the hollow of a small peak ghosting across the face. For a moment, in the gully just in front of the wave, my board loses forward momentum as the water rushing off the reef sucks it back up the face. Then the wave lifts me up—I've met the steepest part of the peak, and swerved into its shoreward track—and with two hard strokes I'm aboard. It's a clean takeoff: a sudden sense of height fusing with a deep surge of speed. I hop to my feet and drive to the bottom, drawing out the turn and sensing, more than seeing, what the wave plans to do ahead—the low sun is blinding off the water looking south. Halfway through the first turn, I can feel the wave starting to stand up ahead. I change rails, bank off the lower part of the face, and start driving down the line. The first section flies past, and the wave—it's slightly overhead, and changing angle as it breaks, so that it now blocks out the sun—stands revealed: a long, steep, satiny arc curving all the way to the channel. I work my board from rail to rail for speed, trimming carefully through two more short sections. Gaining confidence that I will in fact make this wave, I start turning harder, slicing higher up the face and, when a last bowl section looms beside the channel, stalling briefly before driving through in a half crouch, my face pressed close to the glassy, rumbling, pea-green wall. The silver edge of the lip's axe flashes harmlessly past on my left. A second later, I'm coasting onto flat water, leaning into a pullout, and mindlessly shouting "My God!"

The unridden waves behind mine send me windmilling greedily back outside, but the set is over before I can reach the lineup. I resume my search for a takeoff spot, lining up the cypress tree on the crown of a forested hill farther inland. When the next set comes, a few minutes later, the wave I catch is smaller and slower than that first one, but I ride with more confidence, my board loose and quick under my feet, and the last section is again a fine, swift flourish. From that point, the session settles into a rhythm of paddling, positioning, waiting, and riding—and my recollection of this morning at Four Mile begins to blur, its colors running into other sessions, other mornings, other waves. A similar but more dramatic wave in Indonesia, for instance, bleeds into the picture. There the reef was coral and perfectly straight, making an immaculate wave, and the water was warm—the island where the wave broke straddled the equator, a hundred miles west of Sumatra—but the last section before the channel there also wrapped around luxuriously, inviting a sharp last maneuver, although on a larger scale. The same rare sense of surfeit, of leisure, also suffuses the memory of that quiet, palm-lined bay in Indonesia: if I didn't often surf it alone, neither did I worry much about getting my share of waves. There were more than enough waves to go around among the few surfers who had managed to find the place. (Later, after the surf magazines discovered it, that changed.)

The places I've surfed sometimes seem like so many beads on a memory string, a rosary of hundreds of small stereopticons, wherein multicolored waves break in amber. More often, they seem like stations on some looping, ragged pilgrimage, my wave hound's Wanderjahre—a long search through a fallen world for shards of a lost bliss. I tend to locate this primal bliss, both for myself and for surfing as a whole, somewhere off Waikiki. At the turn of the century, when there were half a dozen surfers in the world, they were all to be found at Waikiki. Its wide, gentle swells were the womb of modern surfing—the warm, turquoise bowl of beginning. In my own case, my family lived in Honolulu when I was a young teen-ager, and I lived in the water off Waikiki. Things on land were complicated, and Waikiki itself was by then a dense nest of skyscrapers, hucksterism, and crime, but the waves, while crowded, hadn't changed since the days when Duke Kahanamoku and Dad Center rode the "bluebirds" out at Castle Surf on great

hardwood boards. And the tradewinds were the same, sweet and soft off Diamond Head. And it all made a profound impression on me, and my lasting attachment to surfing was largely forged then.

Ocean Beach is the polar opposite of Waikiki—cold, gritty, scary, not for beginners. I find beauty in it, but an utterly different, more challenging, modernist beauty. Captain Cook, when he first saw surfing, compared its effects to those of listening to music. When I think of Waikiki, I hear early classical compositions: fugues and Bach concertos, sacred music. Being out at Ocean Beach is like surfing to Mahler. This glistening morning at Four Mile has a score by Handel. That wave in Indonesia might have been composed by Mozart. Sunset Beach is pure Beethoven. Strangely, when I think of the best wave I've ever surfed—the one breaking off an uninhabited island in Fiji—I hear no music at all.

But this metaphor is about mood and memory, not about the waves themselves, which dance to an infinitely more complex tune. To someone sitting in the lineup trying to decipher the structure of a swell, the problem can, in fact, present itself musically. Are these waves approaching in 13/16 time, perhaps, with seven sets an hour, and the third wave of every second set swinging wide in a sort of minor-chord crescendo? Or is this swell one of God's jazz solos, whose structure is beyond our understanding? When the surf is very big, or in some other way humbling, such questions tend to fall away. The heightened sense of a vast, unknowable design silences the effort to understand. You feel honored simply to be out there. I've been reduced on certain magnificent days to just drifting on the shoulder, gawking at the transformation of ordinary seawater into muscled swell, into feathering urgency, into pure energy—impossibly sculpted, ecstatically edged—and, finally, into violent foam. This solitary session at Four Mile does not contain that level of grandeur. It does, however, have a sweet, jewelled quality that leaves me peering from the channel into the last, cracking section, trying to hear what oceanographers call the entrainment of air burst free as the wave breaks—millions of air bubbles collapsing into smaller and smaller bubbles, from which the entrained air finally escapes with a barely audible hiss.

The most memorable aspect of this session, however, is just that, for the longest time, no one else shows up. The waves change as the tide drops, getting smaller and breaking slightly, farther out, but the wind stays down, and, for all my glancing at the bluff, no one appears. After a time, I stop glancing, and my surfing goes into a trance. My concentration is unusually good: I find I'm correctly anticipating the behavior of even the trickiest sections. More than that, I'm riding at the outer edge of my ability, recovering consistently from maneuvers that under normal circumstances would be long shots. After two hours of high-amp wailing—the only real soundtrack for aggressive surfing is, in truth, rock and roll—I realize I haven't fallen off once.

A howl from the hillside finally ends this idyll. Ten minutes later, two guys are furiously paddling out through the channel, with two more hurrying across the beach, shaking their boards and hooting like monkeys. I decide that my next wave will be my last. I catch a shoulder-high peak, driving across the inside shelf. As I near the channel, I can see the two paddlers there pause to watch me ride. Rather than coast through the last section, I bank hard off the bottom and try a showy maneuver known as a reentry. I've been making more difficult moves all morning, but my concentration is flawed now. I fall off, and get washed through the shallows to shore.

In 1992, Finnegan described the surfing scene in San Francisco. This is the second part of his two-part article.

It was a shining February afternoon. The tide was low, and Ocean Beach, a four-mile-long north-south strip that accounts for nearly all of San Francisco's seafront and is normally narrow and deserted, was wide and full of people. I stutter-stepped down the bank at the foot of Sloat Boulevard, surfboard in hand, and hurried across the sand. Off to my left, two young black men in 49ers warmup jackets were silently putting a pair of miniature remote-control dune buggies through their paces; they wove and whirled and fishtailed in the sand. Off to my right, a group of white people were beating the hell out of pillows with yellow plastic clubs. As I passed, I could hear screaming and cursing: "Bitch! Bitch!" "Get out of this house!" Some people were weeping. They were also kicking the pillows around on the sand. A chubby man in his forties was pounding a sheet of paper laid on a pillow. When it flew off, he chased it down, bellowing, "Get back on there, you bitch!" Near the water's edge, I found another middle-aged man, gazing out to sea, his yellow club at his feet, a beatific expression on his face. He eyed my board as I knelt to strap on an ankle leash. I asked about the pillow-beaters, and he said they were engaged in something called the Pacific Process. Thirteen weeks, three thousand dollars. This exercise, he said, was called Bitching at Mom. I noticed he was wearing work gloves. Hey, no use getting blisters while beating the bejeezus out of Mom.

It was the third day of a solid west swell. Winter is the prime season for surfing Ocean Beach—it's when the biggest waves and the cleanest conditions (little or no wind, orderly sandbars) coincide—but this joyful conjunction usually falls apart in early February, so each good day now was gravy. Conditions this afternoon were superb: six-foot waves, not a breath of wind. Unfortunately, the prolonged season had brought out unprecedented crowds, and half the surfers in Northern California seemed to be on hand. Ocean Beach didn't normally suffer from the overpopulation that spoils most California surf spots. There were only a few dozen local surfers, and visitors were rare. My theory was that surfers from nearby towns and cities didn't want to know about Ocean Beach, because, while it sometimes got great waves, it was just as often ferociously intimidating. But crowds of sixty or more had become common in the last couple of weeks. It was as if a whole layer of the regional surf population had decided that, with the major winter swells probably over and conditions still improbably clean, Ocean Beach could be safely raided. I understood this selective bravado, because I felt it, too, along with an immense relief at having survived another winter—this was my third—of surfing Ocean Beach. Still, I resented the horde whose spidery silhouettes I could barely see, gliding and thrashing in the glare beyond the shore break, as I prepared to paddle out.

The water was atrociously cold. I could feel it tracing the seams in my wetsuit as I danced through the shallows; my hands throbbed when I started paddling. The first wall of sandy, grumbling white water felt like a barrel of gritty ice cubes poured down my back. I gasped, and kept churning toward what looked like a channel—a passage where fewer waves broke. At this tide, the waves near shore had little power, and I made steady progress. But I still had to cross the inside sandbar—a shallow ridge about halfway between the shore and the outermost surf—where unridable waves broke with pulverizing force. The first wave I saw break on the bar as I approached looked as if a string of land mines had exploded inside it. Sunlight splintered in long shards behind a curtain of falling water, then blew through the wall like a million grains of glass. An instant later, there was nothing but angry foam. I could see no channel. My progress stopped. For a couple of minutes, the waves and I quietly banged heads. Then came a lull: no waves. I sprint-paddled straight at the bar. A thick, glistening wave made a delayed appearance, but I

got to the bar before it did, and hurled myself with an involuntary cry through its harmless, shiny, icy crest.

