

WEDGING DIPSTICK

by Clement Henriksen

The University of California Santa Barbara had sent many form letters and computerized reports to Arnold 'Dipstick' Sevich in his seven years of attendance, but never an envelope like this. It had an embossed University logo and a return address to Dr. Stanley Chia, Dean of Student Affairs. The letter was thin as a knife and could only be bad news.

Dip carried the envelope to the roof of his Isla Vista apartment house. It was furnished in a comfortable outdoor style, and Dip liked to do his heavy thinking there. He snagged a water bottle from the full-size white refrigerator, flopped on the ratty couch and opened the envelope. Inside was a single sheet of high quality bond paper with UCSB letterhead personalized for Dean Chia. Under the salutation was a single line—"Dean Chia will see you at 2:00 PM next Monday, September 9, 1999." signed by Ms. Mary Rosenblatt, Administrative Assistant to the Dean.

Dip pushed his shades up on his forehead, sipped on the plastic bottle and contemplated the letter. No matter how he sliced it, he couldn't explain away the fact that the main Dean, the academic alpha wolf, the guy in the red mortarboard, the Man himself, wanted to see him and wasn't saying why.

This disturbed Dip, as he had always been careful to avoid the university administration. By his sophomore year Dip had flattened his profile lower than a wake in Santa Barbara harbor. He filled out the forms neatly, sent the money in on time, handled university business by mail, passed all his classes and stayed out of trouble. By now Dip was just another surfer dude on campus with a pony tail and clean worn clothing, hiding out behind a tan and straight white teeth.

Oh well, there was nothing to be done until Monday, he could forget about it until after the weekend. Saturday he worked at the surf shop and Sunday was the trip to Jalama. A day at Tarantulas with Teri would be sweet even if the swell dropped.

Dip and Teri walked the beach to Tarantulas from the county park carrying their surfboards. If Teri hadn't been there Dip would have parked on the bluff above Tarantulas and risked the ticket. But Teri didn't like the possible hassle and had insisted they enter the park and pay the day use fee. Besides, she liked the hot showers at Jalama County Park, she felt they made surfing that much nicer. Whatever Teri wanted was fine with Dip. Any time spent with Teri was fine.

Dip was the lanky, crinkly blonde with the longer hair. Teri was shoulder high to Dip, with straight black hair and an hourglass figure. The sunshine warmed their bare shoulders on the half mile walk along the beach. On the left the exposed eroded bluffs rose 50 feet, with boulders and large driftwood logs at their base. On the right small surf broke, it's noise causing them to walk close together to speak. They walked easily, Dip with a knapsack, Teri carrying a towel, their full wetsuits open to the waist, neoprene sleeves flapping around their knees. Their bare footprints in the wet sand crossed those of kite fliers, dog walkers, dogs, surf fishermen and a pack of rowdy kids. A lone surfer, back from a dawn session at the point, walked towards them.

"How was it?" called Dip to the oncoming surfer.

"Good! Wind's coming up, but its offshore," said the surfer, sleek as a seal fresh from the sea, smiling under his dripping hair at both of them as he trotted by. Dip knew he had missed the best waves of the day, but he didn't mind, he was with Teri.

Teri was back from summer vacation. Just starting her junior year, she had spent the summer living at home in San Diego and working as an intern with a high-tech firm in Sorrento Valley. Now back at school preparing to start the fall quarter, she was excited to be living off campus. Teri had found an apartment in Summerland and was enjoying a brief vacation between the end of summer and the start of school.

Dip had missed her over the summer. They had been apart and he wanted the old feeling back. She was the best chick surfer he knew. She rode a short board better than most guys, and wasn't afraid to take her place in the lineup. Dip had met Teri during her first quarter on campus and she had knocked him out, she was so pretty, forthright and smart. Like Dip, she liked the beach life and the student life. Sometimes, Dip wondered how he got so lucky.

Dip and Teri surfed the point for an hour. When the wind started to

blow the waves into misshapen humps they came in to sit on the beach close to the bluff, which sheltered them from the wind.

