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The Dawn Patrol

Don Winslow

About The Author

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*, *The Power of the Dog* and *The Winter of Frankie Machine*.

Also by Don Winslow

The Winter of Frankie Machine

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

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arrow books

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wave (n): a disturbance that travels through a medium from one location to another location.

Let me take you down, ’cause I’m going to,
Strawberry Fields….

Lennon/McCartney


the dawn
patrol

1

The marine layer wraps a soft silver blanket over the coast.

The sun is just coming over the hills to the east, and Pacific Beach is still asleep.

The ocean is a color that is not quite blue, not quite green, not quite black, but something somewhere between all three.

Out on the line, Boone Daniels straddles his old longboard like a cowboy on his pony.

He’s on The Dawn Patrol.

2

The girls look like ghosts.

Coming out of the early-morning mist, their silver forms emerge from a thin line of trees as the girls pad through the wet grass that edges the field. The dampness muffles their footsteps, so they approach silently, and the mist that wraps around their legs makes them look as if they're floating.

Like spirits who died as children.

There are eight of them and they *are* children; the oldest is fourteen, the youngest ten. They walk toward the waiting men in unconscious lockstep.

The men bend over the mist like giants over clouds, peering down into their universe. But the men aren't giants; they're workers, and their universe is the seemingly endless strawberry field that they do not rule, but that rules them. They're glad for the cool mist—it will burn off soon enough and leave them to the sun's indifferent mercy.

The men are stoop laborers, bent at the waist for hours at a time, tending to the plants. They've made the dangerous odyssey up from Mexico to work in these fields, to send money back to their families south of the border.

They live in primitive camps of corrugated tin shacks, jerry-rigged tents, and lean-tos hidden deep in the narrow canyons above the fields. There are no women in the camps, and the men are lonely. Now they look up to sneak guilty glances at the wraithlike girls coming out of the mist. Glances of need, even though many of these men are fathers, with daughters the ages of these girls.

Between the edge of the field and the banks of the river stands a thick bed of reeds, into which the men have hacked little dugouts, almost caves. Now some of the men go into the reeds and pray that the dawn will not come too soon or

burn too brightly and expose their shame to the eyes of God.

3

It’s dawn at the Crest Motel, too.

Sunrise isn’t a sight that a lot of the residents see, unless it’s from the other side—unless they’re just going to bed instead of just getting up.

Only two people are awake now, and neither of them is the desk clerk, who’s catching forty in the office, his butt settled into the chair, his feet propped on the counter. Doesn’t matter. Even if he were awake, he couldn’t see the little balcony of room 342, where the woman is going over the railing.

Her nightgown flutters above her.

An inadequate parachute.

She misses the pool by a couple of feet and her body lands on the concrete with a dull thump.

Not loud enough to wake anyone up.

The guy who tossed her looks down just long enough to make sure she’s dead. He sees her neck at the funny angle, like a broken doll. Watches her blood, black in the faint light, spread toward the pool.

Water seeking water.

4

“Epic macking crunchy.”

That’s how Hang Twelve describes the imminent big swell to Boone Daniels, who actually understands what Hang Twelve is saying, because Boone speaks fluent Surfbonics. Indeed, off to Boone’s right, just to the south, waves are smacking the pilings beneath Crystal Pier. The ocean feels heavy, swollen, pregnant with promise.

The Dawn Patrol—Boone, Hang Twelve, Dave the Love God, Johnny Banzai, High Tide, and Sunny Day—sits out there on the line, talking while they wait for the next set to come in. They all wear black winter wet suits that cover them from their wrists to their ankles, because the early-morning water is cold, especially now that it’s stirred up by the approaching storm.

This morning’s interstitial conversation revolves around the big swell, a once-every-twenty-years burgeoning of the surf now rolling toward the San Diego coast like an out-of-control freight train. It’s due in two days, and with it the gray winter sky, some rain, and the biggest waves that any of The Dawn Patrol have seen in their adult lives.

It’s going to be, as Hang Twelve puts it, “epic macking crunchy.”