Beyond the inside bar, in the deepwater trough that separated it from the outside bar, scores of people came suddenly into view. They were scattered for two hundred yards in each direction: sitting in clumps far outside, scrambling for waves, scratching to get back out. Two or three were actually on their feet, riding waves. All had passed the snarling mastiff of the inside bar—the price of admission to this green-gold world of glassy low-tide peaks. The channels through the outside bar looked wide and easy to read. I angled north, toward a field of open water. Slightly farther north, a surfer I didn't recognize, riding a needle-nosed pale-blue board, caught a good-sized wave. He fought to keep his balance as the wave, which was about twice his height, jacked and began to pitch. He didn't fall, but he lost speed in the struggle to keep his feet, and his first turn, now deep in the wave's shadow, was weak. If the wave hadn't hit a patch of deep water, and paused for a beat, he would have been buried by the first section. He managed to steer around it, though, and then pull into the next section and set a high line across a long green wall. By the time he passed me, he was in full command, perhaps one turn from the end of an excellent ride. But his face, I saw in the moment he shot past, was twisted with anguish, and with something that looked like rage.

Riding a serious wave is for an accomplished surfer what playing, say, Chopin's Polonaise in F-Sharp Minor might be for an accomplished pianist. Intense technical concentration is essential, but many less selfless emotions also crowd around. Even in unchallenging waves, the faces of surfers as they ride become terrible masks of fear, frustration, anger. The most revealing moment is the pullout, the end of a ride, which usually provokes a mixed grimace of relief, distress, elation, and dissatisfaction. The assumption, common among non-surfers, that riding waves is a slaphappy, lighthearted business—fun in the sun—is for the most part mistaken. The face of the stranger on the pale-blue board had reminded me, in fact, of nothing so much as the weeping, contorted faces of the pillow-beaters on the beach.

I slipped between the big, shifting peaks of the outside bar and arrived at the takeoff area, known as the lineup. I half knew a few of the people I could see there, but the crowd seemed amorphous, unfocussed—there were no conversations in progress. Everyone seemed intent on the waves, on himself. I caught my breath, chose a lineup marker—a school bus parked in the Sloat lot—and went to work. It was important, especially in a strange crowd, to make a good showing on one's first waves, for they established one's place in the pecking order. Blowing a takeoff or failing to catch a catchable wave usually sent one to the end of the queue for waves; this was an improvised but fierce arrangement, and in an aggressive crowd where waves were scarce one could easily be stuck there for the duration. I moved to a spot about fifteen yards inside a group of four or five surfers—a risky position, vulnerable to a big set, or series of waves, breaking farther out, but I was fit after a winter of paddling, and had the advantage of knowing the bars off this part of Ocean Beach. And, as it happened, the next wave to come through held up nicely, shrugging off the efforts of two guys farther out to catch it, and handing me a swift, swooping, sure-footed first ride.

Paddling back out, I burned to tell somebody about the wave—about the great crack the lip had made as it split the surface behind me, about the mottled amber upper hollows of the inside wall. But there was no one to tell. A surf crowd is a delicate social unit. Everyone out there is starring in his own movie, and permission is required before you inflict your exploits on anyone else. Vocal instant replays and noisy exultation are not unknown, but they're subject to a strict code of collective ego control. Young kids sometimes misunderstand this part of the surfing social contract, and brag and browbeat each other in the water, but they generally cool it when older surfers are in earshot. The usual crowd at Ocean Beach

was older than most—in fact, I couldn't remember ever seeing a teen-ager out on a big day—and the unwritten limits on garrulity among strangers there were correspondingly firm. Those who exceeded them were shunned. Those who consistently exceeded them were hated, for they failed to respect the powerfully self-enclosed quality of what other surfers, especially the less garrulous, were doing out there—the emotions that many of them were surfing through.

Two black grebes popped out of the foam beside me, their spindly necks like feathered periscopes, their big, surprised eyes staring. I murmured, "Did you see my wave?"

I headed for an empty peak slightly north of the school bus. I caught two quick waves there, and half a dozen people saw fit to join me. The jockeying for waves got, for Ocean Beach, fairly bad. Nobody spoke. Each dreamer stayed deep in his own dream—hustling, feinting, gliding, windmilling into every possible wave. Then a cleanup set rolled through, breaking fifty yards outside the bar we were surfing. Huge walls of white water swatted all of us off our boards, pushing a few unlucky souls clear across the inside bar. The group that reconvened a few minutes later was smaller, and now had something to talk about. "My leash leg just got six inches longer." "Those waves looked like December." We settled into a rough rotation. Waves were given and taken, and givers were sometimes even thanked. After noteworthy rides, compliments were muttered. The chances of this swell's lasting another day were discussed in general session. A burly Asian from Mann County was pessimistic—"It's a three-day west. We get 'em every year." He repeated his prediction, then said it again for those who might have missed it. The little group at the school-bus peak, while it would never be known for its repartee, had achieved some rude coherence. A delicate fabric of shared enterprise had settled over all of us out there, and I found that my resentment of the non-locals had faded. The tide, which was now rising, was unanimously blamed for a lengthy lull. The sun, nearing the horizon, ignited a fiery Z of sea-facing windows along a road that switchbacked up a distant San Francisco hillside.

Then a familiar howl and raucous laugh rose from the inside bar. Heads turned. "Doc," someone said, unnecessarily. It was Dr. Mark Renneker, on his rounds. Doc Hazard, as he was sometimes called, was the one San Francisco surfer whom non-locals were likely to know. His fame derived mainly from his exploits in giant Ocean Beach surf, but he was hard to miss in waves of any size. He was paddling alongside somebody I didn't know, regaling him with the plot of a horror movie: "So the head starts running around by itself, biting people to death." Before they reached the lineup, Mark interrupted himself, swerved, sprint-paddled north, wheeled, and picked off a wave that had somehow slipped past the rest of us. Ten minutes later, I saw him steaming in my direction again. There was, it struck me, a gawkiness about Mark; today, for instance, he was wearing an absurd-looking short-billed neoprene hood, with his beard jutting over the chin strap and his ponytail flopping out the back. But when Mark was on a surfboard his gawkiness was completely obscured by the power and precision of his movements. He paddled like a Grand Prix racer, always poised for agile cornering and breathtaking accelerations. Mark was six feet four but rode boards as short as six feet—a sign of rare strength and confidence. I watched him bearing down on me. When he was still ten yards away, he made a face and yelled, "This is a zoo!" I wondered what the people around us made of that observation. "Let's go surf Santiago," he said.

Mark didn't recognize the unwritten limits on garrulity in the water. He tore up the surfing social contract and blew his great, sunburned nose on the tatters. And he was too big, too witty, and far too fearless for anyone to object. Feeling compromised, I reluctantly abandoned my spot in the rotation at the school-bus peak and set off with Mark for the peaks breaking near the base of Santiago Street, half a mile north. "A three-day west!" Mark snorted. "Who are these guys? It's going to be bigger tomorrow. All the

indicators say so." An amateur meteorologist, Mark diligently monitored weather and buoy reports from the North Pacific, and he was usually right about what the surf would do. He was wrong about Santiago, though. The bars, we saw as we approached, were plainly sloppier than those we had left behind at Sloat. There was nobody surfing anywhere nearby. That was why Mark wanted to surf there, of course.

It was an old disagreement between us. Mark believed that crowds were stupid. "People are sheep," he liked to say. And he often claimed to know more than the crowd did about where and when to surf. He would head down the beach to some unlikely-looking spot and stubbornly stay there, riding marginal, inconsistent waves, rather than grub it out with the masses. I had spent a lifetime paddling hopefully off toward uncrowded peaks myself, dreaming that they were about to start working better than the popular break, and sometimes—rarely, briefly—they actually seemed to do so. But I had a rueful faith in the basic good judgment of the herd. Crowds collected where the waves were best. This attitude drove Mark nuts. And Ocean Beach, with its great uncrowded winter waves, did in fact bend the universal Malthusian surf equation. Freezing water and abject fear and ungodly punishment were helpful that way.

A block or so before we reached Santiago, I took off, over Mark's objections, on a midsized wave, a detour that I quickly regretted: the set behind my wave gave me a thorough drubbing, almost driving me over the inside bar. By the time I got back outside, the sun was setting, I was shivering, and Mark was a hundred yards farther north. I decided not to follow him. I would see him later; there was going to be a slide show at his apartment that evening. Now shivering badly, I started looking for a last wave. But the peaks along here were shifty, and I kept misjudging their speed and steepness. I nearly got sucked over backward by a vicious, ledging wave, then had to scramble to avoid a monstrous set.

The twilight deepened. The spray lifting off the wave tops still had a crimson sunset tinge, but the waves themselves were now just big, featureless blue-black walls. They were getting more and more difficult to judge. There were no longer any other surfers in sight. I was ready to try to paddle in—an ignominious maneuver. And, when a lull came, that's what I did, digging hard, struggling to keep my board pointed shoreward through the crosscurrents of the outside bar, using a campfire on the beach as a visual fix, and glancing back over my shoulder every five or six strokes.

I was about halfway to shore, coming up on the inside bar, when a set appeared outside. I was safely in deep water, and there was no sense trying to cross the inside bar during a set, so I turned and sat up to wait. Against the still bright sky, at the top of a massive wave off to the south and far, far outside, a lithe silhouette leaped to its feet, then plunged into darkness. I strained to see what happened next, but the wave disappeared behind others, nearer by. My stomach had done a flutter kick at the sight of someone dropping into such a wave at dusk, and as I bobbed over the swells gathering themselves for the assault on the inside bar I kept peering toward where he had vanished, watching for a riderless board washing in. That wave had looked like a leash-breaker. Finally, less than forty yards away, a dim figure appeared, speeding across a ragged inside wall. Whoever it was had not only made the drop but was still on his feet, and flying. As the wave hit deep water, he leaned into a huge, elegant carving cutback. The cutback told me who it was. Bill Bergerson, known around Ocean Beach as Peewee, was the only local surfer who could turn like that. He made one more turn, driving to within a few yards of me, and pulled out. His expression, I saw, was bland. He nodded at me but said nothing. I felt tongue-tied. I was relieved, though, by the thought of having company for the passage across the inside bar, which was now detonating continuously. But Peewee had other plans. He turned and, without a word, started paddling back out to sea.

