

### Mark Kreidler

Inside a Season of Triumph



WAVE

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## VOODOO WAVE

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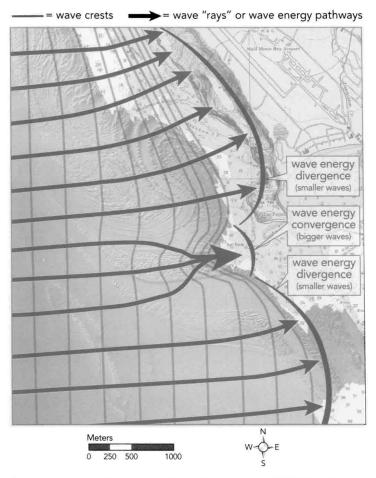
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# VOODOO

W. W. NORTON & COMPANY NEW YORK LONDON

For my family and for Donald and Shelly Wood original soul surfers

#### Mavericks—Half Moon Bay, California



Wave energy is displaced up and down the coast around Half Moon Bay, often the result of storms formed off the coast of Japan. The large arrow in the center shows the point at which wave energies converge to form Mayerick's.

#### PROLOGUE

The reef came first. On the human scale, it has always been there. In geologic time, it was hundreds of thousands of years in the making—millions of years, maybe. And it was a fluke, the random result of a hodgepodge collection of rock and sand and sediment, thrust up and folded by the San Gregorio fault. As the years passed it became a fortress. While the beds around it withered and sank, the reef continued to thrive. In time it came to resemble nothing so much as a ramp, a fixed and dramatic rise in the ocean floor that could concentrate the deep, incessant swells of the Pacific Ocean and launch them heavenward. It gave birth to the wave.

Once people had found it, a half mile beyond little Pillar Point on the San Mateo County coastline in Northern California, they would imbue the surf point with human qualities: the wave was temperamental, or nasty, or beneficent, or treacherous. In reality, it was the most neutral thing in the world. It was a force, not a personality. The wave was relentless, and relentlessly changing. It stood at the far end of the storms that formed out over the North Pacific near Japan, storms that dragged wind across the water and created the friction that pushed the swells toward North America. When everything broke just right, when those swells came pulsing toward Half Moon Bay from the west at precisely the proper angle and with enough speed, and hit that reef-ramp more than 20 feet below the ocean's surface and stood straight up, they became curling mountains of water, hard and cold and—if you wanted to assign a personality trait to them—terribly unforgiving. The locals called it Maverick's.

Long before Jeff Clark made his first lonely journey to the outer reef in 1975, himself still just a teenager, Maverick's was there to be ridden. But not by many. To this day, it is among the most exclusive clubs in the world. While thousands of people over the years might eventually paddle out toward the break in order to say they've done it, or at least to see the wave up close, the truth is that perhaps 150 people on the planet have the constitution, skill, and basic disregard for personal safety to paddle in, stand up, and traverse the 40- or 50-foot wave faces under the forbidding conditions that the break routinely serves up. The water is frigid; the surf pattern can smash a rider almost directly into a jagged, exposed reef; great white sharks migrate through the area; the point is isolated and often cloaked in fog or deep gray cloud cover.

The payoff: the ride of a lifetime.

Before Clark was there, the reef stood formed; the wave was ready. It was a relentless force regardless of whether it was ever visited by man. Still, what Clark achieved in '75, all by himself, was a feat that becomes more lustrous year by year. He inaugurated a process that now brings the people from around the world to the point, to see it, to marvel at it, and, very occasionally, to attempt it. They come in groups, in the safety of numbers if they are surfers, and try to fathom the force before them. They think about Clark, exploring this world on his own, taking ultimate risks with no one trailing along to help him or initiate an emergency rescue, and they shake their heads. Sometimes they laugh out loud at the thought: such a crazy, reckless, inspired thing to do, daring fate that way. And they agree: you'd have to be out of your mind to try.



Chapter 1

OUNDING THE CORNER AT PILLAR Point, the surfer faced the morning cloud cover and the light salt

spray and emerged onto a thin strip of beach. The sandy runway led to the rocks and the seawall and, well beyond his sightline, massive green barrels of water that he knew were breaking out at sea. The storied ridge beside him already teemed with too many people for the bluff's crumbling edges to hold. And seeing the radical conditions around him and feeling the cold sand where he stood, and knowing what he knew, which only a lifetime spent at this precise point could tell him, Grant Washburn immediately understood two things.

First, he had an excellent chance either to catch the ride of his life or to get himself killed, with pain.

Second, the people on the water weren't the only ones about to get abused.

Standing there with his nine-foot eight-inch board in tow, Washburn, himself a towering six foot six, stopped momentarily to take in the scene unfolding around him. It was a circus on the sand. There were tents and booths everywhere, awards stands, scaffolding, sound equipment, sponsors' goodies piled on makeshift tables. There was a bourbon booth—were those mixed drinks being passed around? In the air, the festival aroma of pizza and sausages wafted through; vendors were peddling them a few yards away from a stand where you could buy your own Maverick's T-shirt and other memorabilia. It looked like the last hundred yards before the exit at a theme park.

From where the spectators were milling about, there was a zero percent chance of getting a decent look at the surf point itself and the wave that had brought about this carnival. All anyone could see were low clouds, high sun, and some water. They were better off buying a pepperoni slice and heading back home to watch the event webcast on their laptops. But Washburn already knew that the people here weren't going to leave. Most of them were rank amateurs; they didn't know what they didn't know. It was this thought, not the February air coming off the water from Maverick's, that sent a chill through Washburn.

