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The Winter of Frankie Machine

Don Winslow

Don Winslow has worked as a movie theatre manager, a production assistant, and as a private investigator. In addition to being a novelist he now works as an independent consultant in issues involving litigation arising from criminal behaviour. His novels include *The Death and Life of Bobby Z, California Fire and Life* and *The Power of the Dog*.

ALSO BY DON WINSLOW

Gentlemen's Hour

The Dawn Patrol

The Power of the Dog

California Fire and Life

The Death and Life of Bobby Z

While Drowning in the Desert

Isle of Joy

A Long Walk up the Water Slide

Way Down on the High Lonely

The Trail to Buddha's Mirror

A Cool Breeze on the Underground

the winter of frankie machine

DON WINSLOW

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To Bill McEneaney
Teacher, friend, virtuoso in the art of life

THE WINTER OF FRANKIE MACHINE

1

It’s a lot of work being me.

Is what Frank Machianno thinks when the alarm goes off at 3:45 in the morning. He rolls right out of the rack and feels the cold wooden floor on his feet.

He’s right.

It *is* a lot of work being him.

Frank pads across the wooden floor, which he personally sanded and varnished, and gets into the shower. It only takes him a minute to shower, which is one reason that he keeps his silver hair cut short.

“So it doesn’t take long to wash it” is what he tells Donna when she complains about it.

It takes him thirty seconds to dry off; then he wraps the towel around his waist—of which there’s a little more these days than he’d like—shaves, and brushes his teeth. His route to the kitchen takes him through his living room, where he picks up a remote, hits a button, and speakers start to blast *La Bohème.* One of the nice things about living alone—maybe the only good thing about living alone, Frank thinks—is that you can play opera at 4:00 a.m. and not bother anyone. And the house is solid, with thick walls like they used to build in the old days, so Frank’s early morning arias don’t disturb the neighbors, either.

Frank has a pair of season tickets to the San Diego Opera, and Donna is kind enough to pretend that she really enjoys going with him. She even pretended not to notice when he cried at the end of *La Bohème* when Mimi died.

Now, as he walks into the kitchen, he sings along with Victoria de los Angeles:

“. . . ma quando vien lo sgelo,
il primo sole è mio
il primo bacio dell’aprile è mio!
il primo sole è mio! . . .”

Frank loves his kitchen.

He laid the classic black-and-white floor tile himself and put in the counters and cabinets with the help of a carpenter buddy. He found the old butcher block in an antique store in Little Italy. It was in tough shape when he bought it—dried out and starting to crack—and it took him months of rubbing oil to get it back into prime condition. But he loves it for its flaws, its old chips and scars—“badges of honor,” he calls them, from years and years of faithful service.

“See, people *used* this thing,” he told Donna when she asked why he didn’t just buy a new one, which he could easily afford. “You get close, you can even smell where they used to chop the garlic.”

“Italian men and their mothers,” Donna said.

“My mother was a good cook,” Frank replied, “but it was my old man who could *really* cook. He taught me.”

And taught him good, Donna thought at the time. Whatever else you want to think about Frank Machianno—such as he can be a genuine pain in the ass—the man can cook. The man also knows how to treat a woman. And maybe the two attributes aren’t unrelated. Actually, it was Frank who introduced this idea to her.

“Making love is like making a good sauce,” he said to her one night in bed during the “afterglow.”

“Frank, quit while you’re ahead,” she told him.

He didn’t. “You have to take your time, use *just* the right amount of the right spices, savor each one, then *slowly* turn the heat up until it bubbles.”

The unique charm of Frank Machianno, she thought, lying there next to him, is that he just compared your body to a

Bolognese and you don't kick his ass out of bed. Maybe it's that he really does care so much. She has sat in the car while he's driven back and forth across town, going to five different stores for five different ingredients for a single dish. ("The *salsiccie* is *better* at Cristafaro's, Donna.") He brings the same attention to detail into the bedroom, and the man can make, shall we say, the sauce bubble.