Surfing is not a spectator sport. There is an international contest circuit, and a handful of surfers earn a living from competition, but most of the professionals actually make ends meet by endorsing products—surfboards, wetsuits, or the output of one of the many companies in the surf-apparel industry. Contest surfing is seldom exciting to watch: the ocean cannot be relied on to provide memorable waves on an organizer's schedule, and few of the world's great surf spots happen to be natural amphitheatres.

One of the few times I've seen non-surfers get their money's worth was on a minor Indonesian island about a hundred miles west of Sumatra, in 1979. Half a dozen of us, Australians and Americans, had found our way to a fishing village on the southwest shore of the island. Photographs of the wave that breaks near the village would later be splashed across the surf magazines, putting the spot on the world surfing map, but at that time it was known only to a small, malaria-ridden band. Two Swiss travellers—hearty types in hiking boots, who had come to the island to look at Stone Age fortifications—turned up in the village one day, and decided that it might be interesting to join us in the surf. They came out on borrowed big-wave boards and, following instructions, took up positions in a deep-water channel near the edge of the reef. The waves happened to be magnificent that day: big, powerful, flawless. The rides were long, fast, and extremely intense, and most of them ended in the channel right where the Swiss travellers bobbed like a pair of buoys, slowly turning orange in the equatorial sun. We would come screaming through the final, jacking section and skittering onto the wind-brushed flat, steering around them as we coasted out of the waves, too pumped up to reply when they applauded solemnly and said things like "Marvellous! How I admire you!" I wanted to try to explain to them that they were witnessing the culmination of years of hard search and sacrifice. But they clearly thought they were just watching a bit of sport. They weren't even afraid of the waves. Two of the surfers there that afternoon had boards they had dragged thousands of miles—across oceans, through Asian cities and jungles—destroyed, snapped in half by the waves, but the Swiss observers just splashed blithely back toward the channel whenever we warned them they were drifting too close.

My girlfriend, Caroline, watched surfing for years, with no particular interest, until one day in Santa Cruz. We were standing on the cliffs at a popular break called Steamer Lane. As surfers rode past the point where we stood, we could see the waves from the side and then from the back. For a few seconds, we saw an elevated version of what the surfers themselves saw, and Caroline's idea of surfing was transformed on the spot. Before, she said, waves to her had been two-dimensional objects, sheer and onrushing, standing up against the sky. Suddenly, she could see that they were in fact pyramids, with steep sides, thickness, broad, sloping backs, and an incredibly complex three-dimensional construction, which changed, collapsing and rising and collapsing, very quickly. It was nearly enough, she said, to make watching surfing interesting.

It was also nearly enough, she said, to make the desire to surf comprehensible. Caroline had never understood why, after surfers spent hours studying the waves from shore, they often announced their intention of going out by saying things like "Let's get it over with." But then she wasn't there in Ventura, on a cold afternoon in 1964, when my father ordered me back into the water after a dismal session during which I had caught no waves. I was eleven years old, just learning to surf, still too small to get my arm around my battered, beloved old board. Three waves, Dad said, and we could go. My feet were bloody—it was a rocky shore, and this was before the invention of ankle leashes—and I was probably crying, and I wanted desperately to get warm and go home. But he had the car keys, not to mention the keys to manhood, and I bitterly paddled back out and caught my three waves, riding them in on my knees. My father has always claimed that I would never have learned to surf if it had not been for that episode. All I know is that over the next few years I lost all interest in other sports—especially team

sports. By high school, when the other boys were doing or dying for the school, their parents cheering in the stands, my friends and I were skulking in Mexico, camping on lonely beaches and bluffs, looking for waves.

The only audience that matters to most surfers is other surfers, for they alone can truly appreciate what they are seeing. They have been through the special ordeal of learning to surf, and know what a good performance involves. Also, they share the obsession. Sunday surfers—people for whom surfing is a hobby, who keep their surfboards in the closet next to their skis and tennis racquets—undoubtedly exist. But every Sunday surfer who can stand up on his board was, at some stage, obsessed, for nothing less can get one through the hundreds of difficult, discouraging hours it takes to gain basic skills. And retaining those skills requires constant practice; in other words, competence presumes obsession. It also takes exceptional physical fitness. James Michener once reported, in a book called "Sports in America," that the demands made on the muscles, lungs, and heart by surfing were roughly the same as those made by paddleball and slightly less than those made by badminton. Michener must have meant by "surfing" only the act of riding a wave, because if paddling out and catching waves are included—and it would be hard to surf without catching a wave—the level of fitness required for surfing is more like what might be needed for a combination of long-distance rowing, white-water kayaking, and ballet. Brian Lowdon, an Australian exercise physiologist, has published studies showing that surfers have a faster return to baseline pulse and respiratory rate after exertion than even Olympic pentathletes. (Lowdon's studies fail to mention badminton players.)

Not all surfers are robust young males; plenty of females and graying diehards surf, some of them well. Still, it's not really a sport that the entire family—unless the family is a marine version of the Flying Wallendas—can enjoy. Hence the insular codes and cryptic slang of surfers, and the relegation of all non-surfers to alien status—"inlanders," "chalk people." Much of the tribe's language isn't even language. If you listen closely to surfers in the water, you are likely to hear little intelligible speech. Mainly, you'll hear a strange, primitive chorus of whoops, war cries, karate shouts. The first time Caroline and I looked at waves together was months after we met, and she was appalled to hear me start jabbering in a language that she didn't know I knew. "It wasn't just the vocabulary, all those words I had never heard you use—'gnarly' and 'suckout' and 'funkdog,'" she said, once she had recovered. "It was the sounds—the grunts and roars and horrible snarls."

Grunts and roars and horrible snarls filled the air in Mark's apartment. Slides from the past couple of winters at Ocean Beach were being shown, and most of the surfers featured in the slides were on hand, so the audience was agitated. "That can't be you, Edwin. You hide under the bed when it gets that big!" Mark convened these gatherings quasi-annually, provided most of the slides, and m.c.'d. "This was the best day last winter," he said, projecting a shot of huge, immaculate Sloat that elicited a deep general groan. "But I don't have any more pictures of it. I paddled out after taking this one, and stayed out all day." Mark's voice actually had the nasal, waterlogged quality it got after a long session. And, in fact, he had already told me that he'd come in from the surf—its steady thunder from across the Great Highway, the coast road where Mark lives, was supplying the bass line for this evening's entertainment—only an hour before. "The moon rose just as it got really dark," he said. "I went back to Sloat, and surfed there for another hour. All those kooks were gone. It was just Peewee and me. It was great." I found this scene hard to picture. It wasn't that I didn't believe Mark—his hair was still wet. I just couldn't imagine how anyone could surf by moonlight in waves as big and powerful as the ones that had been breaking at Sloat at dusk. "Sure," Mark said. "Peewee and I do it once every winter."

Peewee was there at Mark's that night. Most of the surfers I knew by name in San Francisco were. Because the surf in and around the city is so formidable, few people learn to surf there—perhaps half of the city's surfers come from elsewhere. These migrants, who tend to be middle class, remain distinct in some ways from the homegrown surfers, who tend to be working class, but the fifteen or twenty men at Mark's that evening came from both groups. Ages ranged from the late teens to the mid-forties. With only three years' seniority, I was probably the most recent arrival in San Francisco. Peewee, who was about the same age as Mark and I—early thirties—and who worked as a carpenter, was a lifelong local. Mark, who grew up in Los Angeles, was still regarded by some natives as a newcomer, but in fact he had been around for more than ten years—he had gone to medical school at the University of California at San Francisco—and during that time had probably logged more hours in the water at Ocean Beach than any three other people combined. He had also become a central figure in local surf society. At least, no one else, from what I had seen, ever put together evenings such as this and Mark did it with almost no visible effort.

"San Francisco is what I imagine surfing in Southern California was like in the fifties," Mark once told me. "Great waves, not too many people, lots of eccentrics, and everybody pretty much knowing everybody else." After the surf craze of the nineteen-sixties, Southern California surfing became a mob scene, with a cast of hundreds of thousands. An Ocean Beach denizen known as Sloat Bill had recently moved back to San Francisco after a stint in San Diego, declaring, "Surfing down there was like driving on the freeway. Totally anonymous." Sloat Bill, who qualified in my book as an eccentric, was a commodities trader from Texas via Harvard. He got his nickname when, following one of his divorces, he moved into his car and lived for a month in the Sloat parking lot, vowing not to leave until he had mastered the harsh art of surfing Sloat. There was room for argument about whether he had achieved that aim, but certainly he had made more money, after tapping market quotations into a computer plugged into his car's cigarette lighter, than any of the rest of us ever did while sitting in the Sloat parking lot. Sloat Bill wasn't at Mark's that night, but Mark showed several slides of him anyway—taking gruesome spills. A slide of me surfing Ocean Beach the previous winter drew a couple of hoots but no insults—I hadn't been around long enough for that. Mark said he had two new sequences he wanted to show, and then he would turn the projector over to others.