Which, roughly translated from Surfbonics, is a term of approbation.

It’s going to be good, Boone knows. They might even see twenty-foot peaks coming in every thirty seconds or so. Double overheads, tubes like tunnels, real thunder crushers that could easily take you over the falls and dump you into the washing machine.

Only the best surfers need apply.

Boone qualifies.

While it’s an exaggeration to say that Boone could surf before he could walk, it’s the dead flat truth that he could surf before he could run. Boone is the ultimate “locie”—he was conceived on the beach, born half a mile away, and raised three blocks from where the surf breaks at high tide. His dad surfed; his mom surfed—hence the conceptual session on the sand. In fact, his mom surfed well into the sixth month of her pregnancy, so maybe it isn’t an exaggeration to say that Boone could surf before he could walk.

So Boone’s been a waterman all his life, and then some.

The ocean is his backyard, his haven, his playground, his refuge, his church. He goes into the ocean to get well, to get clean, to remind himself that life is a ride. Boone believes that a wave is God’s tangible message that all the great things in life are free. Boone gets free every day, usually two or three times a day, but always, always, out on The Dawn Patrol.

Boone Daniels lives to surf.

He doesn’t want to talk about the big swell right now, because talking about it might jinx it, cause the swell to lie down and die into the deep recesses of the north Pacific. So even though Hang Twelve is looking at him with his usual expression of unabashed hero worship, Boone changes the subject to an old standard out on the Pacific Beach Dawn Patrol line.

The List of Things That Are Good.

They started the List of Things That Are Good about fifteen years ago, back when they were in high school, when Boone and Dave’s social studies teacher challenged them to “get their priorities straight.”

The list is flexible—items are added or deleted; the rankings change—but the current List of Things That Are Good would read as follows, if, that is, it were written down, which it isn’t:

1. Double overheads.
2. Reef break.
3. The tube.
4. Girls who will sit on the beach and watch you ride double overheads, reef break, and the tube. (Inspiring Sunny's remark that "Girls watch—women *ride.*")
5. Free stuff.
6. Longboards.
7. Anything made by O'Neill.
8. All-female outrigger canoe teams.
9. Fish tacos.
10. Big Wednesday.

"I propose," Boone says to the line at large, "moving fish tacos over all-female outrigger canoe teams."

"From ninth to eighth?" Johnny Banzai asks, his broad, generally serious face breaking into a smile. Johnny Banzai's real name isn't Banzai, of course. It's Kodani, but if you're a Japanese-American and a seriously radical, nose-first, balls-out, hard-charging surfer, you're just going to get glossed either "Kamikaze" or "Banzai," you just are. But as Boone and Dave the Love God decided that Johnny is just too rational to be suicidal, they decided on Banzai.

When Johnny Banzai isn't banzaiing, he's a homicide detective with the San Diego Police Department, and Boone knows that he welcomes the opportunity to argue about things that aren't grim. So he's on it. "Basically flip-flopping them?" Johnny Banzai asks. "Based on what?"

"Deep thought and careful consideration," Boone replies.

Hang Twelve is shocked. The young soul surfer stares at Boone with a look of hurt innocence, his wet goatee dropping to the black neoprene of his winter wet suit, his light brown dreadlocks falling on his shoulder as he cocks his head. "But, Boone—all-female outrigger canoe teams?"

Hang Twelve loves the women of the all-female outrigger canoe teams. Whenever they paddle by, he just sits on his

board and stares.

“Listen,” Boone says, “most of those women play for the other team.”

“What other team?” Hang Twelve asks.

“He’s so young,” Johnny observes, and as usual, his observation is accurate. Hang Twelve is a dozen years younger than the rest of The Dawn Patrol. They tolerate him because he’s such an enthusiastic surfer and sort of Boone’s puppy; plus, he gives them the locals’ discount at the surf shop he works at.

“What other team?” Hang Twelve asks urgently.

Sunny Day leans over her board and whispers to him.