This morning, like every morning, he takes raw Kona coffee beans from a vacuum-sealed jar and spoons them into the little roaster he bought from one of those chef's catalogs he's always getting in the mail.

Donna gives him endless crap about the coffee bean thing.

"Get an automatic maker with one of those timers," she said. "Then it would be ready when you get out of the shower. You could even sleep a few minutes later."

"But it wouldn't be as good."

"It's a lot of work being you," Donna said.

What can I say? Frank thought. It *is.*

"You've heard of the phrase 'quality of life'?" he asked her.

"I have," Donna said. "Usually referring to the terminally ill, whether they pull the plug or not."

"This is a quality-of-life issue," Frank replied.

And it is, he thinks this morning as he enjoys the smell of the roasting coffee beans and puts the water on to boil. Quality of life is about the *little* things—doing them well, doing them *right.* He takes a small pan from the rack that hangs over the butcher block and puts it on the stovetop. He lays a thin slice of butter in it, and when the butter just starts to bubble, he breaks an egg in the pan, and while it's frying, he slices an onion bagel in half. Then he carefully slips the egg out with a plastic spatula (*only* plastic—metal would scratch the nonstick surface, which is something Donna can't seem to remember, which is why she's not allowed to cook in Frank's *cucina*), lays it on one of the

slices, puts the other over it, and wraps the egg sandwich in a linen napkin to keep it warm.

Donna, of course, gives him grief about the daily egg.

“It’s an *egg,*” he tells her, “not a hand grenade.”

“You’re sixty-two years old, Frank,” she tells him. “You have to watch your cholesterol.”

“No, they found that wasn’t true about the eggs,” he says. “They got a bum rap.”

His daughter, Jill, harasses him about it, too. She just graduated premed at UCSD, so of course she knows everything. He tells her otherwise. “You’re *pre*med,” he says. “When you’re *med,* then you can give me agita about the eggs.”

America, Frank thinks—we’re the only country in the world afraid of our food.

By the time the lethal egg sandwich is ready, the coffee beans are roasted. He pours them into the grinder for exactly ten seconds, then pours the ground coffee into the French-press maker, pours the boiling water in, and lets it sit for the suggested four minutes.

The minutes aren’t wasted.

Frank uses them to get dressed.

“How a civilized human being can get dressed in four minutes is beyond me,” Donna has observed.

It’s easy, Frank thinks, especially when you lay your clothes out the night before, and you’re going to a bait shop. So this morning, he puts on a clean pair of underwear, thick wool socks, a flannel shirt, an old pair of jeans, then sits on the bed and puts on his work boots.

When he goes back into the kitchen, the coffee is ready. He pours it into a metal go cup and takes his first sip.

Frank loves that first taste of coffee. Especially when it’s freshly roasted, freshly ground, and freshly made.

Quality of life.

Little things, he thinks, matter.

He puts the lid on the go cup and sets it on the counter as he takes his old hooded sweatshirt from the hook on the wall and puts it on, jams a black wool beanie on his head, and takes his car keys and wallet from their assigned place.

Then he takes yesterday's *Union-Tribune,* from which he's saved the crossword puzzle. He does it late in the morning, when the bait business is slow.

He picks the coffee back up, grabs the egg sandwich, flicks off the stereo, and he's ready to go.

It's winter in San Diego and cold outside.

Okay, *relatively* cold.

It's not Wisconsin or North Dakota—it's not the painful kind of cold where your engine won't turn over and your face feels like it's going to crack and fall off, but anyplace in the Northern Hemisphere is at least chilly at 4:10 a.m. in January. Especially, Frank thinks as he gets into his Toyota pickup truck, when you're on the wrong side of sixty and it takes a little while for your blood to warm up in the morning.

But Frank loves the early hours. They're his favorite time of the day.

This is his quiet time, the only part of his busy day that's actually tranquil, and he loves to watch the sun come up over the hills east of the city and see the sky over the ocean turn pink as the water changes from black to gray.

But that won't be for a little while.

It's still black out now.

He turns to a local AM station to get the weather report.

Rain and more rain.