The first sequence illustrated a recent expedition to a remote point break near Cape Mendocino, far up in Northern California. Mark and another San Francisco surfer, a gardener named Rob, had travelled the last ten miles to the surf on dune bikes, racing at low tide along what looked like an extraordinarily rugged wilderness coast. They had camped on the beach for three days. The surf looked very cold and scary, and nobody watching the slides volunteered for a return trip that Mark was planning. On the way home, he said, they had been forced to travel at night, because that was the only time the tide got low enough. There had been a lot of rain while they were camping, so the streams crossing the beach had become major obstacles, especially in the dark. Rob had inadvertently sailed off the bank of one stream and crashed, bending the forks on his bike and soaking the sparkplugs. The tide had started rising while they were trying to get the bike going again. Bob Wise, who owns and operates the only surf shop in San Francisco, had heard enough. He had changed his mind, he said. "Doc, please take me with you next time."

The second sequence showed another North Coast exploit: Mark pioneering a fearsome surf spot known as Saunders Reef, in Mendocino County. Local surfers had been watching Saunders break for years, but no one had ever tried to surf it until, earlier that winter, Mark persuaded two big-wave riders from the area to paddle out with him. The wave broke at least half a mile from shore, on a shallow rock reef, and

featured what was plainly a horrendous drop, along with some troublesome kelp. Mark's slides, taken by an accomplice with a telephoto lens from a mountainside, showed him cautiously riding deep-green walls two or three times his height. The trickiest part, he said, had actually come not in the water but in a nearby town that evening. People at the local hangout had been alarmed to hear that he'd surfed Saunders, and suspicious, he said, until they learned that he had done it in the company of two locals.

It was surprising to hear Mark mention local sensitivities. They were a real issue—I once saw a clipping from a Mendocino newspaper in which a local columnist described Mark as "a legendary super surfer from the Bay Area," adding, perhaps sarcastically, "I'm sorry I didn't stick around for his autograph"—but I usually thought of Mark as impervious to such matters. Of course, it was also a little tricky showing these slides to this audience; it required a delicate touch, even a measure of self-deprecation. Mark might disregard the finer points of the surfing social contract among strangers in the water, but Ocean Beach was home; here the strong drink of his personality needed sweetening. Earlier in the evening, when Mark, who suffers from asthma, complained that he was having trouble breathing, as he often does in February, an Ocean Beach homeboy known as Beeper Dave had muttered, "Now you know how us mortals feel."

A parade of photographers with their slide carousels followed Mark. There were water shots, some of them good, taken at a couple of the gentler San Francisco breaks. There were many blurry shots of giant Ocean Beach. Each time an especially frightening wave appeared on the wall, the youngest member of the audience, a teenager named Aaron Plank, snarled, "That's disgusting." Aaron, who was easily the most talented young surfer in San Francisco, was not yet a big-wave rider. Some old-timers showed slides from the seventies, featuring surfers I'd never heard of. "Gone to Kauai," I was told. "Gone to Western Australia, last we heard."

Finally, Peewee was prevailed upon to show a handful of slides from a recent trip to Hawaii. Taken at Sunset Beach, one of the best big-wave spots in the world, Peewee's pictures, which were of poor quality, showed some friends windsurfing on a small, blown-out day. "Unbelievable," somebody muttered. "Windsurfing." Peewee, who was probably the best pure surfer San Francisco had ever produced—and one of the few people from the city who were actually capable of surfing big Sunset Beach—said little, but he seemed amused by the crowd's disappointment.

As the slide party ended, I stuck around to help Mark clean up—and, watching the crowd drift off down the stairs, I suddenly recalled something that Kim Bodkin, the wife of a local big-wave surfer named Tim Bodkin, had said to me a few days before. I was clearly a charter member, she had said mock-innocently, of what she called "the Doc squad." The remark had mortified me. It meant that I was seen as one of Mark's acolytes. He did have acolytes—guys who wandered into his psychic gravitational field and found themselves orbiting around his fixed, surf-centered ideas about how to live. And it was true that since the day I moved to San Francisco, Mark had made himself my surf coach, health director, and general adviser, urging me on what he called "the surfer's path." And I had largely followed his lead—"played Doc's games," as Edwin Salem, another protégé, put it—letting his exuberance carry me along, letting him be the engine that powered my surfing life. But the fact was that I felt deeply ambivalent about surfing. I had been doing it for more than twenty years, yet I had long been reluctant to think of it as part of my real life as an adult. On balance, I seemed to spend as much energy these days resisting Mark's exhortations as I did actually surfing. So it was dispiriting to hear that I came off as an eager follower. Mark was like the guru character in every Hollywood attempt at a surfing movie—the Kahuna. The last thing I wanted was a walk-on part as one of the slack-jawed chorus.

Really, it shouldn't have mattered. Surfing wasn't supposed to be about one's standing in a company—about caste. In fact, I had spent years slogging through tropical backwaters in search of empty surf, looking for the purest possible encounter with the remotest possible waves. Still, some dogged essence of common vanity, of grubby society, had followed me everywhere. It was a paradox at the heart of my surfing: a desire to be alone with waves fused to an equal desire to be watched, to perform. The old Hawaiians, who institutionalized the spiritual side of surfing, had no illusions about its locker-room aspects: they loved to gamble on organized competitions. Of course, they were not, from all accounts, prey to self-conscious conflicts about their place in the world, or to a Western-style dichotomy between Society and Nature.

They didn't have to cope with photography, either. The passion of virtually all surfers for photographs of themselves in the act of surfing approaches fetishism. To say that waves and the rides they provide are inherently fleeting events, and that surfers naturally therefore want mementos, barely begins to explain the mania for photographs. For a start, pictures are rarely about what a ride felt like; they are about what a ride looked like to others. Mark understood the surf-photo mania. He not only put on these slide shows, and had pictures of himself surfing tacked up all over the walls of his apartment; he also delighted in presenting friends with pictures of themselves surfing. I'd seen these photographs hanging in the homes of their subjects, framed like religious icons. I have one here—of me as I write. Mark likes to say that surfing "is essentially a religious practice." What I've always had trouble deciding is just who or what is being worshipped.

Wave judgment is an ineffable skill. You're sitting in a trough between waves, and you can't see past the approaching swell, which will not become a wave you can catch. You start paddling upcoast and seaward. Why? If the moment were frozen, you could explain that, by your reckoning, there's a fifty-fifty chance that the next wave will have a good takeoff spot (a point at which you can catch the wave and then have a reasonable chance of making it—of staying ahead of the breaking part of the wave—by angling to the left or the right) about ten yards over and a little farther out from where you are now. This calculation is based on: your last two or three glimpses of the swells outside, each glimpse caught from the crest of a previous swell; the hundred-plus waves you have seen break in the past hour and a half; your cumulative experience of three or four hundred sessions at this spot, including fifteen or twenty days that were much like this one in terms of swell size, swell direction, wind speed, wind direction, tide, season, and sandbar configuration; the way the water seems to be moving across the bottom; the surface texture and the water color; and, beneath these elements, innumerable subcortical perceptions too subtle and fleeting to express. These last factors are like the ones that the ancient Polynesian navigators relied upon when, on the open seas, they used to lower themselves into the water between the outriggers on their canoes and let their testicles tell them where in the great ocean they were.

Of course, the moment can't be frozen. And the decision whether to sprint-paddle against the current, following your hunch, or to stop and drift, gambling that the next wave will defy the odds and simply come to you, has to be made in an instant. And the deciding factors are just as likely to be non-oceanic—your mood, your stance (those who surf with their right foot back, as I do, usually pursue and prefer "rights," on which they face the wave as they angle across it, to "lefts," which they must surf "backhand"), the state of your arm muscles, the deployment of other surfers. The role of the crowd is, in fact, often critical. Other surfers can signal approaching waves. You watch someone paddle over the top of a swell and you try to assess, in the last instant before he disappears, what he sees outside. It helps if you know the paddler—whether he is liable to overreact to the sight of a big wave, whether he knows the

spot well. Or you may look down the line, upcoast or downcoast, at someone who may have a better view of what's in store for you than you have, and try to gauge his reaction to what he sees. He may even try to signal which way you should be moving—to give you a jump on whatever is bearing down on you. For the most part, though, the crowd is just a nuisance, a distraction, distorting your judgment while you hassle and jockey to get a wave to yourself. When Mark paddles off to some dubious area, far from the crowd, he is partly just reclaiming his concentration on the ocean.

All surfers are oceanographers, and in the area of breaking waves all are engaged in advanced research. Surfers don't need to be told that when a wave breaks actual water particles, rather than simply the waveform, begin to move forward. They are busy figuring out more arcane relationships, like the one between tide and consistency, or marginal phenomena, like double waves. Oceanographers have never been able to agree on an explanation of double waves, yet surfers have had to develop methods of analyzing and coping with them (double waves can be treacherous), and I've heard any number of theories. One holds that some waves get slowed up in their shoreward progress by outside reefs but leave enough water on the reefs so that the following waves move more quickly and then overtake them on the inside reefs. I tend to think, contrarily, that the two parts of a double wave are actually broken pieces of the same wave—one that has been refracted in its sweep along the coast in such a way that one section has slipped behind the other and run up on its back.

The science of surfers is not pure but heavily applied—and completely unsystematic. It is full of myths and superstitions—the widespread belief that a full moon brings big swells, for instance. It also suffers from a fatal anthropomorphism. When you are all wrapped up in surfing them, waves seem alive. They have personalities, distinct and intricate. They act, you react. It's a tender, intimate relationship, and it can thus come as a shock when the wave turns out to be not only insentient but, on occasion, lethal. Wave love is a one-way street.

It is also platonic, in that it trades heavily on the ideal. Surfers have a perfection fixation. Its origin is in the endless variety of waves, and in their ephemerality. Surfers seek a rare and specialized kind of wave. When a great break is discovered, world surfing attention focusses furiously on the reports, the photographs, the film. How good is it? How consistent? How difficult, how dangerous? Could I ride it? The ocean being what it is, no place is perfect. Every wave has its virtues and its flaws, and even at the same spot no two waves are ever exactly the same. No break is good on all tides and winds and swells—not to mention flat spells and storms. Still, great surf spots always arouse the fantasy. What if that magnificent wave keeps breaking just like that for another four hundred yards? What if the next wave is just as good? What if it stays that good, hour after hour, day after day? Surfers are always looking for better waves, and the platonic ideal, the perfect wave, keeps them travelling to the farthest reaches of the globe; it kept me on the ocean roads for years on end. There is a dense and growing lore, a grand arcanum of the world's waves, which complements the localized jargon, the cabalistic code through which surfers trade the secrets of their avocation.