Grant could tell at a glance that the spectators didn't understand that they would never be able to see the event from this vantage, not even if the clouds gave way to a perfect, crystalline afternoon. They had only the faintest idea that they were putting themselves in harm's way by standing so close to the seawall. And since it was a public area, no one was

particularly motivated to tell them they shouldn't stand in a place where they had a legal right to be. Sure, you *could* stand there, but common sense and long experience told Grant that the spectators were almost guaranteed to get wave-whipped. But nothing was going to stop them today.

This was an event, after all. It was not a surf day, or at least not merely a surf day. The people in the water today were going to risk their lives and limbs to an extent that was unusual even by the rugged standards of this place; many of them were going to get trashed by the waves even if they avoided a full-blown tragedy. That idea alone made this a happening. Washburn had to admit the truth: even people who did know better—who knew the wave's fickle moods—were on the beach. There were results to be announced, a webcast to be produced, cell phone subscription plans to be hawked, an event to be recorded and edited, food to be sold.

Grant Washburn, at just that moment, felt that he was standing at the corner of Soul and Commerce avenues. It was right there at Pillar Point.

By that winter, Maverick's had by many accounts fulfilled its promoters' dream and become the Super Bowl of bigwave surfing events. It was classic overkill. However many people were too many, however much commercialism was too much, from now on the competition would approach the outer limits, then exceed them. Washburn had seen the event blossom and build for years on the commercial end; as one of the break's longtime veterans, he'd had a hand in the growing popularity of the place among people who had never surfed and would never surf. He had given innumerable interviews;

he had shared his time and knowledge with documentarians, surf scientists, feature writers, filmmakers. He had watched as the ensuing gold rush on the point nearly trampled one of his best friends, Jeff Clark, the founder of and godfather to the contest itself. Grant had surfed in every competition, filmed the wave dozens of times, and collaborated on a book of photos and surf essays about it. He was proud to be one of the tiny handful of humans who would ever attempt something as clearly insane as chasing down the side of a 50-foot wave face; and he believed in celebrating, not hiding, the fact of the site and of those who, like him, loved it without reservation.

Neither Washburn nor any of his brothers in competition opposed getting a little appearance money to surf the wave that they gleefully rode for free, or at a net loss, during the rest of the season. It was the time on the water that they all valued anyway, the fraternity and the challenge and the risk and thrill of it, and that indescribable reward of harnessing a tiny fraction of the awesome natural power that rolled and rumbled through Pillar Point, eternal and unrelenting. That part was spiritual and real. The rest was simply business—grabbing a little bit of the coin that other people had figured out how to wring out of Mavs. If anyone deserved a piece, surely it was the guys taking the chances.

Still, today was different. It was bigger and scarier in the water, more crowded and more disorganized on land. Washburn already could see ahead; he could see where it was going to go bad. He didn't want anybody in pain who hadn't volunteered for it. "You're going to get washed away," Washburn said matter-of-factly to the cluster of phone-company vendors in front of him. He looked around again and remembered why, years before, he had told his wife and daughters to stop coming to the beach on contest day. He alone among the Washburns would be the one to take chances—and even then, at age forty-two, the risks he was willing to take on the wave were more calculated than ever. Nevertheless, the risks were there, and they carried a heavy penalty—never more so than today. There would be no such rolls of the dice on behalf of the other Washburns.

Across the sand, Grant found some of the people who were trying to handle security and safety, and he told them to move the merchandise and the tents—and, most of all, the spectators—to a safer location behind the bluff. Washburn knew that water was going to come crashing through the skinny strip of beach, blasting jets of heavy spray over the seawall and swamping everything in its path. It felt like that kind of a day, and to a surfer, that feel was everything. In truth, to anyone who had spent time at Maverick's over the years, this was an automatic conclusion based on the conditions. Waves were forming so far out in the water and bearing down on Maverick's with such force that they were bound to carry remnants of that potent energy all the way into the seawall. It had happened thousands of times before.

Beyond that, what was about to occur had been right there on anyone's computer screen to see, and it had been there for a while. Washburn and the other surfers had seen these swells moving across the Pacific for days; they'd been tracking the storm from its inception, following the forecast models that

their colleague Mark Sponsler had built on his website. This particular wave pattern had threaded the needle and made it across nearly 2,000 miles of open sea, all the way through to this one tiny dot on the map, and it was a beast. The surfers were stoked beyond all measure. Even for a storm that had created such giant swells, it was still an unbelievable long shot for all of the many variables to line up exactly right and deliver the big wave to Maverick's. It always seemed like a miracle when it happened.

This time, the surf was going to be epic. And epic out on the water meant a potential catastrophe on the beach.

Some part of Washburn wanted to find a megaphone and scream to the assembled masses to get out of danger, but he knew it would do little good. And ultimately Grant Washburn was here to surf, not handle security. His heat in the contest was going to begin soon. He wanted to get in the water and paddle out to really take a look at the waves that Mavs had produced for him today. He shook his head in dismay at the spectacle on the beach. He wasn't the world police—but maybe somebody needed to be. One of the security workers had nodded to Grant when he spoke of the danger, nodded as if to say he understood what Washburn was trying to tell him about moving everyone well away from the likely area of impact, but Grant felt sure that nothing was going to change. The sponsors were still arriving. The TV and webcast folks were dialed in. The fog was going to burn off into a spectacular, postcardperfect afternoon, and the surfers were going to dance inside a watery maw for the amusement—and perhaps amazement—of the masses.