Sunny looks just like her name. Her blond hair glows like sunshine. A force of nature—tall, long-legged—Sunny is exactly what Brian Wilson meant when he wrote that he wished they all could be California girls.

Except that Brian’s dream girl usually sat on the beach, whereas Sunny surfs. She’s the best surfer on The Dawn Patrol, better than Boone, and the coming big swell could lift her from waitress to full-time professional surfer. One good photo of Sunny shredding a big wave could get her a sponsorship from one of the major surf-clothing companies, and then there’ll be no stopping her. Now she takes it upon herself to explain to Hang Twelve that most of the females on the all-female outrigger canoe teams are rigged out for females.

Hang Twelve lets out a devastated groan.

“You just ripped a boy’s dreams,” Boone tells Sunny.

“Not necessarily,” Dave the Love God says with a smug smile.

“Don’t even start,” Sunny says.

“Is it my bad,” Dave asks, “that women love me?”

It’s not, really. Dave the Love God has a face and physique that would have caused a run on marble in ancient Greece. But it’s not even so much Dave’s body that gets him sex as it is his confidence. Dave is confident that he’s going to get

laid, and he's in a profession that puts him in a perfect position to have a shot at every snow-zone *turista* who comes to San Diego to get tanned. He's a lifeguard, and this is how he got his moniker, because Johnny Banzai, who completes the *New York Times* crossword in ink, said, "You're not a 'life guard'; you're a 'love god.' Get it?"

Yeah, the whole Dawn Patrol got it, because they have all seen Dave the Love Guard crawl up to his lifeguard tower while guzzling handfuls of vitamin E to replace the depletion from the night before and get ready for the night ahead.

"They actually give me binoculars," he marveled to Boone one day, "with the explicit expectation that I will use them to look at scantily clad women. And some people say there's no God."

So if any hominid with a package could get an all-female outrigger canoe team member (or several of them) to issue a gender exemption for a night or two, it would be Dave, and judging by the self-satisfied lascivious smile on his grille right now, he probably has.

Hang Twelve is still not convinced. "Yeah, but, fish tacos?"

"It depends on the kind of fish in the taco," says High Tide, né Josiah Pamavatuu, weighing in on the subject. Literally weighing in, because the Samoan crashes the scales at well over three and a half bills. Hence the tag "High Tide," because the ocean level rises anytime he gets in the water. So High Tide's opinion on food commands respect, because he obviously knows what he's talking about. The whole crew is aware that your Pacific Island types know their fish. "Are you talking about yellowtail, ono, opah, mahimahi, shark, or what? It makes a difference, ranking-wise."

"Everything," Boone says, "tastes better on a tortilla."

This is an article of faith with Boone. He's lived his life with it and believes it to be true. You take anything—fish, chicken, beef, cheese, eggs, even peanut butter and jelly—and fold them in the motherly embrace of a warm flour

tortilla and all those foods respond to the love by upping their game.

Everything does taste better on a tortilla.

“Outside!” High Tide yells.

Boone looks over his shoulder to see the first wave of what looks to be a tasty set coming in.

“Party wave!” hollers Dave the Love God, and he, High Tide, Johnny, and Hang Twelve get on it, sharing the ride into shore. Boone and Sunny hang back for the second wave, which is a little bigger, a little fuller, and has a better shape.

“Your wave!” Boone yells to her.

“Chivalrous or patronizing, you decide!” Sunny yells back, but she paddles in. Boone gets on the wave right behind her and they ride the shoulder in together, a skillful pas de deux on the white water.

Boone and Sunny walk up onto the beach, because the morning session is over and The Dawn Patrol is coming in. This is because, with the exception of Boone, they all have real j-o-b-s.

So Johnny’s already stepping out of the outdoor shower and sitting in the front seat of his car putting on his detective clothes—blue shirt, brown tweed jacket, khaki slacks—when his cell phone goes off. Johnny listens to the call, then says, “A woman took a header off a motel balcony. Another day in paradise.”

“I don’t miss *that*,” Boone says.

“And it doesn’t miss you,” Johnny replies.