Local surf cultures, meanwhile, sprout and flourish near virtually every rideable break on earth. In some places, such as southern Brazil, surfing is a rich boy's sport, taking the social place of polo or the hunt. In most places, it's a multiclass affair, as it was originally, in old Hawaii. I've surfed with yuppie architects and stolid crab fishermen in Ireland, with the sons of campesinos and the sons of oligarchs in Central America. Everywhere, though, one finds the same complicated, passionate attention to minute details of local waves, weather, and coastline. Surfers are like farmers or hunters in their rapt absorption in nature's vicinal habits and vagaries. Ask a voluble local about seasonal variations at his home break, and he'll still be diagramming offshore canyons in the dirt an hour later.

The best-known surf spot in San Francisco is actually not at Ocean Beach but at Fort Point, underneath the Golden Gate Bridge. In "The Surfer's Almanac: An International Surfing Guide" (1977), by Gary Fairmont R. Filosa II, Fort Point sounds uninviting. "San Francisco Bay is polluted and infested with roving Navy gunboats equipped to sink surfers amid the strong currents, so be cautious," Filosa writes. Although powerful currents do run past Fort Point, and the rocks there can be dangerous, it is in fact the closest thing to a reliably gentle break in the city. (The deadly gunboats have apparently been retired.) Tourists line the seawall on sunny days, trying to get the bridge in the background of their surfing snapshots. The setting is spectacular, and the novelty of surfing in what is technically not the ocean but a bay increases in the springtime, when, after heavy inland rains, the water is fresh to the taste. The wave itself is undistinguished, though. There are other surf spots, farther out the Golden Gate—notably Dead Man's, a low-tide point break that is experts-only—but the main arena is around the corner to the south, off the windswept desolation of Ocean Beach.

A couple of blocks from the south end of Ocean Beach, in the Sunset District, stands Wise Surfboards, a bright, well-managed place, with a long row of shiny new boards along one wall and racks of wetsuits in the back. The shop is a hangout for the Ocean Beach crew, and Bob Wise, a tightly built, sardonic James Brown fan in his early forties, presides over a permanent bull session. It is a sort of surf-story jukebox, featuring a well-worn collection of tales, most of them essentially slapstick: the time Edwin Salem found himself facing, in waist-deep water, a wave pushing before it the trunk of a redwood tree; the time the resin barrel blew up, burning off Peewee's eyebrows. Business is usually slow, except when rich dope-growers from up north come in loaded with cash and saying to their friends, "You want a board? Lemme buy it for you. You think Bobby might want a board? Let's get him one, too."

I used to spend time in Wise's shop, and during the years I lived in San Francisco there was an old photograph taped to the wall behind the counter. It was fly-specked, curling, captionless, and incredibly beautiful. The photograph showed a surfer—Peewee, according to Wise—trimmed very high on a seemingly endless backlit ten-foot left. The wave was lime green and wind-sculpted, and looked as if it must be somewhere in Bali, but Wise said it was at Outside VFW's, an Ocean Beach sandbar that hadn't broken in years. The wave was so exquisitely proportioned that it made the nine-foot-six-inch big-wave "gun" that Peewee was riding look like a short board. And the line he was drawing was out of a dream—too high, too fine, too inspired for real life.

During my second or third winter in San Francisco, more photographs began to appear on the wall in Wise's shop. The first several were all big wood-framed prints under glass. They, too, were Ocean Beach surfing shots, but they all had typed captions listing the exact date and place taken, and also the rider, who was in every case "Doc." All the photographs showed Mark riding gigantic waves on days when, it was said, nobody else had been willing to paddle out.

Mark and Peewee were the fire and ice of San Francisco surfing, the oversold thesis and the understated antithesis. They were like two opposed theories of character formation. In Peewee's case, experience seemed to be about removing superfluities; in Mark's case, it was all accumulation. That was how they looked, at least, from the channel where I paddled.

"Do you want to hear my latest metaphor?" Mark asked me. "'Life is a run-on sentence. The object is to punctuate it with experiences.' You stick in a comma here, a comma there. You try to figure out where to put a semicolon. It takes balls to put in a period. If you want to get profound, you stick in a few question marks. And, of course, if you're the impatient type you can always take the sophomoric route—this is what I do—and just throw in exclamation points all over the place. 'Hey! Wow! Did you see that!'" Mark does throw in exclamation points nearly everywhere he goes, and is notably unafraid of appearing sophomoric. He is a passionate fan of punk rock, horror movies, video games, and movie theme music. In the eighteen years I've known him, I've never seen him wear a necktie. Like any self-respecting adolescent, he scorns marriage (he and Jessica Dunne, a painter, have lived together since college and are famously monogamous, but that's different, somehow), parenthood (known to reduce one's willingness to surf big, dangerous waves), and steady employment (proved to reduce one's ability to go surfing on short notice). "A basic orientation for many people is their group of friends as adolescents," he once told me. "As adults, they constantly check themselves against that group: who succeeded, who failed, who swerved in what direction. Among my friends, there was a strong belief in the surfer's path. Most people swerved from it sooner or later. That's why I loved the moment in 'Big Wednesday' when the two old surf buddies get together. They don't surf much anymore, and they're sad about that. They wonder what's become of their old friend Leroy, the masochist, and one of them says, 'I heard he was living up north, riding big waves.' Now, that's not a bad epitaph."

Mark's résumé doesn't actually resemble Leroy the masochist's. It runs for nearly a dozen pages and includes, in the list of his publications, honors, and degrees, "Understanding Cancer," a best-selling university text that was first published while Mark was in medical school and is now in its third edition. He does his best around Ocean Beach to appear unemployed and on permanent surf call, but the truth is that he holds down several medical jobs, including a post as assistant clinical professor at U.C. San Francisco. His specialty is family practice. He sees his patients at an inner-city clinic, and he says that they are the only thing that keeps him from fleeing San Francisco for half the year—spring and summer, when the surf at Ocean Beach is almost always poor. "But it's O.K.," he says, "because that's where I get my strength, my metaphors—from my ongoing relationships with my patients." Mark works one overnight shift a week on a geriatric ward at a San Francisco hospital. What metaphor does he derive from the geriatric ward? Mark pauses. "It's all about conveyance," he says, finally. "The souls have already departed the bodies, I think, of some of the people there, and I can only surmise that they continue living only because they have some important unsolved problem." For his own models for aging well, Mark looks to older surfers—he calls them "elders." Doc Ball, a lifelong surfer and retired dentist in Northern California, now in his eighties, is a favorite. "He's still stoked," Mark says. "He still skateboards!" Peewee agrees that Mark is preternaturally youthful. "He's like somebody who's twenty or twenty-two, with that much stoke about surfing, that much enthusiasm," Peewee told me, during a rare conversation. But Peewee disagrees about the long-term benefits of the surfing life. As he put it, "The biggest locals can be the biggest derelicts." We were sitting in a Chinese restaurant near his house, in the upper Sunset, with Peewee warily watching me take notes. "The surfing life just breeds a lot of derelicts," he said. "It's such a great sport it corrupts people. It's like drug addiction. You just don't want to do anything else. You don't want to go to work. If you do, it's always 'You really missed it' when you get off." As a carpenter, Peewee said, he had some job flexibility, and he tried to take a month off each year to go surfing someplace else, like Hawaii or Indonesia. But there was no way that he could surf as avidly as he had surfed while growing up—not without risking dereliction.

Peewee grew up in the Sunset. He learned to surf on borrowed boards at Pedro Point, a beginners' break a few miles south of San Francisco. It took him five years to work up to Ocean Beach, which, he recalled, was an even more formidable spot in the days before ankle leashes. As a teen-ager, he met some surfers

who lived near the water and let him keep his board at their house, and he started riding his bicycle to Ocean Beach daily. His memories of his early surfing years are filled with names I've never heard before—Jimmy Holt, Rod Lundquist, the Valera brothers—and with a little kid's awe of the big guys. Lundquist "was ahead of his time," Peewee recalled. "He used to surf the Beach on huge days alone. No leash. No wetsuit. He wore Speedo trunks. Rode a long board. He left to go teach college in Santa Cruz." Peewee eventually became a big guy himself—over six feet, broad-shouldered, with the poker-faced, blond good looks of a B-Western gunfighter. He also became a superb surfer. But he never managed to ditch the nickname that his older brother's friends hung on him when he was small.

He also seems never to have lost the unassumingness of the novice. Getting him to talk, over tepid tea in an emptying restaurant, was the journalistic equivalent of paddling out at Sloat on a mean day. My request for an interview had no doubt startled him. Peewee knew me as a face in the water, a recent Ocean Beach regular, one of Mark's crowd. Now, suddenly, I was a reporter. I wasn't sure why I had revealed this to Peewee, except that I felt direly confused about surfing myself, and was trying to sort it out. As one who had been struggling for several winters with Mark's contention that to miss a swell was a far greater sin than to miss a deadline—Mark's favorite expression was, in fact, "You really missed it"—I got more comfort than Peewee knew from his simple description of the inevitable conflict between surfing and work.

Peewee's self-effacement was so thorough that it was easy to misread him as remote. Even I could see, though, after knowing him awhile, that his terse exterior hid, and not very well, an acute shyness, which, in turn, hid, somewhat more effectively, an old-fashioned sensitivity. He was a straight-A student in school—I learned this not from him but from others—and an English major at San Francisco State University. He also took a lot of science courses in college, including an oceanography class in which the instructor once averred that the big winter swells that hit the Northern California coast came typically from the south. This notion is solidly false. The instructor refused to be corrected, and Peewee let it slide.