Blackening seaweed, driftwood sticks and blobs of tar marked the last high tide line. They picked a spot on clean sand between the tide line and the dirty sand next to the bluff. Clean sand was important. Just being on the beach was important, watching the surf and what went on around them.

“I got this letter yesterday from the Dean of Student Affairs,” said Dip, looking out to sea.

“Lucky you,” drawled Teri, “What’s it about?” She turned her head to look at him.

“I don’t know. I’m just supposed to show up at his office.” Dip offered the comment for informational purposes only, no point to be made or empathy sought.

“Muy misterioso, Dipito.” said Teri and turned back to her book. The beach was good for the kind of conversation where speaking was optional.

They lay in the sunlight without talking, reading and being part of the beach scene. A trio of high-school sponge-heads in baggy shorts goofed on each other near an overflowing trash barrel. Gulls wheeled overhead, waiting their chance at the trash. A black Labrador wearing a red kerchief gamboled past, seeking his chance at the gulls.

“I’m declaring my major,” said Teri reading on her stomach, up on her elbows, her back arching gracefully from a slim waist to muscular shoulders.

“To what?” Dip asked, watching the Lab leap over a stack of boogie boards. Dip had surfer shoulders too, a long waist and blonde hairy legs. He was digging a hole in the sand with his toes.

“Environmental Sciences.”

“That’s cool.” Even though Dip had changed majors like clothes, he knew Teri cared about the environment. They had gone to a fund raising concert for the Surfrider Foundation last spring. The major was a good choice for her.

“And I want to get out of school,” she said firmly as if she had thought about it.

“What’s your hurry?” said Dip lazily as if he had considered the possibility and discarded it.

“I mean, I liked my job this summer. You can’t be a student forever and I want to get a good job.”

Dip was in no hurry to answer, get back to the car, start the new quarter or get a job so he stayed silent. “What did you like about your job?” he said finally.

Teri told him. Dip had to admit it sounded good, especially the flex-time that allowed her to surf Del Mar before work, and the company-sponsored Friday kegger.

On Monday at two o’clock Ms. Rosenblatt effortlessly ignored Dip, who was not the first student to squirm in her office. Dip felt as uncertain as a beach break peak on a cross swell. Unsure of how to dress this far up the academic food chain, he went for formal—his newest Vans, long khaki pants and a white polo shirt he’d found on the remainder rack in an Ojai tourist shop. Dip figured the embroidered Kokopelli over the left breast lent a certain formality.

“Dean Chia will see you now,” said Ms. Rosenblatt with a neutral smile that gave no hint of his status. Dip returned his best smile for practice and memorized the pronunciation of the Dean’s name. Chi like the life force, not Chia like the pet.

Dean Chia did not look up as Dip entered so he silently sat in the only available chair. The Dean continued to study the papers on his desk, his smooth face expressionlessly absorbing the information through half-glasses. In the studious silence, Dip looked around the calm room. A large framed doctoral degree in electrical engineering from MIT dominated the left wall. Under the diploma, three large ceramic bowls were precisely placed on a long teak credenza. Floor-to-ceiling built-in bookshelves occupied the entire right wall. The wall behind the diminutive Dean was all glass. Dip could see Storke Tower reflected in the top of Dean Chia’s wood desk, as large and shiny as an ice rink. A gray laptop computer parked Zamboni-like to the side. A rich intricate rug centered the room, the desk, and the chair on which Dip sat.

Dean Chia wore a short-sleeved white shirt with a narrow knit black tie. He brought up his gaze from the papers and looked studiously over his glasses at Dip. “Mr. Sevich,” he said not unkindly, “can you explain to me why you are still here?”

Rattled, Dip instinctively played dumb. “What do you mean, sir?”

Dean Chia answered Dip's question as if he had never asked it. "I've examined your file, Mr. Sevich," He spoke impersonally, as if Dip were an undergraduate lab rat, "You have been carrying a full academic load at UCSB for the last seven years. You have done moderately well, and yet have somehow avoided graduation. At this time it appears you are only one course short of graduation in three different majors." The Dean looked sharply at Dip.

