



heads, and sea gulls descending, and all of us hungry, weak and buzzed, and the beach empty of anyone older.

Is it redundant to remember the day's waves as a *series*? First you had to wait for a set. And swim out to the last wave of the set, which was the biggest. And there were legends about the ninth waves of sets, and bigger legends about ninth waves of ninth sets, all diffracting in an infinity of excuses to stay in the water: Forever you ran at one more wave. The far-off ones seemed to build in slow motion, manufactured behind smaller decoys, haughty and monumentally steep, still adding inches and teeming at the crest and seemingly unreachable across a sudden

expanse. And more or less wildly you charged the face, elbows high, scooping water with both hands for traction, finally to be swept upward, swimming hard out in front of the curl, eyes fixed downward to take you through the drop. Rocketing forward then. Scattering small kids in inner tubes.

Recovering, laughing, pulling up trunks in the shallow playground where the backwater crashed like cymbals against baby waves. Trudge back out, hug your own goosebumped arms and wait for the next visitation/mirage.

The object, I think, was humility. And in that department I may have been a specialist: Just as the rest of

the gang played at adulthood (with pecking orders and anatomical jokes, loving the transparency of our own posturings), I was, in ways, a pretender to the gang: clearly the shyest and smallest—and so nicknamed, for the entire summer of 1969, "The Instigator." (A firecracker explodes in a trash can, and a half-dozen fingers point at *me*.) I didn't kid myself about being a leader, nor did I mind being awed by tall waves. Or even just good waves. Two days stand out. There was the Perfect Day in Newport Beach that my friend Scott insists cannot be described except by a two-panel cartoon, the first panel showing two guys in a wave, and in the second panel they've carved a

groove back to their towels, hands still tented an arm's length before them. And there was this one awful pilgrimage to the Wedge, just the name of which had me all but paralyzed on the trip down, a place where storm tides push against a jetty and form ten- or twenty-foot waves that break in waist-deep water. I pulled out of every single wave before it broke, to my lasting disgrace—a debacle that, in retrospect, segued directly to a different kind of high-school career entirely: one of false courage and cigarettes and beer, and scoffing at the whole world of genuine effort and risk.

There were more summers at the beach, but none with the strange safety of '69. The glow gave way, I now believe, to age, and to a certain sexual materialism that's never been entirely escapable since. Jeff Rhodes showed up the next summer with a girlfriend of his own, an incomprehensible acquisition: a half-foot taller than he was, and lithe, and with the first ankle bracelet ever. I became a stealthy watcher of a girl in a lace bikini with peach fuzz on the backs of her legs, and I smoked cigarettes instead of finding a way to say hello to somebody who looked so complete without clothes. And I remember consciously deciding in 1970 that if my face were tan enough I would be invulnerable; I rotated my towel with the angle of the sun, and for years after had a self-conscious, front-only tan. Weiser went on to UCLA, and pretty soon all of us had summer jobs. Mine was at night, and I tanned in the daytime, wondering if I was having a good summer.

Finally the beach became a thing for me to use, a compartment in a life with other goals. It was a good place to take a date for dinner, or to dream of owning a house, or to drive by. It was, in other words, a backdrop for human plans, instead of a reminder of what's real, a reminder of why some plans are worth having and others are unbelievably foolish.

But I still know what the ocean sounds like; I'll never program a noisebuster to turn it into Muzak. And I believe an eight-hour swim could probably heal me. If I let it. The dangers are so different nowadays: that the waves will seem smaller than they used to, and that my life will seem bigger than the ocean. And then I'll have missed the lesson absolutely. □