When letting foolishness slide became impossible, though, he was capable of taking a memorable stand. Once, on a crowded day at VFW's, during my first winter in San Francisco, a local surfer, riding a three-finned board, was behaving badly—stealing waves, jumping the queue, and threatening anyone who objected. Peewee warned him once, quietly. When the guy kept it up, then nearly decapitated another surfer with a clumsy pullout, Peewee invited him to leave the water. The miscreant snarled. Peewee knocked him off his board, turned his board over, and, with small, sharp blows with the palm of his hand, broke off each of its fins. Surfing is difficult, if not impossible, without fins. The definned one paddled in. Years later, Ocean Beach regulars who hadn't seen this incident were still asking those who had to tell it again. (A basic orientation for many people is still their group of friends as adolescents.)

Peewee was a locals' local. He was one of those guys who, when you surfed with them at Fort Point, under the Golden Gate Bridge, could look up and tell you where all the elevators inside the bridge were; how many workers were entombed in its pilings; how long the lines of men waiting for work were during its construction, back in the Depression, and how much they were paid; and how much the present-day maintenance workers, some of whom were friends or relatives, earned. Peewee was a union carpenter, and often served as the job steward on construction sites. When I asked him about that, he said simply, "I believe in the construction unions."

He was equally closemouthed on the subject of big waves. He preferred them to small waves, he said, because they were uncrowded. "Crowds can get tense," he said. "In big waves, it's just you and the ocean." Peewee was known around Ocean Beach for his iron nerves in big surf, but it took him a number

of years, he said, to build up to facing very big waves. "Each new wipeout makes you realize, though, that you're actually safer than you thought. It's just water. It's just holding your breath. The wave will pass." Did he never panic? "Sure. But all you have to do, really, is relax. You'll always come up." In retrospect, he said, the times when he had thought he was drowning were not in fact such close calls.

Mark was more voluble, naturally, about big surf. He, too, believes that big waves are less dangerous than most people think, but he talks about the ocean's behavior in extreme situations—and the human response to it—in clinical, even scientific terms, emphasizing factors such as galvanic skin response and certain chemicals released by the liver. "Time slows down when you're out in big waves—not just while you're riding a wave but the whole time you're out," he says. "Your mind keeps playing survival messages. Your concentration is absolute. It's the possibility of death." This is also, according to Mark, what happens to people who have cancer, and even to those around them. Lives are suddenly viewed from vital new perspectives; the possibility of imminent death concentrates the mind and spirit. There are psychologists who say that ferocious concentration on one activity for a period of time can lead to a heightened sense of well-being, even to euphoria, and Mark believes it. Surfing big waves, he says, leaves him "feeling like I'm going to explode with joy."

Although death by surfing pleasure seems to pose no threat to Peewee, he and Mark have shared many extraordinary moments in the water. Every surfer has a limit to the size of the waves he will venture among, and during the years I lived in San Francisco it chanced that their separate upper limits were in a range not broached by anyone else at Ocean Beach. Thus, while they were an unlikely pair, and were quite competitive (on a bad day, the best word that Mark had for Peewee was "laconic"; the key term in Peewee's description of Doc, meanwhile, was "ego"), they were often the only two people willing to paddle out on the days that Mark liked to call "epic."

Mark's upper limit seemed at times not to exist. He had a great ambition, for instance, to be the first to surf an infamous shipping hazard known as the Potato Patch, several miles off the Golden Gate. He once persuaded Peewee to go out there with him in a speedboat, on a day when Mark estimated that the waves they found were between twenty-five and fifty feet. (Peewee thought they were twenty to twenty-five.) Certainly they were the largest waves that either of them had ever seen. Nobody got out of the boat, and Peewee renounced any ambition to ride the Patch. It wasn't even a surf spot, he said. But Mark went out there again, on a smaller day, a couple of years later, and actually took off on a wave. He never got to his feet, but he wrote about the experience for a surfing magazine, and he still hopes to surf the Patch someday.

"Doc's kind of building a reputation here," Peewee conceded, ten years after Mark started surfing Ocean Beach. What about Peewee himself? "I'm kind of maintaining a reputation here," he admitted. But his interest in big waves was not indiscriminate; he didn't try to surf every big day that came along. Mark would go out in anything, no matter how big, no matter how ugly; Peewee surfed big waves only when they were clean. What was the biggest wave he had ridden at Ocean Beach? "The biggest wave I've taken off on out here, I didn't make," he said. "The wave was perfect—my board was just too small. It was an eight-four. I only got about three-quarters of the way down the face. I fell, and I got sucked up and over. It was the scariest moment I've had. I thought I'd never stop free-falling. But it wasn't so bad." How big was it? "Twelve feet," Peewee said. "Maybe fifteen." He shrugged. "I hardly try to measure waves in feet anymore." That was just as well, because plenty of surfers around the city believed they had seen Peewee ride waves larger than fifteen feet. It was also notoriously difficult to estimate the size of a wave you were riding. What was the biggest surf he had ever seen ridden at Ocean Beach?

"The day after Thanksgiving, sometime back in the seventies," Peewee said. "Outside VFW's. Breaking top to bottom. It was twenty feet, if you have to measure it. Bigger than anything Doc has surfed here. There were three guys out. Only one of them, Bones, was from the city. He lives in Hawaii now. This was before Doc moved here."

The size of waves is a topic of constant dispute among surfers. Some measure the wave face from the lowest point in the trough, producing dimensions that sound impressive—except that underestimation is más macho. Underestimation is practiced with the greatest aplomb on the North Shore of Oahu, in Hawaii, the big-wave capital of the surfing world. On the North Shore, a wave must be the size of a small cathedral before the locals will call it eight feet. The arbitrariness of all this is obvious from the fact that among surfers there is no such thing as a nine-foot wave or a thirteen-foot wave. (Anyone who says there is would be laughed off the beach.) Ricky Grigg, an oceanographer and big-wave surfer, used to phone a friend who lived at Waimea Bay, the premier big-wave spot on the North Shore, for surf reports when he lived in Honolulu. His friend's wife, who could see the surf from her kitchen, could never grasp surfers' irrational system of wave measurement, but she could estimate with fair accuracy how many refrigerators stacked on top of one another would equal the height of the waves, so Grigg used to ask her, "How many refrigerators is it?"

Wave size ends up being a matter of local consensus. In San Francisco, the standard unit of measurement is the height of a man. A "double-overhead" wave is one that looks, from shore, to be twice the height of someone riding it. And a double-overhead wave is, for no good reason, reckoned to be eight feet. A triple-overhead wave is ten feet. A wave four times the height of a rider is twelve feet. Five times is fifteen feet, more or less. Beyond that, the system disintegrates. Peter Cole, a veteran big-wave rider, got it right when he wrote that big waves are best measured not in feet but in increments of fear.

Sloat looked to be at least five refrigerators as I pulled into the parking lot one Sunday afternoon in January. The waves breaking on the outside bar were difficult to see, though. The sun was shining, but the surf was generating a salt mist that filled the air on both sides of the Great Highway—a sharp-smelling haze like some essence from the bottom of the ocean. There was no wind, but gray plumes of spray rose nonetheless from the tops of the largest waves, lifted by the sheer mass and speed of their crests as they plunged. The inside bar was a maelstrom of dredging, midsized killer waves, their dark-chocolate faces smeared with drifts of foam. The outside bar looked ill-defined, the swell confused, but the outside waves themselves were smooth and shiny, with clean peaks and sections looming randomly in the mist. Some of them looked ridable—loveliness amid lethality.

I was surprised to see the Sloat lot full. It was Super Bowl day, the 49ers were playing, and kickoff was within the hour. A high percentage of the cars, trucks, and vans were familiar, though: the Ocean Beach surf crew was out in force. Some of its members slouched behind steering wheels, others sat on the hoods of their cars, a few stood on the embankment above the beach. Nobody was in a wetsuit, and no boards that I could see had been unsheathed, but everyone was staring out to sea. I looked for a minute, and saw nothing. I rolled down my window and called to Sloat Bill, who was standing on the embankment, heavy shoulders hunched, hands jammed in the pockets of a ski jacket. He turned, regarded me for a moment from behind mirrored sunglasses, then cocked his head toward the surf and said, "Doc and Peewee."

I got out and stood on the embankment, shielding my eyes against the glare, and eventually picked out a pair of tiny figures rising over a massive silver swell. "Neither one of them's taken off for the last half hour," Sloat Bill said. "It's really shifty." Someone had set up a camera on a tripod, I noticed, but he wasn't bothering to man it; the mist made photography hopeless. "They're both riding yellow guns," Sloat Bill said. He kept his eyes on the horizon. He seemed miserable, I thought—even more gruff than usual. He was probably agonizing over whether to try to paddle out himself. Sloat Bill thought of himself as a big-wave surfer, and he went out on some huge days. But he was a slow paddler, and often never got past the inside bar. He was powerfully built, with a great hull neck—he still played competitive rugby, though he was over forty—and he could probably bench-press twice what I could, but fast paddling is not simply a matter of strength. Making a board glide on the surface is partly a matter of artful leverage, and pushing through waves is largely a matter of presenting the least possible resistance to them. Big waves demand a paradoxical combination—ferocity and passivity—that Sloat Bill had never seemed to master. He had only the ferocity. He rolled in the waves like a redwood log, or a canister of pure testosterone. He amused other surfers, very few of whom played rugby. He fascinated me, although I suspected that I irritated him. He once called me a Communist during a poker game at his apartment. Worse, I had sometimes made it out on days when he had not. Today, I wasn't tempted to try. Indeed, I couldn't see how Mark and Peewee had made it—or how Peewee had been persuaded to try. It wasn't his sort of surf—not clean. I stood with Sloat Bill awhile, trying to keep Mark and Peewee in sight. They disappeared behind swells for minutes at a time. They paddled north constantly, barely holding position against a southbound current. After fifteen minutes, one of them suddenly appeared at the top of an immense wall, paddling furiously toward shore at the head of a peak that looked at least a block wide. A volley of sharp shouts and curses went up along the Sloat embankment. But the wave passed the paddler by; it stood sheer and black across the horizon for what seemed a long time, then silently broke, top to bottom. There were relieved shouts, and strangely bitter curses. The assortment of non-surfers in the parking lot, on the embankment, on the beach, all looked up in confusion. None of them seemed aware that anybody was in the water.