A big front moving in from the North Pacific.

He pays half attention as the announcer gives the local news. It's the usual—four more houses in Oceanside have slid down a slope in the mud, the city auditors can't decide if the city is on the verge of bankruptcy or not, and housing prices have risen again.

Then there's the city council scandal—the FBI's Operation G-Sting has resulted in the indictment of four councilmen for taking bribes from strip-club owners to repeal the city ordinance prohibiting "touching" in the clubs. A couple of vice cops have been paid off for looking the other way.

Yeah, it's news and it's not news, Frank thinks. Because San Diego is a port town for the navy, the sex trade has always been a big part of the economy. Bribing a councilman so that a sailor can get a lap dance is practically a civic duty.

But if the FBI wants to waste its time on strippers, it's nothing to Frank.

He hasn't been in a strip club in—what, twenty years?

Frank switches back to the classical station, opens the linen napkin on his lap, and eats his egg sandwich while he drives down to Ocean Beach. He likes that little bite of the onion in the bagel against the taste of the egg and the bitterness of the coffee.

It was Herbie Goldstein, may he rest, who had turned him on to the onion bagel, back in the days when Vegas was still Vegas and not Disney World with crap tables. And back when Herbie, all 375 pounds of him, was an unlikely player and unlikelier ladies' man. They'd been up all night, hitting the shows and clubs with a couple of gorgeous girls, when Herbie had somehow pulled into his orbit. They decided to go out to breakfast, where Herbie talked a reluctant Frank into trying an onion bagel.

"Come on, you guinea," Herbie had said, "stretch your horizons."

That was a good thing Herbie had done for him, because Frank enjoys his onion bagels, but only when he can buy them fresh-made at that little kosher deli up in Hillcrest. Anyway, the onion bagel–egg sandwich is a highlight of his morning routine.

"Normal people sit *down* to eat breakfast," Donna told him.

“I *am* sitting down,” Frank replied. “Sitting down driving.”

What is it Jill calls it? The kids these days think they invented doing more than one thing at a time (they should have tried raising kids in the old days, before the disposable diapers, the washer-dryers, and the microwaves), so they came up with a fancy name for it. Yeah, “multitasking.” I’m like the young people, Frank thinks. I’m multi-tasking.

2

Ocean Beach Pier is the biggest pier in California.

A big capital *T* of concrete and steel jutting out into the Pacific Ocean, its central stem running for over sixteen hundred feet before its crosspiece branches out to the north and south an almost equal distance. If you decide to walk the entire pier, you're looking at a jaunt of about a mile and a half.

Frank's bait shop, O.B. Bait and Tackle, sits about two-thirds of the way up the stem on the north side, just far enough from the Ocean Beach Pier Café so that the smell from the bait shop doesn't bother the diners and the dining tourists don't bother Frank's regular fishermen.

Actually, a lot of his customers also hit the OBP Café on a regular basis for its eggs *machaca* and lobster omelette. So does Frank, for that matter, a good lobster omelette (okay, *any* lobster omelette) being a difficult thing to come by. So if there's one right next door, you tend to take advantage of it.

But not at 4:15 in the morning, even though the OBP Café is open 24/7. Frank just polishes off his sandwich, parks his van, and walks out to his shop. He could drive out there—he has a pass—but unless he has some equipment or something to bring in, he likes to walk. The ocean at this time of the day is spectacular, especially in winter. The water is a cold slate gray, heavy this morning with the ominous swell of an approaching storm. It's like a pregnant woman this time of year, Frank thinks—full, temperamental, impatient. The waves are already slapping against the concrete support pillars, making little explosions of white water burst into the air below the pier.

Frank likes to think about the long journey that the waves make, starting near Japan and then rolling all the way across thousands of miles of the North Pacific just to break against the pier.

The surfers will be out in force. Not the spongers, the wannabes, or the kooks—they will and should stay onshore and watch. But the real guys, the gunners, will be out for these swells. Big waves, thundercrushers, that will crash all along the old spots and breaks, which read like a litany in a surfers' church service: Boil, Rockslide, Lescums, Out Ta Sites, Bird Shit, Osprey, Pesky's. Both sides of the OB Pier—south side, north side—then up along the coast—Gage, Avalanche, and Stubs.