Suddenly, Dip's supposedly hidden plan was as easy to see as a towel on the beach. Dip goggled at the Dean, who glanced at the file before him and continued, "which are Asian Studies, Business Economics and Geography. I do applaud your wide-ranging thirst for knowledge, Mr. Sevich, but the fact remains that you must graduate sometime."

"I didn't know graduation was a requirement," Dip blurted in brainless panic.

"Indeed it is not, Mr. Sevich," Dean Chia chuckled. "Students leave for all sorts of reasons. Some drop out, some seek their education elsewhere, some are persuaded to leave, and some sad cases are expelled. But all must leave eventually. The preferred method is by graduation—it really works out best all around."

"But I'm in good standing with the University." Dip struggled to stay calm in the face of Dean Chia's remorseless rationality. "Shouldn't I be allowed to pursue an education?"

"Although we are an academic institution, we of the administration must deal with non-academic realities." Dean Chia continued as smoothly and overwhelmingly as a rising tide. "You may be aware that due to a finite enrollment, the university is compelled to turn away many incoming students every year. The university, and myself, continually struggle with this unfortunate situation." Dean Chia leaned back in his chair to enjoy his own smooth delivery of a practiced speech. "One factor in our favor is turnover. Each student that graduates, you see, makes a space available to another equally deserving student. You have been educated, Mr. Sevich, and lack only the formality of a degree. It is only fair that after seven years you move on."

Dip had nothing to say, although gulping like a grouper, it appeared he was trying to recover the ability to speak.

Seizing the opportunity, Dean Chia concluded his discourse. "Mr. Sevich, it is my sincere wish that in the fall quarter you will choose

among the three majors you are so close to completing, complete one of them, and graduate."

Dip understood his fate as a surfer caught inside on a big day understands. No way out. Only this time the looming wave blinked and waited for him to speak.

Dip came up for air. "Does it matter what major I choose?" he squeaked.

"That is entirely up you and the department chairs," Dean Chia replied briskly, "I have already informed them," he nodded at the laptop, "of our conversation."

The conversation with Dean Chia was as disorienting as the tumbling chaos of a bad wipeout. Dip was too stunned to move. Seeing this, Dean Chia came around the desk and led Dip to the door. He shook Dip's hand, smiled and said encouragingly, "Good luck, Mr. Sevich. I'll see you at graduation." The heavy door closed softly behind Dip, leaving him teetering in the doorway. Ms. Rosenblatt smiled at him expectantly until Dip realized he was supposed to leave.

Dip pedaled his beach cruiser slowly back to the apartment. He parked the beater in the living room and plodded morosely up to his sunny sanctum. His surf bro Fuzzy was kicked back on the couch, eyes closed, doing little chicken headdips to the tunes coming in through his mini-phones. When Dip plopped down next to him, Fuzzy pulled off the phones and asked, "How'd it go with the Dean?"

"I have to graduate next quarter," said Dip morosely. He could hear faint rap from Fuzzy's phones. Da da da DA da da DA, dat-da-dah DA DA.

"Bummer, Dippo," said Fuzzy.

"Yeah, I gotta do it or they'll expel me or something."

"Jeez, that's whack," said Fuzzy. Concentrating on the moment he added, "It bites, dude." Having exhausted his conversational repertoire, Fuzzy replaced the earphones back and closed his eyes. His eyes snapped open and he looked at Dip with concern, "We still on for dawn patrol tomorrow?"

"Sure," said Dip resignedly.

Satisfied that the natural order of life continued, Fuzzy went back to his music. Dip leaned forward and sadly checked out the coeds passing

by in the street below. Suddenly, a paint-splattered pickup truck braked to a stop in the middle of the street. A hairy middle-aged man in a tank top got out and yelled up at Dip, “Hey you, Sevich! When are you going to get that couch off my roof?”

Mr. Lucas, his landlord. Great, just what he needed. Dip and Mr. Lucas disagreed on the true purpose of the roof. Mr. Lucas thought the roof was to keep the rain out, Dip thought it provided additional living space.

“Soon, Mr. Lucas, soon,” said Dip wearily and leaned back out of sight of the street and Mr. Lucas. There was no point in talking to Mr. Lucas when he got excited.