I had somewhere else to be, across the city—at a friend's house, where a group of people, none of them surfers, gathered every year to watch the Super Bowl. I asked Sloat Bill how long Mark and Peewee had been out. "Couple hours," he said. "It took 'em thirty-five minutes to get out." He didn't turn his head.

Twenty minutes later, I was still there, still waiting for something to happen. The mist was thicker, the sun was lower in the western sky. I was now going to miss the kickoff. A couple of big sets had come through, but Mark and Peewee had been nowhere near them. Although there was still no wind, the conditions were, if anything, deteriorating. Huge rips had started moving through the outside bars, increasing their confusion. Soon the only question would be how Mark and Peewee were going to get back in.

Finally, somebody caught a wave. It was a gigantic right, four or five times overhead, with a wave in front of it that blocked all view of the rider after the drop. Several seconds passed. Then the rider reappeared, fifty yards down the line and climbing the face at a radical angle, eliciting screams of surprise from the gallery. It was impossible to tell who was surfing. He rode all the way to the top of the wave, pivoted against the sky, then plunged out of sight again. There were appreciative cries and groans. "Fucker's ripping," someone said. The rider was, in fact, surfing the wave as if it were a third the size it really was. And he kept it up, wheeling and carving huge cutbacks, riding from the trough to the crest in unnervingly sharp arcs as the wave in front of his died down, affording us an untrammelled view. It was still impossible to tell who it was, even after the yellow of his board became visible through the haze. I had never seen Mark or Peewee surf a wave that size with such abandon. The wave lost half its height,

and all its power, when it hit the deep water between the bars, but the rider found a freak piece of steep swell that carried him cleanly across the flat spot and onto the inside bar. Somehow, as the wave jacked over the inside bar, he slipped down the face early enough to make a turn, and then drew a breathtaking line and ran for forty yards under a ledging lip, his arms outstretched against a backlit wall, before he finally straightened off, escaping the lip's explosion by sailing far out onto the flat water in front of the wave. He stayed on his feet when the white water, its energy exhausted, finally caught him, and he worked it back and forth all the way to the sand.

As he started up the beach, board tucked under his arm, it was still difficult to tell who it was. Finally, it became clear that it was Peewee. At the moment of recognition, Sloat Bill stepped forward, to the edge of the embankment, and solemnly began to clap his hands. Others, including me, joined in. Peewee looked up, startled. His face filled with alarm, and then sheepishness. He turned and angled south across the beach, shaking his head, and climbed the embankment where no one could see him.

I had been bewitched by surfing since I was a kid. I had often wanted to break the spell; Mark, meanwhile, wanted to deepen it. I remembered the first time I accompanied him up the Mendocino coast, shortly after moving to San Francisco. The surf was big and scary, with a numbing northwest wind ruining every surf break except Point Arena Cove, which was protected by a thick kelp bed. I gingerly followed Mark out through the channel there, intimidated by the wind, the freezing water, and, above all, the heavy-gauge waves plunging and grinding down the rock reef. Mark threw himself into the fray, of course, surfing aggressively and noisily enjoying himself, and I gradually moved farther out along the reef, taking off on bigger and bigger waves. Finally, I took off on a very big wave indeed, and nearly fell when the nose of my board caught a piece of chop on the takeoff. I recovered, barely, and managed to make the wave. Afterward, Mark, who had seen that takeoff from the channel, said that he had actually been frightened for me. "That would have been really, really bad if you hadn't made it," he said. "That wave was a solid ten feet, and the only thing that got you down that face was twenty years of experience." It was true that I had been surfing on pure instinct at that point, too intent to be scared, but somehow Mark's assessment pleased me deeply. I was trying to figure out how to live with the disabling enchantment of surfing—and with Mark's efforts to weave the spell tighter—and I realized that he had said a lot of things that pleased me deeply.

He had also said a lot of things that infuriated me. Once, on another trip to Mendocino, while we were surfing a beautiful little cove we called Secrets, I had just ridden a wave rather well, I thought, and Mark had seen it. "You really got a rhythm going on that one," he said as we paddled back out. "You need to do that more." Giving unwanted advice in the water was an outrageous breach of what I understood as the surfing social contract, and the condescension of his remark only made it worse. It was ridiculous, I knew, to be so sensitive, and yet surfing was always this strangely private exhibition—something Mark couldn't help but know. He was insulated in some ways, though, from how other people felt. His manic insouciance in public places, for instance, owed much to the fact that no one wanted to mess with a guy his size. I had noticed that, while pushing through a crowd, he didn't tap people on the elbow to get past but, instead, wrapped his huge hands around their shoulders and gently shifted them out of his path, seemingly oblivious of the rapid sequence of surprise, irritation, and intimidation he left in his wake. But the true source of his endless self-assurance was not his height, I thought, but his abiding sense of entitlement and invulnerability.

A good part of my enchantment in San Francisco was with the seamlessness of Mark's world, its willed

continuities and focus, its manifest satisfactions. My own life felt riven by discontinuities. Surfing, specifically, was like some great, battered remnant of childhood that kept drifting incongruously into the foreground. More specifically still, surfing big waves felt atavistic, a compulsive return to some primal scene to prove some primal fact of manhood. Over the time I had been surfing Ocean Beach, I had become fascinated by Peewee as well. His world also seemed oddly seamless, although in a quite different way from Mark's. The powerful continuities between his past and his present, between his childhood and his adulthood, were links of place, of community, of character. They were so quiet. They didn't seem to need to display themselves.

Early in the spring of my third year in San Francisco, after a series of storms, the sandbar at Outside VFW's began to break regularly for the first time since I had moved to the city. I saw why the wave was a local legend. The bar was unusually long and straight for Ocean Beach, with a deep channel at its northern end. Northwest swells produced clean waves there, but only short rides. The waves hit the bar straight on; one had to take off very near the channel to make them. More westerly swells, on the other hand, struck the bar at a slight angle, making for long, fast lefts of exceptional quality. Since the bar began to break only when the swell was over six feet, Outside VFW's was never crowded. I had watched it break several times, including a couple of frightening days when only Mark, Peewee, Tim Bodkin, and a scatter of other certified big-wave riders paddled out, and I'd actually surfed it a few times on marginal days, when it wasn't breaking with much authority—before I ever had to face the question of paddling out myself on a big, serious day. It was Mark, of course, who forced the issue. "You can use my eight-eight," he kept saying, indicating the yellow gun in the back of his van as he scrambled into his wetsuit. "I'll ride my eight-six."

It occurred to me that Mark might be trying, for his own reasons, to offer my life one last time to the gods of Ocean Beach. Maybe he already knew what I was trying to find the nerve to tell him—that I had decided to move back to New York. Maybe he was hoping to punish me for attempted desertion. I had mixed feelings about leaving, but one of the biggest was relief. Each winter at Ocean Beach, I had had at least one bad scare—some heavy passage in big surf which troubled my sleep for many nights afterward. Bob Wise understood. "Surfers never do drown out here," he once told me. "It's tourists and drunk bikers and sailors who drown. But even the most experienced surfers get convinced they're about to drown out here at least once a winter. That's what makes Ocean Beach so weird." Mark, who thrived on the weirdness, would not understand, I assumed. Still, justified or not, I was glad to be getting away without drowning. I was also glad to be getting out from under Mark's evangelizing gaze. I had heeded his general advice to take surfing more seriously, but there were other things I took more seriously still. It was a shame that riding waves was unlikely to be a mainstay of my daily round in Manhattan, but in truth I was bored with California. I was also, when it came to surfing, tired of being a sidekick. I just didn't know how to tell Mark I was going. I didn't want to hear about how I was swerving from the surfer's path.

Ten or fifteen guys were hanging out on the seawall. VFW's—Inside VFW's—was the most popular spot along Ocean Beach, and most of the people standing around watching the waves that day, and making no move to go out, surfed there regularly. Among them was an older guy, a housepainter named Rich, who was one of the dominant surfers down at this end of the beach. Rich scowled at me as I walked past, the yellow eight-eight under my arm, and I realized I had never seen him out in waves over six feet. Today was eight to ten, at least. The swell was massive and fairly west. It was not immaculate, there was a little sideshore wind, and a raging rip—but several stunning lefts roared through, unriden,

while we were getting ready to go out. Bodkin and Peewee were already out, and each had caught a couple of huge waves, but they were surfing conservatively, and letting the ledgier sets go by.

Paddling Mark's board felt like paddling a miniature oil tanker. I kept an old single-fin seven-six for big days, but I had been riding a three-fin six-nine most of the winter. Thick-railed and sharp-nosed, the eight-eight gun floated me high out of the water, and I had no trouble keeping up with Mark as we started out through the channel. The water was brownish-green and very cold; the channel, which ran clear from the shore break out to sea, with no inside bar to cross, was choppy and spooky nonetheless, with huge swells sweeping into it from both sides, forming fat, unpleasant A-frames that half broke before they vanished. There was a shallow outside bar to the north, where enormous waves leaped up and disembowelled themselves with a horrible growl. To the south, the last section of the long, winding left at Outside VFW's wasn't much more inviting. It, too, looked shallow and extremely thick. Mark and I paused to watch a smooth-faced wave pitch heavily over the last section of the bar, barely twenty yards from where we lay. Into the great, dark barrel it formed Mark bellowed "Death!" The idea seemed to please him.