Frank gets a kick just reciting the names in his head.

He knows them all—they're sacred places in his life. And those are just the breaks around OB—go farther up the San Diego coast and the litany continues, from north to south: Big Rock, Windansea, Rockpile, Hospital Point, Boomer Beach, Black's Beach, Seaside Reef, Suckouts, Swami's, D Street, Tamarack, and Carlsbad.

These names have magic for a local surfer. They're more than just names—each place holds memories. Frank grew up at these spots, back in the golden sixties, when the San Diego coast was paradise, uncrowded, undeveloped, when there weren't a lot of surfers and you knew practically every guy who went out.

Those *were* the endless summers.

Each day seemed to last forever, Frank thinks as he watches a wave roll in and smack the pier. You'd get up before dawn, just like now, and work hard all day on the old man's tuna boat. But you'd get back by the middle of the afternoon; then it was off to meet your buddies at the beach. You'd surf until dark, laughing and talking shit out there in the lineup, goofing on one another, showing off for the bunnies watching you from the beach. Those were the longboard days, plenty of time and plenty of space. Days of

“hanging ten” and “ho-dadding” and those fat Dick Dale guitar riffs and Beach Boys songs, and they were singing about *you,* they were singing about *your life,* your sweet summer days on the beach.

You’d always stop and watch the sunset together. You and your buddies and the girls had that ritual, a common acknowledgment of—what, *wonder*? A few quiet, respectful moments watching the sun sink over the horizon, the water glowing orange, pink, and red, and you’d think to yourself how *lucky* you were. Even as a kid, you knew you were just damn lucky to be in that place at that time, and you were just wise enough to know that you’d better enjoy it.

Then the last sliver of red sun would slide over the edge, and you’d all gather firewood and build a bonfire and cook fish or hot dogs or hamburgers or whatever you could scare up, and you’d eat and sit around the fire and someone would pull out a guitar and sing “Sloop John B” or “Barbara Ann” or some old folk song, and later, if you were lucky, you’d slip away from the firelight with a blanket and one of the girls and you’d make out, and the girl smelled of salt water and suntan lotion, and maybe she’d let you slide your hand under her bikini top, and there was nothing like that feeling. And you might lie with her all night on that blanket, and then wake up and hustle down to the docks just in time to catch the boat and get to work and then do the whole thing all over again.

But you could do that in those days—get a couple hours of sleep, work all day, surf all afternoon, play all night and shake it off. Can’t do that anymore—now you put in a short night and you *ache* the next morning.

But those were the golden days, Frank thinks, and suddenly he feels sad. Nostalgia, isn’t that what they call it? he thinks as he shakes himself from his reverie and walks toward the bait shack, remembering summer on a cold, wet winter day.

We thought those summers would never end.

Never thought we'd ever feel the cold in our bones.

Two minutes after he opens, the fishermen start coming in.

Frank knows most of them—they're his OBP regulars—especially on a weekday, when the weekend fishermen have to go to work. So on a Tuesday morning, he gets his retired guys, the sixty-five-and-ups, who have nothing better to do with their time than to stand on the dock in the cold and wet and try to catch a fish. Then, more and more over the years, you have your Asians—mostly Vietnamese, along with some Chinese and Malaysians—middle-aged guys for whom this *is* work. This is how they put food on the table, and they always still seem amazed that they can do this pretty much for free, buy a fishing license and some bait and throw a line into the ocean and feed their families from the bounty of the sea.

But hell, Frank thinks, isn't this what immigrants have always done here? He's read articles about how the Chinese had a fleet of fishing junks down here way back in the 1850s, until the immigration laws shut them down. And then my own grandfather and the rest of the Italian immigrants started the tuna fleet, and dived for abalone. And now the Asians are doing it again, feeding their families from the sea.