This is true. When Boone pulled the pin at SDPD, his lieutenant’s only regret was that it hadn’t been attached to a grenade. Despite his remark, Johnny disagrees—Boone was a good cop. A very good cop.

It was a shame what happened.

But now Boone is following High Tide’s eyes back out to the ocean, at which the big man is gazing with an almost reverential intensity.

“It’s coming,” High Tide says. “The swell.”
“Big?” Boone asks.
“Not big,” says High Tide. “Huge.”
A real thunder crusher.
Like, ka-*boom.*

5

What is a wave anyway?

We know one when we see one, but what *is* it?

The physicists call it an “energy-transport phenomenon.”

The dictionary says it’s “a disturbance that travels through a medium from one location to another location.”

A disturbance.

It’s certainly that.

Something gets disturbed. That is, something strikes something else and sets off a vibration. Clap your hands right now and you’ll hear a sound. What you’re actually hearing is a sound *wave.* Something struck something else and it set off a vibration that strikes your eardrum.

The vibration is energy. It’s transported through the phenomenon of a wave from one location to the other.

The water itself doesn’t actually move. What happens is one particle of water bumps into the next, which bumps into the next, and so on and so forth until it hits something. It’s like that idiot wave at a sports event—the *people* don’t move around the stadium, but the *wave* does. The energy flows from one person to another.

So when you’re riding a wave, you’re not riding water. The water is the medium, but what you’re really riding is energy.

Very cool.

Hitching an energy ride.

Billions of H_20 particles work together to transport you from one place to another, which is very generous when you think about it. That last statement is, of course, airy-fairy soul-surfer bullshit—the wave doesn’t care whether you’re in it or not. Particles of water are inanimate objects that don’t know anything, much less “care”; the water is just doing what water does when it gets goosed by energy.

It makes waves.

A wave, any kind of wave, has a specific shape. The particles knocking into one another don't just bump along in a flat line, but move up and down—hence the wave. Prior to the "disturbance," the water particles are at rest, in technical terminology, *equilibrium.* What happens is that the energy disturbs the equilibrium; it "displaces" the particles from their state of rest. When the energy reaches its maximum potential "displacement" ("positive displacement"), the wave "crests." Then it drops, *below* the equilibrium line, to its "negative displacement," aka, the "trough." Simply put, it has highs, lows, and middles, just like life its own self.

Yeah, except it's a little more complicated than that, especially if you're talking about the kind of wave that you can ride, *especially* the kind of giant wave that's right now rolling toward Pacific Beach with bad intent.

Basically, there are two kinds of waves.

Most waves are "surface waves." They're caused by lunar pull and wind, which are sources of the disturbance. These are your average, garden-variety, everyday, Joe Lunchbucket waves. They show up on time, punch the clock, and they range in size from small to medium to, occasionally, large.

Surface waves, of course, give surfing its name, because it appears to the unenlightened eye that surfers are riding the surface of the water. Surfers are, if you will, "surfacing."

Despite this distinction, surface waves are the mules of the surfing world, unheralded beasts of burden not incapable, however, of kicking their traces from time to time when whipped into a frenzy by the wind.

A lot of people think that it's strong winds that make big waves, but this really isn't true. Wind can cause some big surf, blowing an otherwise-average wave into a tall peak, but most of the energy—the disturbance—is on the surface.

These waves have height, but they lack depth. All the action is on top—it's mostly show; it's literally superficial.

And wind can ruin surf, and often does. If the wind is blowing across the wave it will ruin its shape, or it can make the surf choppy, or, if it's coming straight in off the ocean, it can drive the crest of the wave down, flattening it out and making it unridable.

What you want is a gentle, steady, offshore wind that blows into the face of the wave and holds it up for you.

The other kind of wave is the *sub*surface wave, which starts, duh, under the water. If surface waves are your middleweight boxers, dancing and shooting jabs, the subsurface wave is your heavyweight, coming in flat-footed, throwing knockout punches from the (ocean) floor. This wave is the superstar, the genuine badass, the take-your-lunch money, walk-off-with-your-girlfriend, give-me-those-fucking-sneakers, *thank you for playing and now what parting gifts do we have for our contestant, Vanna* wave.