I kept angling out as Mark turned left, cutting across the edge of the bar. Peewee and Bodkin were a couple of hundred yards south, and Mark made a beeline for them, but I circled far around, preferring to look like a coward rather than take a chance on getting caught by a big set. A small set rolled through. It was too far inside for any of us to catch, but even it thundered ominously when it finally broke. I found the scale of things out here thoroughly daunting. I did not look forward to seeing a big set. I checked my position against the shore as I slowly moved south. Huge-lettered graffiti on the seawall—"Maria" and "Kimo" and "Ptah"—marked my progress. The shore looked, as it often did on big days, bizarrely peaceful and normal. A dark line of cypress trees rose beyond the seawall—a windbreak for the ocean end of Golden Gate Park—and two windmills rose above the trees. Just north, the cliffs were brushed with pink flowers and lined by a stone belvedere, from the ruins of the old Sutro mansion. It all looked so stable. I kept yanking my gaze back and forth, craning to see where I was, then craning to see if anything nightmarish was yet looming out at sea.

Being out in big surf is dreamlike. Terror and ecstasy ebb and flow ceaselessly around the edges of things, each threatening to overwhelm the dreamer. An unearthly beauty fills the world, in scenes that seem mythic even as they unfold. The experience usually arouses in me a ferocious ambivalence: I want to be nowhere else; I want to be anywhere else. I want to drift and gaze, drinking it in, but know, at the same time, that maximum alertness is crucial. Truly big surf is a force field that dwarfs you, and you survive your time there only by reading those forces carefully and well. But the ecstasy of actually, riding big waves requires placing yourself right beside the terror of being buried by them: the filament separating the two states becomes whisker-thin. Dumb luck weighs heavily, painfully. And when things go badly, as they inevitably do—when you're caught inside by or fail to make a very large wave—all your skill and strength and judgment mean nothing.

Nobody maintains his dignity while getting rumbled by a big wave. The only thing you can hope to control at that point is the panic.

I edged south slowly, toward Mark and the others, taking deep, regular breaths in an effort to slow my heart, which had been pounding unpleasantly since the moment I first thought seriously about paddling out. Mark took off on a wave as I approached the lineup. He screamed as he launched into a mammoth face and disappeared behind a seething brown wall. The takeoff spot, I noted, was directly off a big red graffito, "Ptah Lives." Bodkin, who was still sifting with Peewee, shouted my name, grinning widely. It

was a grin that struck me as half wicked amusement at my safety-first route to the lineup, half congratulation that I was out there at all. Peewee simply nodded hello. Peewee's blandness in the water was usually a blessing. His poker-faced virtuosity left psychological space for other surfers, which was something that many of them, I believed, appreciated; in fact, I believed that if the rider of that remarkable wave at Sloat on the day of the Super Bowl had turned out to be Mark people would not have applauded. Sometimes, though—today, perhaps—I thought Peewee carried surf cool a bit far. Of course, he probably didn't consider Outside VFW's at this size a particularly scary place, and maybe didn't realize that for me it was a stretch.

As it happened, luck—and the right board—were with me that afternoon. I caught several big, good waves over the next couple of hours. I didn't surf them particularly well—it was all I could do to keep the eight-eight pointed in the right general direction—but they were long, fast rides, and after each of them I managed to scramble back outside unscathed. Mark's board was wonderfully stable, and allowed me to get into waves extremely early. I even caught what Mark later called "the wave of the day." On another afternoon, on another board, I would probably have let it pass, but I found myself at the head of the peak alone, far outside, as a vast wave arrived. The wall stretched north for blocks, seemingly impossible to make, but by that point I had great faith in the bar and the channel. I got in early, using a small cross chop on the face to launch myself over the ledge. I had to fight off a little jolt of acrophobia as I jumped to my feet—the bottom of the wave looked miles beneath me. Halfway down the face, I leaned back hard into a turn, struggling to stay over my board as it gained speed across the millrace running up the face. My nerve wobbled a second time when I looked over my shoulder at the wall ahead. It was much bigger than I had expected: taller and steeper and more threatening. I turned away and concentrated, as if I were wearing blinders, on the few feet of rushing water immediately in front of me, carving long, gradual high-speed turns. The wave held up beautifully, and I made it easily, although the final, house-thick section next to the channel shot me out so fast that I had to abandon all pretense of control and simply stand there, knees bent, a gratified passenger.

Peewee was in the channel, paddling past as I pulled out. He nodded. We began paddling back out together. My, entire body was trembling. After a minute, I couldn't help myself. I asked, "How big was that wave?"

Peewee laughed, not unkindly. "Two feet," he said.

There are no such waves in my world now. On summer weekends, I surf Fire Island, where conditions are most often ridiculous, never very good, certainly never scary. I find myself copying out a passage from "Beyond Good and Evil." "We moderns, we half-barbarians," Nietzsche writes. "We are in the midst of our bliss only when we are most in danger." I remember, ambivalently, that bliss. Surf kitsch, meanwhile, is everywhere. The Mutant Ninja Turtles shout "Cowabunga!" and somebody's T-shirt on Central Park West touts "Surfeteria, A Bar and Restaurant for Retired Surfers" over a long list of California surf spots. I follow the T-shirt down the street, trying to read the list. I realize I've surfed every spot on it. Why is my youth being recycled as farce this way? And in such rapacious detail! In France, I discover, any product that can possibly be packaged in a surfing motif is. Cigarettes, cars, cognac—all invoke le surf. Even the national-lottery game cards for a while featured an image of a surfer on a wave.

On late-night television, I stumble upon a surfing contest. Two red-hot kids are tearing apart one-foot waves in conditions that can only, be described as funkdog. They are, moreover, hassling one another,

each paddling around frantically trying to trick the other into committing “interference”—a call by the judges which apparently costs one valuable point. The waves are not worth riding, let alone hassling for. And the announcer gets everything wrong, calling maneuvers by the wrong names, getting excited over ordinary moves while overlooking extraordinary ones, and, in the midst of his misnarration, taking journalistic indirection to new heights: “And the California regular-footer and former world champion pulls a radical roller coaster here at the United States Surfing Championships at Huntington Beach, California.” He keeps calling his color co-host “Robert Bartholomew,” and the co-host, a great Australian surfer known as Rabbit Bartholomew, never bothers to correct him. Neither does Bartholomew bother to point out that the surf we are watching is contemptible. It’s obviously part of the deal that he must pretend that this obscene parody of surfing is very exciting. I remember surfing with Bartholomew at his home break in Queensland when he was doing things on waves that the rest of us could not yet comprehend. I comprehend him too well tonight.

The surf magazines have discovered San Francisco—partly through the efforts of Mark, who started editing a medical-advice column for *Surfer* shortly after founding, at a conference he organized in Fiji, the Surfers’ Medical Association. His views and big-surf exploits have become a staple item in the magazine’s regional columns. Young surfers all dream of seeing themselves in the surf mags, and it seems that Mark has finally found, in middle age, a way to get himself in. Aaron Plank, the hottest young surfer in San Francisco, made it in through the front door: a phenomenal fourteen-frame sequence in which he is completely hidden from view for seven frames—about four seconds—and then emerges cleanly from a double-overhead Ocean Beach left. This sequence was part of a 1990 *Surfer* article about San Francisco that smelled to me like the end of an era. The whole surfing world knows about Ocean Beach now. There is even, I am told, an annual pro surfing contest at VFW’s.

But the strangest news I’ve had of San Francisco through *Surfer*—to which I still subscribe—was a paean to Peewee, by Mark. “Quiet, seemingly egoless, he draws little attention to himself—until he paddles out and goes off,” Mark writes. “Best spot on the beach—Peewee’s there. Best wave of the set—Peewee’s on it. Best wave of the day—Peewee got it.” Mark compares Peewee to Clint Eastwood, and the famous fin-busting incident is mentioned.

I was wrong, by the way, to fear Mark’s reaction to the news that I was leaving San Francisco. He never missed a beat. He hasn’t passed up any opportunities since then, though, to let me know about all the great waves I’m missing at Ocean Beach, where last winter was surely the best in living memory, or on the various surf trips I’ve inexplicably declined to join him on—to Indonesia, Costa Rica, Fiji, Scotland. When I last spoke to him, earlier this month, he had just returned from Alaska, where he had chartered a plane, explored hundreds of miles of coast, and, near the foot of a glacier, discovered and surfed magnificent waves, alone, off a beach marked with fresh grizzly tracks.

The last time I was in San Francisco, I went by Wise’s shop and found the same crew lounging around the counter, telling many of the same stories. The photographs of Mark on the wall had multiplied, however, into dozens of well-framed, captioned shots of various locals surfing big Ocean Beach. It seemed that Mark and company had founded a new club—the Double Overhead Association. To be a D.O.A. member, you had to provide a picture of yourself on an Ocean Beach wave that was at least double-overhead. The pictures went up on Wise’s wall. I half wished I could join, and I was pleased to see that a photograph I had taken—of Edwin Salem on a huge, rainy day south of Sloat—was up there. I looked for the beautiful shot of Peewee at Outside VFW’s, but it was gone. Wise said he didn’t know what had become of it.

On the wall by my desk in New York a photograph hangs: me half crouched inside a slate-gray barrel off Noriega Street, Ocean Beach. Mark gave Caroline the photograph; she had it framed for my birthday. It's a great shot, but it frustrates me to look at it, because the photographer fired an instant too soon. Just after the moment recorded by the camera, I disappeared into the wave. That's the shot I covet: the wave alone, with the knowledge that I am in there, drawing a high line behind the thick, pouring, silver-beaded curtain. That invisible passage, not this moment of anticipation, was the heart of the ride. But pictures are not about what a ride felt like; they are about what it looked like to others. This picture shows a dark sea; my memory of that wave is drenched with silver light. That's because I was looking south while I navigated its depths, and as I slipped through its brilliant almond eye back into the world.