So you got the retirees, and the Asians, and then you got the young blue-collar white guys, mostly utility workers coming off night shifts, who consider the pier their ancestral turf and resent the Asian "newcomers" for taking "their spots." About half these guys don't fish with poles at all, but with crossbows.

They're not fishermen, Frank thinks; they're hunters, waiting until they see a flash in the water and shooting one of their bolts, which are attached to long cords so they can pull the fish up. And every once in a while they shoot a little too close to a surfer coming in by the pier, and there have

been a few fights over this, so there's some tension between the surfers and the crossbow guys.

Frank doesn't like tension on his pier.

Fishing and surfing and the water should be about fun, not tension. It's a big ocean, boys, and there's plenty for everybody.

That's Frank's philosophy, and he shares it freely.

Everyone loves Frank the Bait Guy.

The regulars love him because he always knows what fish are running and what they're hitting on, and he'll never sell you bait that he knows won't work. The casual fishermen love him for the same reason, and because, if you bring your kid on a Saturday, you know that Frank is going to hook him up right, and find him a spot where he's most likely to catch something, even if he has to nudge a regular aside for a little while to get it done. The tourists love Frank because he always has a smile, and a funny saying, and a compliment for the women that's a little flirtatious but never a come-on.

That's Frank the Bait Guy, who decorates his shack every Christmas like it's Rockefeller Center, who dresses up at Halloween and gives out candy to anyone who comes by, who holds an annual Children's Fishing Contest and gives prizes to every kid who enters.

The locals love him because he sponsors a Little League team, pays for uniforms for a local kids' soccer team, even though he hates soccer and never attends a game, buys an ad in the program for every high school drama production, and paid for the basketball hoops at the local park.

This morning, he gets the bait for his early customers, and then there's the usual lull, so he can relax and watch the surfers who are already out on the Dawn Patrol. These are the young, hard chargers, getting in a session before they have to go to work. A few years ago, that would have been me, he thinks with a slight pang of jealousy. Then he laughs at himself. *A few years?* Get real. These kids with their

shortboards and their cutback maneuvers. Christ, even if you could do one of those, you'd probably just throw your back out and be in bed for a week. You're twenty years out from being able to compete with those kids—you'd just get in their way, and you know it.

So he sits and does his crossword puzzle, another gift from Herbie, who had turned him on to the puzzles. Herbie Goldstein has been on his mind a lot these days, particularly this morning.

Maybe it's the storm, he thinks. Storms bring up memories like they drop driftwood on the beach. Things you think are lost forever, and then, suddenly, there they are—faded, worn, but back again.

So he sits and works the puzzles, thinks about Herbie, and waits for the Gentlemen's Hour.

The Gentlemen's Hour is an institution on every California surf spot. It starts around 8:30 or 9:00, when the young guns have hustled off to their day jobs, leaving the water to guys with more flexible schedules. So the lineup consists of your doctors, your lawyers, your real estate investors, your federal worker early buyouts, some retired schoolteachers—in short, gentlemen.

It's an older crowd, obviously, mostly with longboards and straightahead riding styles, more leisurely, less competitive, a lot more polite. No one's in a particular hurry, no one drops in on anybody else's wave, and no one worries if he doesn't get a ride. Everyone knows that the waves will be there tomorrow and the next day and the next. Truth be known, a lot of the session consists of sitting out on the lineup, or even standing on the beach, swapping lies about gigantic waves and ferocious wipeouts, and talking stories about the good old days, which get better with each passing rendition.

Let the kids call it "the Geriatric Hour"—what do they know?

Life’s like a fat orange, Frank thinks. When you’re young, you squeeze it hard and fast, trying to get all the juice in a hurry. When you’re older, you squeeze it slowly, savoring every drop. Because, one, you don’t know how many drops you have left, and, two, the last drops are the sweetest.

He’s thinking this when a fracas breaks out across the pier.

Oh, this is going to make a good story for the Gentlemen’s Hour, Frank thinks when he gets over there and sees what’s what. This is rich—Crossbow Guy and Vietnamese Guy have caught the same fish and are about to come to blows over who caught it first, whether Crossbow Guy shot it while it was on Vietnamese Guy’s hook, or Vietnamese Guy hooked it when it was on Crossbow Guy’s arrow.