Dip’s parents invited Dip and Teri to dinner at their home in Ojai the next night. Dip’s folks liked Teri and considered her a good influence. Teri liked them too and said, “They’ll be excited to hear you’re graduating.”

“You say that like it’s a good thing,” said Dip.

“Well it is,” said Teri and they left it at that.

Dip drove to Teri’s in his tired Toyota truck. Peeling surf decals covered the bumper, and a rust spot the size of a bar of Mr. Zog’s Sex Wax was slowly eating the faded paint on the cab roof. The pickup had faithfully taken him to many sweet surf sessions, and fit him as comfortably as a spring suit. Dip loved his truck.

Dip loved Teri. Dip had helped her move to Summerland and figured to make the drive a lot because, on grounds of hygiene, she had always refused to sleep in his apartment, even when she lived in the dorms. When Dip drove up Teri was waiting, looking as sweet and smooth as a three foot wave on a glassy day. For the occasion, she wore her straight hair drawn back, light makeup, a simple white top, and a floral print skirt. She was holding a bottle of wine. “Do you like this skirt?” she asked, “I thought it was right for a dinner party.”

“Its just dinner, not a party,” said Dip. For the occasion, Dip had remembered to wear shoes.

“That’s what you call it when you get a dinner invitation, silly.” She looked in the cab, “Dipilicious, clean the seat, please.”

Dip cleared out the paper trash and smoothed a towel over the melted surf wax and duct tape patch on the seat.

“Now that you’re graduating,” Teri said as she made room for her feet among the petrified fries and bottle caps, “you’ll be able to get a nice car. Like a 4Runner. You can take it on your Baja trips and everything.”

Dip was shocked to silence. Sometimes Teri was like a dawn surf session at Mussel Shoals. There you were, enjoying a smooth swell rising beautiful out of glassy water, making a predictable takeoff and smooth bottom turn, then Bang! the sun glare off the water made it impossible to read the next section. Could she be serious? Give up his truck? Start making payments?

Teri missed Dip’s expression and blithely continued, “My landlady recommended this wine. She called it a ‘solid central coast Chardonnay’,” she giggled, “I hope your folks like it.”

“They’ll love it,” said Dip and turned over the engine. The Ziggy Marley CD picked up where it left off, and so did Dip on 101 South. Just before Rincon he turned off on Highway 150 to go over the mountain to Ojai. On the sharp left turn up and over the bridge in the lemon groves he went too fast, and Teri squealed “Dipper, slow down!” By the time Dip passed Lake Casitas he began to wonder how a 4Runner would corner on the windy road.

Paul Sevich was a bluff hearty man, a born salesman, a factory rep whose line was replacement parts for earthmoving equipment. He worked out of his home and flew his own airplane to close deals, which had allowed him to raise his family in out-of-the-way Ojai. That which Paul had worked so hard to provide, Dip took for granted. Which Paul reckoned was as it should be. When Dip and Teri rang the bell Paul, wearing shorts and an aloha shirt, greeted them with pleasure

“Big Dipper and Terrible Teri! Come on in, kids!”

“Paul, you know I’m not so terrible,” said Teri. Amused by his greeting, she kissed him on the cheek.

“You’re welcome anyway,” Paul laughed, and hugged his son.

Paul’s booming good nature overwhelmed Dip, it always had. Party animal just wasn’t Dip’s style, particularly not today. “Hi Dad,” he said. Not wanting to be a downer he gave Paul a good hug back.

In the kitchen, Dot was making the salad. “Hi Mom,” said Dip and gave her a hug too.

“Hello, Arnold,” she smiled at him. His mother was probably the only person in the world who called him Arnold, which was just fine

with Dip.

“We brought some wine,” said Teri. Paul took it from her and examined the label.

“Good choice, a solid central coast Chardonnay,” he said. “This will go fine with the calimari.” Paul caught the glance Teri threw at Dip. “What?” he said.

“Nothing. Something at work today,” said Teri. “Dot, can I help?”