If surface waves lack depth, the subsurface wave has more bottom than a Sly and the Family Stone riff. It's deeper than Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein combined. It's *heavy*, my friend; it ain't your brother. It's the hate child of rough sex at the bottom of the sea.

There's a whole world down there. In fact, *most* of the world is down there. You have enormous mountain ranges, vast plains, trenches, and canyons. You have tectonic plates, and when they shift and scrape against each other, you have earthquakes. Gigantic underwater earthquakes, violent as a Mike Tyson off meds, that set off one big honking disturbance.

At its most benign, a big beautiful swell to ride; at its most malevolent, a mass-murdering tsunami.

This is a disturbance, a mass transportation of energy phenom, that will travel thousands of miles either to give you the ride of your life or fuck you up, and it doesn't care which.

This is what’s rolling toward Pacific Beach as The Dawn Patrol gets out of the water this particular morning. An undersea earthquake up near the Aleutian Islands is hurtling literally thousands of miles to come crash on Pacific Beach and go—

Ka-boom.

6

Ka-boom is good.

If you're Boone Daniels and live for waves that make big noises.

He's always been this way. Since birth and before, if you buy all that stuff about prenatal auditory influences. You know how some mothers hang out listening to Mozart to give their babies a taste for the finer things? Boone's mom, Dee, used to sit on the beach and stroke her belly to the rhythm of the waves.

To the prenatal Boone, the ocean was indistinguishable from his mother's heartbeat. Hang Twelve might *call* the sea "Mother Ocean," but to Boone it really is. And before his son hit the terrible twos, Brett Daniels would put the kid in front of him on a longboard, paddle out, and then lift the boy on his shoulder while they rode in. Casual observers—that is, tourists—would be appalled, all like, "What if you drop him?"

"I'm not *going* to drop him," Boone's dad, Brett, would reply.

Until Boone was about three, and then Brett would *intentionally* drop him into the shallow white water, just to give him the feel of it, to let him know that other than a few bubbles in the nose, nothing bad was going to happen. Young Boone would pop up, giggling like crazy, and ask for his dad to "do it again."

Every once in a while, a disapproving onlooker would threaten to call Child Protective Services, and Dee would reply, "That's what he's doing—he's protecting his child."

Which was the truth.

You raise a kid in PB, and you know that his DNA is going to drive him out there on a board, you'd *better* teach him what the ocean can do. You'd better teach him how to live,

not die, in the water, and you'd better teach him young. You teach him about riptides and undertow. You teach him not to panic.

Protect his child?

Listen, when Brett and Dee would have birthday parties at the condo complex pool, and all Boone's little friends would come over, Brett Daniels would set his chair at the edge of the pool and tell the other parents, "No offense, have a good time, have some tacos and some brews, but I'm sitting here and I'm not talking to anybody."

Then he'd sit at the edge of the kid-crowded pool and never take his eyes off the *bottom* of the pool, not for a single second, because Brett knew that nothing too bad was going to happen on the surface of the water, that kids drown at the bottom of the pool when no one is watching.

Brett was watching. He'd sit there for as long as the party lasted, in Zen-like concentration until the last kid came out shivering and was wrapped in a towel and went to wolf down some pizza and soda. Then Brett would go eat and hang out with the other parents, and there were no irredeemable tragedies, no lifelong regrets ("I only turned my back for a few seconds") at those parties.

The first time Brett and Dee let their then seven-year-old boy paddle out alone into some small and close beach break, their collective heart was in their collective throat. They were watching like hawks, even though they knew that every lifeguard on the beach and every surfer in the water also had their eyes on young Boone Daniels, and if anything bad had happened, a mob would have showed up to pull him out of the soup.

It was hard, but Brett and Dee stood there as Boone got up and fell, got up and fell, got up and fell—and paddled back out, and did it again and again until he got up and stayed up and rode that wave in while a whole beach full of people played it casual and pretended not to notice.