The poor fish is hanging in the air at the apex of this unlikely triangle, while each guy plays tug-of-war with their lines, and one look at it tells Frank that Vietnamese Guy is in the right because his hook is in the fish’s mouth. Frank somehow doubts that the fish got shot clean through the body with an arrow and *then* decided it was hungry for a nice minnow.

But Crossbow Guy gives a hard yank and pulls the fish in.

Vietnamese Guy starts yelling at him, and a crowd gathers, and Crossbow Guy looks like he’s going to pound Vietnamese Guy into the pier, which he could easily do because he’s big, bigger even than Frank.

Frank steps through the crowd and stands between the two arguing men.

“It’s his fish,” Frank says to Crossbow Guy.

“Who the hell are *you*?”

It’s an amazingly ignorant question. He’s Frank the Bait Guy, and anyone who frequents OBP knows it. Any regular would also know that Frank the Bait Guy is one of the pier’s sheriffs.

See, every water spot—beach, pier, or wave—has a few “sheriffs,” guys who, by virtue of seniority and respect, keep

order and settle disputes. On the beach, it's usually a lifeguard—a senior guy who's a lifesaving legend. Out on the lineup, it's one or two guys who've been riding that break forever.

On Ocean Beach Pier, it's Frank.

You don't argue with a sheriff. You can present your case, you can express your grievance, but you don't argue with his ruling. And you sure as hell don't ask who he is, because you should know. Not knowing who the sheriff is automatically labels you as an outsider, whose ignorance probably put you in the wrong in the first place.

And Crossbow Guy has East County written all over him, from the down vest, to the KEEP ON TRUCKIN' ball cap, to the mullet underneath it. Frank's guessing he's from El Cajon, and it always amuses him how guys who live forty miles from the ocean can get territorial about it.

So Frank doesn't even bother to answer the question.

"It's obvious he hooked it first and you shot it while he was reeling it in," Frank says.

Which is what Vietnamese Guy is saying fast, loudly, continuously, and in Vietnamese, so Frank turns to him and asks him to chill out. He has to respect the guy for not backing down even though he's giving away a foot of height and a bill and a half in weight. Of course he won't back down, Frank thinks; he's trying to feed his family.

Then Frank turns back to Crossbow Guy. "Just give him his fish. There's a lot more in the ocean."

Crossbow Guy isn't having it. He glares down at Frank, and one look at his eyes tells Frank that the guy is a tweeker. Great, Frank thinks, a head full of crystal meth will make him a *lot* easier to deal with.

"These fucking gooks are taking *all* the fish," Crossbow Guy says, reloading the crossbow.

Now Vietnamese Guy may not speak a lot of English, but from the look in his eye, he knows the word *gook.* Probably heard it a lot, Frank thinks, embarrassed.

“Hey, East County,” Frank says. “We don’t talk that way here.”

Crossbow Guy starts to argue and then he stops.

Just stops.

He might be a moron, but he isn’t blind, and he sees something in Frank’s eyes that just makes him shut his mouth.

Frank looks square into Crossbow Guy’s methed-up eyes and says, “I don’t want to see you on my pier again. Find a different place to fish.”

Crossbow Guy’s in no mood to argue anymore. He takes his fish and starts the long walk back down the pier.

Frank goes back to the bait shack to change into his wet suit.

3

“Hey, if it isn’t the dispenser of justice!”

Dave Hansen grins at Frank from his board out in the lineup. Frank paddles up and pulls alongside. “You heard about that already?”

“Small town, Ocean Beach,” Dave says. He stares pointedly at Frank’s longboard, an old nine-foot-three-inch Baltierra. “Is that a surfboard or an ocean liner? You got stewards on that thing? I’d like to sign up for the second sitting, please.”

“Big waves, big board,” Frank says.

“They’ll be even bigger tomorrow when we talk about them,” Dave says.