At the end of the meal, as Paul poured the last of the wine, Dot said, “We have some news for you.” She paused until she had the young people’s attention. “We’re moving to Oregon. To Portland.”

“Really? How exciting!” enthused Teri. Dip’s eyes bugged slightly. More changes. His life was closing out faster than beach break.

“Wait a minute,” he said, “What? Why are you moving?”

Paul explained, “I have an opportunity to take over a territory in the Northwest. Dot and I have always liked Portland. Teri, you may not know this, but Dot went to school there. And well, we’re ready for a change. The kids are grown, even the baby,” he smiled at Dip, “and this house is too big. So why stick around? Ojai is nice but so is Portland. We talked it over and decided it was what we wanted.”

Dot added, “We’ve been thinking of making a change for some time. We have some years left that are just ours and we’re going to be selfish and please ourselves. We’re not as old as we look.”

“You don’t look old at all,” said Teri quickly. “I think it’s sweet. You kids go off and have fun.” Everyone laughed but Dip.

Dip couldn’t believe it, just couldn’t believe it. No folks and no house. He didn’t visit much, true, but it was still important to know home was still there. And now it wasn’t.

“Dip, you look a little upset. What do you think of this move?” asked Paul.

Dip shook his head and forced out some words. “If that’s what you want to do. I mean, I think it’s great.”

“You don’t sound so sure,” said Paul.

“Dip’s just going through a lot of changes now,” Teri broke in. “Did he tell you he’s going to graduate next quarter?”

“You’re kidding. What brought this on?” said Paul, floored. Dip graduating was bigger news than the move to Portland.

“The university wants me to graduate,” said Dip, petulant as a child

told to take his hand out of the cookie jar. “The dean told me they need my space for other students.”

Dot smiled to herself at her son’s discomfort, but said encouragingly, “My goodness! Congratulations, Arnold! I was beginning to wonder if it would ever happen. What will be your major? I mean, you’ve had so many.” Catching her mood, Paul began whistling ‘We’re in the Money’ under his breath. Paul had been trying to turn down the money tap for the last three years.

“I haven’t decided yet. It seems so unfair,” Dip complained. “I played by the rules. I’m happy there. Why do I have to leave?” Like taking off left at Ventura Harbor jetty, he knew it was wrong as soon as he said it.

The family did not respond until Dot replied gently, “Maybe because you’re twenty-four and need to think about the future.” Dip’s whiny inner child heard the plain truth and had nothing to say.

“Cheer up, Arnold. You’ll survive even this, I’m sure.” Dot continued, “Anyway, we have the house on the market and we’re pricing it to sell. And we have a request. We need you to deal with your belongings.”

“Yeah,” laughed Paul, “We’re not hauling your comic book collection to Portland!” Even Dip had to laugh because the collection was as bulky and awkward as a quiver of big wave guns. The comics were the prize of his paper route years, twenty full storage cartons he’d not touched since he went away to school.

“No problem, I’ll take care of it.”

When Teri and Dip were at the door about to leave, Dot said, “Oh, I almost forgot. Your landlord, Mr. Lucas called. He had my number from when we co-signed on the apartment a few years ago. He asked me to tell you to get the furniture off the roof? Does that make any sense? Anyway, I told him I had no connection with your apartment now, but that I’d pass it on.”

“I’ll talk to him.” Lucas was out of line. Bugging his folks was so bogus.

Dip and Teri drove back to Santa Barbara on the dark freeway along the familiar coast. As they passed the beach houses at Faria, Teri spoke up. “I’m going to miss Dot and Paul.”

Dip let a night freighter roar past before replying, “Yeah, me too. I wish they were staying in Ojai.”

“I’m a little surprised you weren’t more supportive. Everybody

changes, you know.”

“I don’t change,” said Dip argumentatively.

“You don’t want to change, Dipman.” Teri said tartly, responding to his tone. Then, softer, “Everybody changes. I’ve changed a lot this summer. Like, I have a better idea about what I want out of life.”

“So, what do you want?” said Dip, preoccupied and out of sorts.

“I want what Paul and Dot have—a decent life, a family, some money to enjoy it with.” Teri looked hard at Dip and spoke clearly over the noisy engine. “What do you want?”

