

Prologue

Far out at sea, born of the wind, water, currents, and the Coriolis effect, a new wave emerges. Not just any wave, but one very different than the waves nearby. The laws of uniformity in wave height and distance are unheeded. It moves swifter than others, and tears into the waves in front, absorbing their energy and increasing its size. It travels alone and seeks the rocks and shoals of seashores to dissipate its energy. It has a single mission, to obliterate itself when it reaches land.

The shore life depends on the constant movement of the tides, but such a wave impacts the weakest of animal and plant life with devastating and lethal consequences. Many ocean scientists describe it as a myth, but countless tales of the destructive effect of a rogue wave are told and recorded. When the wave gets closer to shore and encounters the continental shelf, the acquired energy forces the inherent mass of the wave upward. A rogue wave is rushing toward California's Big Sur coast.

Bill and Jodi Ockham were driving down California's Big Sur Coast to Pfeiffer State Beach. Well known for the five-story keyhole rock carved and honed offshore by the Pacific Ocean, visitors and professional photographers line up their cameras at the end of the day when the sun peers through the opening. Shooting the sun setting through the hole above a cresting wave is a coveted picture.

Just north of the famous rock, thirty feet from the high water mark, and jutting out of the mountain wall is a large granite boulder. Through the effects of erosion and the sea, the indentation in the rock allows two people to sit on the beach and support their backs. That is the very spot that Bill proposed 15 years ago. As they reached the spot, Bill said, "Here we are."

Using the light breeze as an aid, Jodi unfurled a beach blanket and laid it on the sand in front of the boulder. Bill positioned the picnic basket with wine and cheese at one end of the cover to keep it from blowing away, not realizing that this was one of those rare days where there was little wind. They sat down in the rock recess.

Jodi opened the picnic basket and withdrew a bottle of Chardonnay, wine opener, wine goblets, napkins, cutting board, cheeses, and grapes. Jodi gave Bill the wine and the wine opener. She placed the serviettes, cheeses and grapes on the cutting board. With leverage, the wine cork finally came out. Bill poured wine into each wine glass. He offered one glass of wine to her.

"What a gorgeous day," Jodi said as she watched small waves tumble on the beach. She removed her hat and let her hair drop to her shoulders. Then Jodi removed her windbreaker exposing her athletic build. Long ago, they realized the physical and emotional benefits of staying fit. Jodi played tennis, biked and swam. Bill ran five days a week and played golf on weekends.

Bill raised his glass to Jodi, "Happy anniversary. I love you."

"I love you, too."

“Here’s to the rest of our life together.”

They clinked glasses, and each took a sip.

Bill took Jodi’s glass and placed both glasses on the cutting board. He reached over, put his hand gently behind Jodi’s neck and pulled her close to him. He looked into her blue eyes. Moving her head closer to Bill, her eyes closed and Bill’s lips touched hers. It began as a soft kiss with increasing firmness. In one slow movement, they were laying down on the blanket. Bill could sense her heart rate increasing.

As Bill broke away from the embrace, Jodi reached up and stroked her hand on the side of Bill’s face. “I love you, happy anniversary.”

They sat up. Bill picked up the wine glasses. He gave one to Jodi. They took a sip and looked out at the ocean. The energy of the waves crashing on the beach generated a slight thumping sound, and one could feel the puff of wind spawned by each wave breaking on the shore. They slumped down with their backs to the sand and looked up at the sky. Soaring Seagulls with their wings extended were seeking uplifting warm air.

Something in Bill’s peripheral vision raised the hair on the back of his neck. He turned his eyes to the ocean and froze. A dark gray wall of water was rushing toward them. He felt the adrenaline rushing through his veins. He quickly turned to Jodi. She was transfixed. He stood up, grabbed her hand and pulled her up. He looked up and down the beach. With the bluff behind them, there was no place to run. They were trapped. Realizing they were doomed, Bill wrapped his arms around Jodi. Jodi looked into Bill’s eyes. She understood they were going to die. They passionately kissed goodbye.

The wave crested above them and broke with a thundering clap. The weight of the water slammed down on Bill and Jodi, knocking the wind out of him. He reached out, grabbed Jodi’s hand and pulled her toward him. He held Jodi’s hand tight. He didn’t want to lose her. The wave proved relentless with intent to separate their hold. It was using its deadly weapon, a ton of water per cubic meter to drive Bill and Jodi into the very rock they so cherished. The wave succeeded. The force of hitting the boulder broke his grip on Jodi. Bill became a piece of maliciously tossed flotsam thrown into a churning whirlpool of debris. For a split second, he surfaced and was able to catch his breath, only to be sucked down into the swirling current and slammed into the rock again. With his strength gone, Bill realized his fate and wanted to have images of Jodi in his mind before dying. In rapid fashion, he recalled their first date, their marriage, their home, their last kiss, and hearing a song. Accepting his demise, he stopped fighting and surrendered to the churning water.

With the wave’s destructive energy dissipated, the water began to recede. First, it started returning slowly, then picked up speed. With the surf’s mission accomplished, the ocean was beckoning the wave to return. Or rather, demanding. Anything in its path was returning to the sea with increasing speed. It was as if the mission of the wave were to clean up and erase any proof of the destruction it delivered.

Bill was dragged out to sea along with the flotsam and debris. His body slid into the crevice of a large boulder embedded in the sand. As his vision faded, he felt a painful sensation on his back. A moment later, he opened his eyes and began coughing violently. He was lying on the beach with the rock pressing into the small of his back.

From the wave cresting, washing on the beach, and returning to the sea, the tragic incident took less than 20 seconds. It was calm again.

Bill got up slowly and limped along the shoreline looking for Jodi. He noticed other people yelling for loved ones and attending to injured people lying on the beach. He yelled out at the top of his lungs. "Jodi, Jodi, where are you?"

He looked up the beach. He looked down the beach. He looked out to sea.

Jodi was gone.

With the adrenaline wearing off, Bill dropped to his knees, sat back, crossed his legs and put his hands on his face. He felt the blood oozing from the cuts on his elbows, knees, shoulders and head. He placed his hands on his ears and looked down at the wet sand. Jodi's hat was nearby. He began to shiver. He didn't care.

Thirty minutes later, EMTs were attending to survivors on the beach. After attending to Bill's injuries, an EMT placed an aluminum solar blanket on Bill's shoulders, put his hand beneath his arm to help him stand. "Let's get you out of here, Mr. Ockham, this is not a safe place."