“Waves are like bellies,” Frank says. “They grow with time.”

Except Dave’s hasn’t. He and Dave have been buddies for maybe twenty years, and the tall cop’s belly is still washboard flat. When Dave isn’t surfing, he’s running, and, except for a cinnamon roll after the Gentlemen’s Hour, he doesn’t eat anything with white sugar in it.

“Cold enough for you?” Dave asks.

“Oh yeah.”

Yes, it is, even though Frank’s wearing an O’Neill winter suit with a hood and booties. It is damn cold water, and to tell the truth, Frank had considered giving the Gentlemen’s Hour a pass this morning for that reason. Except that would be the beginning of the end, he thinks, an admission of aging. Getting out there every morning is what keeps you young. So as soon as the kid Abe got in, Frank forced himself to climb into his wet suit, hood, and booties before he could chicken out.

But it *is* cold.

When he was paddling out and had to duck under a wave, it was like sticking his face into a barrel of ice.

“I’m surprised you’re out here this morning,” Frank says.

“Why’s that?”

“Operation G-Sting,” Frank says. “Funny name, Dave.”

“And people say we have no sense of humor.”

Except G-Sting is no joke, Dave Hansen thinks. It’s about the last vestiges of organized crime in San Diego bribing cops, councilmen—there might even be a congressman in the mix. G-Sting isn’t about strippers; it’s about corruption, and corruption is cancer. It starts small, with lap dances, but then it grows. Then it’s construction bids, real estate deals, even defense contracts.

Once a politician is on the hook, he’s hooked for good.

The mob guys know it. They know that you bribe a politician only once. After that, you blackmail him.

“Outside!” Frank yells.

A nice set coming in.

Dave takes off. He’s a strong guy, with an easy, athletic paddle-in, and Frank watches him catch the wave and get up, then drop down, ride the right-hand break all the way in, then hop off into the ankle-deep water.

Frank goes for the next one.

He lies flat on his board and paddles hard, feels the wave pick him up, then goes into a squat. He straightens up just as the wave drops, points the front of his board straight toward the shore. It’s classic, oldschool straight-ahead longboard style, but for the thousands of times Frank has done it, it’s still the best kick there is.

No offense to Donna, or Patty, or any of the women he’s made love to in his life, but there’s nothing like this. Never has been, never will be. How does the old song go? “Catch a wave and you’re sitting on top of the world.” That’s it, sitting—well, standing—on top of the world. And the world is

going about a thousand miles an hour, cold and crisp and beautiful.

He rides the wave and hops off.

He and Dave paddle back out together.

“We’re looking pretty good for old men,” Frank says.

“We are,” Dave says. When they get back out to the shoulder, he says, “Hey, did I tell you I’ve decided to pull the pin?”

Frank’s not sure he heard him right. Dave Hansen retiring? He’s *my* age, for God’s sake. No he isn’t—he’s a couple of years *younger.*

“The Bureau’s offering early retirement,” Dave says. Kind of gently, because he sees the look on Frank’s face. “All these young kids coming up. All the terrorism crap. I talked it over with Barbara and we decided to take it.”

“Jesus, Dave. What are you going to *do*?”

“This,” Dave says, waving his hand toward the water. “And travel. Spend more time with the grandkids.”

Grandkids. Frank’s forgotten that Dave’s daughter, Melissa, had a baby a couple of years ago and is expecting another one. Where does she live? Seattle? Portland? Some rainy place.

“Wow.”

“Hey, I’ll still be here for the Gentlemen’s Hour,” Dave says. “Most of the time. And I won’t have to leave so early.”

“No, listen, congratulations,” Frank says. “*Cent’anni.* Every happiness. Uh, when . . .”

“Nine months,” Dave says. “September.”

September, Frank thinks. The best month on the beach. The weather is beautiful and the tourists have gone home.

Another set comes in.

They both ride it in and then call it a session. Two solid waves on a day like this are enough. And a cup of hot coffee and a cinnamon roll are sounding pretty good right about now. So they go up and clean up at the outdoor shower on