Dip was about to let his mood answer for him when the headlights of a passing car strobed her face. She clearly expected an answer and it had better be a good one. Dip swallowed his first thought and stalled. But Teri wasn’t letting him off the hook, he had to say something.

“I don’t know. I need to think about it.” At this Teri snorted, a sound he had never heard from her before. She looked down the long freeway arcing ahead and ignored his questioning looks, silent all the way to Summerland.

When they stopped, Dip said, “I’ll call tomorrow, OK?”

“OK Dip. You think about my question. I want an answer, you know.”

“I know.”

Teri kissed Dip on the cheek. “This is a tough time for you, isn’t it, Dippity-do?”

“I guess. I’ll call,” Dip said as Teri left.

On the drive to Isla Vista the events of the last two days relentlessly rushed at his thoughts like whitewater pushing him onto a reef. Sick at heart, Dip drove through the empty Santa Barbara interchange into the darkness beyond.

Wednesday afternoon, Dip went to work at the surf shop. The Full On shop was expanding into a larger space closer to the freeway, and the move gave Dip some extra hours. He was glad to help out. Dip liked Fred, Full On’s owner, and Fred seemed to appreciate Dip’s flexible schedule and willingness to work. Today they were clearing out the old store.

On the last trip, Fred locked the door on the storefront shop, peered through the plate glass at the empty interior, sighed, and climbed into the driver’s seat of the rented van. “I’m gonna miss the old place,” said

Fred. The balding older man seemed genuinely sorry about closing the old shop location.

Dip liked Fred’s soul. Even though Fred’s hairline had retreated into his ears he still appreciated things just because they were cool. “Yeah, the shop fit it real well with the beach scene.” The entrance to Carpinteria State Beach was just a few blocks down.

“Yeah, it did. But if I’m gonna stay in business I need the space. The shopping center is close enough to the beach and gives me room to grow. Gotta grow, ya know.” Fred put the truck in gear.

Fred liked Dip, and liked the way he listened. And Dip usually had something interesting to say. “The beach scene just wasn’t making the nut in the winter, I guess,” said Dip distractedly. They had been over this before. Ever since Fred had learned Dip took business classes, he had taken to bouncing ideas off Dip.

“You got that right,” said Fred. At the stop sign he looked both ways, then at Dip. “So. Dipini. What’s on your mind?” He let a car go by, then turned right behind it.

“Oh man,” said Dip, “You don’t wanna know.”

“Sure I do. What’s up?”

“My life has turned to shit. School, Teri, my folks, everything. Even my landlord is on my case.”

Fred turned left, then right into the shopping center parking lot. “That sounds like a lot.” Fred bounced slowly over the speed bumps and drove behind the mall to the delivery entrance to the new store. “What’s with your landlord?”

“I have a couch and fridge on the roof. It’s a cool place to hang. You know, down a brew, check out the sunset. My landlord is pissed about it. He even called my folks.”

“Roof, huh? That’s different. Sounds like cool place to be.” Fred pulled up to the back door of the store. “It’s his roof, right?”

“Yeah, but I live there. I’ve been there a long time. I pay my rent. And on time.”

“Do you pay the roof repair bill?” Fred turned off the engine and set the brake.

“No.”

“See where I’m going with this?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Why not cut him some slack? He’s got his money in the place.”

They got out of the truck and started carrying in the last odds and ends of the move. Finally only a large counter remained in the van. They wrestled it out slowly, then each took an end to carry it in together.

“So what are you going to do with the fridge?” said Fred, looking over his shoulder for a path through the unordered piles from previous trips.

“Sell it, I suppose.”

“What do you want for it? Over there.” Fred nodded to his left, and carefully steered towards the wall. “Here.” They sat the counter down.

“I paid fifty for it. Why?”

“We need an employee fridge. Tell you what. If you haul it here, I’ll pay you sixty for it. It works, right?”

“Sure it works.” Dip was almost offended that Fred would ask. But that was Fred too. “OK, deal. I’ll bring it over Saturday.”

“See, problem solved.” With Fred grinning at him, Dip couldn’t help but smile.

“Do you want the couch, too?” asked Dip.

“Nice try, dude. You think I want some scuzzy ratbag couch? Forget it. OK, let’s knock off. I need to drop off the key at the realtors and pick up some stuff at Home Depot. See you Saturday then?”

“Yep.”

Dip listened to Fred because Fred had it made. Fred Bahl was fifty-five. Years ago, Fred had taken his modest winnings from the early pro surfing circuit and started Full On. The storefront operation supported Fred’s surf habit until five years ago when he met Melinda Pruet at a singles function in Ventura. After a prolonged courtship they married, and now with Melinda involved the shop changed. Her hard business sense, combined with Fred’s energy and creativity, gave Full On a second life. When the surf was up, Fred was still outta there, but now Full On stayed open. Melinda had their retirement to think of.

On Saturday morning, Dip came in the shop’s glass front door. Melinda greeted him with a big smile. “Dipster! What do you think of the place?” In two days it had been halfway transformed from a disorganized warehouse to an attractive retail store.

“I like it. Uh, kind of a big hole over there.” Half the floor space

was empty carpet.

“The ski and snowboard inventory won’t get here until next week. No biggie. We saved a bundle moving out when we did.”

Dip nodded. “The surf side looks good. Did you and Fred do all this yourselves?”

“No, Fuzzy helped.” Fuzzy worked when work came available. He also shaped and glassed surfboards for the Full On house brand out of a Goleta garage.

“Did Fred tell you about the fridge?” Through the plate glass they could see it tied down in the back of Dip’s truck.

“Yeah. Drive around, I’ll help you unload it.”

“Fred’s not here yet? It’s pretty heavy.” Fred’s habit was to start his day with coffee at California Street by the fairgrounds. If the surf was worth it, he’d go out. But even if it was good, he still got to work by 9 AM at the latest. That was the agreement with Melinda.

“No, but I’ve got a dolly. We can handle it.”

When the rounded fridge was pushed into place against the back wall, Melinda took a close look at the faux deco logo on the door and laughed.

“Did you put this on?”

“Naw, Fuzzy did it.”

“Very funny. He’s talented, that boy,” said Melinda and opened the fridge door and recoiled, wrinkling her nose like kelp. “Yikes, what died? OK, first job, clean out the fridge, and use hot soapy water. Cleaning stuff is there, and hot water is in the bathroom.”

Dip finished the chore and came over to find the next job. Melinda was neatly arranging decals in a glass display case next to the cash register. “All clean, plugged in and humming.” said Dip and leaned on the display case, “The fridge got me to thinking, ‘Why not put a cooler out front?’ People always want something to drink. We could stock it with something healthy.”

Melinda looked at Dip appraisingly. “Dip, what a great idea!” Dip looked pleased and she went on, “Do you have time to look into it? We’re just too busy right now.”

“Yeah, I can ask around. My landlord has a coke machine in the building. Moving the fridge got me off his list, I could ask him.”

“Or find a place with a cooler with the kind of drink you want, and ask the owner how to get in touch with the distributor. Very cool, Dip.

Thanks. Let me know what you find out.” Melinda continued stacking decals.

“And I can check the Web.” Dip sat crosslegged on the carpet and looked up at Melinda through the glass front of the case. “Can I ask you something, Melinda?”

“Sure,” said Melinda, busy in her task.

“It’s about Teri,” said Dip hesitantly.

Melinda glanced at Dip and kept working. “Fred mentioned there was something going on with you two.”

“I don’t understand where she’s coming from,” Dip’s words came out in a rush. “Since she’s a babe, and you’re an older babe, maybe you can tell me what’s happening?”

Melinda smiled with half her mouth, “Getting past the compliment that I’m sure is in there somewhere, I don’t know if I can help, but I’ll try. Tell me more.”

“It’s like, we were so happy, then she went home for the summer and went through these major changes, you know? And now she wants me to change but I don’t know into what.”

“What kind of changes, Dip?”

“She won’t tell me! She just says to tell her what I want.”

“Sounds reasonable. So, tell her.”

“I don’t know what I want. I tried to tell her but she doesn’t get it.”

Melinda stopped her work and looked at Dip through the glass. He was obviously miserable about it and she knew he cared for Teri. Melinda straightened and gave Dip her full attention. “Dip, I don’t know Teri all that well, so I’m not going to speak for her. But here goes.”

Dip was listening seriously as she continued, “Try to think about it from her point of view. You said she told you what she wants. You can’t tell what you want, and from her point of view, that’s not reassuring. Are you with me on this?” He nods, an eager student hanging on her words. “So think about it.” Dip looked crestfallen as the easy answer he’d hoped for was evidently not forthcoming.

“Yeah, but what does she want?” he said.

Melinda sighs, drums her nails once on the glass impatiently. “She’s looking to graduate, right? She’s maybe thinking about making a living?” Melinda stops, unwilling to spoonfeed him.

“So she wants me to make a living?” he said slowly.

“Talk to Teri. Now, back to work,” she said firmly, as if she did not want to incapacitate her worker with too much insight.

Dip was busy arranging boxes of swim fins when Fred walked in. “Hey, what a cool store! I’ll take ten of everything.” Fred put his board down, then went to the bathroom to change. As he emerged he dried his hands on his shorts and ran them over his bald head.

“What’s happening, baby?” Radiating good humor, he made a grab for Melinda’s waist.

Melinda gave him a dismissive peck on the cheek. “Work is what’s happening.”

“Work?” said Fred in mock surprise, “I thought we did that yesterday.”

Melinda is in no mood. “And today and tomorrow and, if you’re lucky, into the foreseeable future.”

“Hey, what happened to my surf bunny?”

“She’s trying to get a store ready to open, and you better too if you know what’s good for you.”

“Oh, I know what’s good for me all right,” Fred pulls her to him.

“Fred!” Melinda caved to his mood, and relaxed in his embrace. “Are you ready to get to work or not?” she said, looking him in the eye from three inches away.

“Ouch. Yes, I am ready to work. In fact, I am ready to work my butt off because that west swell is building and I am on it tomorrow morning.”

“You’re on it every morning,” said Melinda, unmollified.

Dip and Fred spent the day installing shelving in the rear of the store. Melinda got the office equipment set up and minded the store. The customer was the priority and she attended to their needs. A few kids wandered in, sidetracking their parents from a trip to the grocery store.

Around noon a rasta-surfarian from Lompoc came in, a friend of Fred’s, and a regular customer. The dread-locked surfer was on his way back from Oxnard. He told and outraged tale of his van getting bricked at Hollywood-by-the-Sea. “And the dudes that did it wanted to fight. Where is that at, man? I just left.” The stoned soul surfer was on the verge of losing his serenity.

“Drag,” said Fred. “And hey, I’m sorry about your van. But you have to adapt to urban surf, man. If you want to surf down south don’t go

to places like Oxnard, or Lunada Bay. You're gonna run into territorial assholes. Next time try County Line or El Porto. It's not as heavy." The Lompoc local couldn't argue with that.

When the surf forecast arrived on the fax in the afternoon Fred grabbed it off the machine. "All right! The swell is concentrating down south." Fred then called the Newport lifeguards and listened to the set litany of their surf and weather report. In an unusual deviation from the script, the lifeguard ended with 'and the Wedge is wedging'.

"Time for the annual Wedge run! Perfect conditions, sounds like." Fred hopped with excitement but remembered to ask, "Melinda, are you OK with this?"

The symptoms of surf fever were plain. "Sure, the store is coming along fine," she said, "When will you be back?" This was the man she had married, and with open eyes. There was no point in denying his passion.

"We should be back by two or three."

"Can you be back by one?" Melinda compromised. "I've got some shopping to do and Sunday is always a busy day."

"Thanks, honey. Dipini, you ever been to the Wedge?"

"Yeah, but it was flat."

"Why don't you come along tomorrow? Leave here at four-thirty, catch the Wedge in the morning and beat it back here by one. The Wedge looks a lot different when it's going off."

"Should I bring a boogie board?"

"Nope, just fins. Mano a wavo."

To be continued.

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