

SURFERS AT THE END OF TIME

Rudy Rucker & Marc Laidlaw

Rudy Rucker www.rudyrucker.com/blog is a mathematician, a computer scientist, and author of more than forty books. He worked as a professor of computer science at San Jose State in Silicon Valley. He received Philip K. Dick awards for his cyberpunk *Software* and *Wetware*. Rudy's most recent novels are *Return to the Hollow Earth* and *Million Mile Road Trip*. Nine of his backlist titles were reprinted by Night Shade this year, and his short stories can be found on his Complete Stories webpage. After retiring from the videogame industry, Marc Laidlaw moved to Kauai, where he is trying to remember how to write books. So far the effort has given rise to one new novel, *Oversea*. The authors' interests in math and the ocean have once again led to the zany adventures of Zep and Del—two dudes who are now . . .

SURFERS AT THE END OF TIME

After a lifetime misspent on tinkering with gadgets, scrawling diagrams, and building mechanical miniatures drawn from that old movie *The Time Machine*, Zep makes his epic discovery while contemplating an all-water, completely natural, no-hidden-parts wave. But it's not just any wave, it's a permanent standing crest formed in the tidal rip under the Golden Gate Bridge.

Zep finds this a meditative spot, on the watery shoulder of the shipping lanes where rusty tankers and stately container ships come and go nonstop, providing excellent training for ignoring distraction. The October swells are huge, but Zep is perfectly poised in stasis, forever sliding down one particular bulky static wave about twenty feet high—a gentle giant, but with nasty, grabby currents at its base.

He's spent so much time on this wave that he's started talking to it, and in between the bellows of the foghorns and the various ship bells, he's not totally surprised when it decides to talk back. Bit of a bummer that its first words are critical of his posture. Zep does a kind of flow yoga when he's really in tune with the surf,

shifting into stances that would get him laughed out of any ordinary line-up, but are a nonissue when he's got the whole mouth of San Francisco Bay to himself. Your basic epoxy surfboard would not put up with his moves, but Zep's board is hardly basic. The impolex Sqwonker reads his moves and adjusts in realtime, keeping him centered even when he closes his eyes. And his eyes *are* closed when the voice comes to him: "Grab your back foot with one hand, put the other on your head."

Not a problem for gnarly, bearded Zep, ascended high surfer that he is. He's in a trance, tripping on the fact that he's moving and not moving. He follows the wave's instructions, first finding his foot, then putting his free hand atop his head, so now his body is like an eight on a stick, you might say. The leg he stands on is the stick, with two loops atop it, the head-hand loop and the leg-arm loop.

"That takes the Murgburger for crappiest infinity sign I've ever seen," says the wave.

"Give . . . me . . . a . . . chance . . . to . . . adjust." Zep wriggles his toes. Perfect. He feels balance in his body, through the board, into the standing pattern of ceaseless flow . . .

Then—aha!

The revelation arrives: The mass of Earth's sea—past and future—is an *undulatory aether* that needs only to be properly scribed by a surfboard's skeg, thereby linking your Now to arbitrary instants of the past or future. The seemingly empty air is alive with the spacetime shadows of oceans gone and yet to come. Not only is a surfboard the interface between ocean and sky, it slices the time layers of the undulatory aether. It's all a matter of carving the right knot. A special curve. Zep thinks of a name for such a curve. *Time sigil*.

If Zep gets his head and his board right, he can surf to anywhen he wants. He could almost do it right now, except that his board is not ideally configured. It needs a shaper's physical touch, a tweak beyond what's possible in software. Come to think of it, a handboard might be the thing. A very small and agile board with a sharp little fin, and a sturdy handle and—

"I have one," says the voice, and from deep in his revelatory zone, Zep opens his eyes and sees a—gnome? Peering at him from the water. Or maybe it's a kid, but with an aura of extreme age. A creepy, gnome-like, round-headed youth wearing a propeller cap, the propeller itself a figure eight/infinity sign doing the very gyrations Zep had been picturing. And now the kid lifts one hand above the water. He's holding a teardrop-shaped handboard, perhaps naturally grown, pale green-yellow, and sculpted as beautifully as the image Zep had just formed.

Zep would like to think the kid refined his vision into higher math and—instantiated it. But maybe somehow the kid had the handboard all along? And Zep's vision had been prompted by a telepathic message from the teardrop handboard? *Whoah*. Zep loses his balance and staggers, which sends a jolt through Sqwonker and out into the sea.

The standing wave breaks up, our surf sage loses his footing, and his board spins away, abandoning him to the black chaos lurking beneath the peak. As Zep goes under, he sees a gray sky. And against this sky, the Golden Gate Bridge is no longer golden, but a hash of corroded girders, rusted decks, dangling cable. The future. He's on the right track.

When Zep surfaces, the gnome-like kid is gone. But something is bumping against his leg. Like a piglet against a sow. It's the handboard. Clutching his prize by its rounded handle, Zep uses his other hand to lever himself back onto Sqwonker. Lying prone, he paddles for the rocky shore, with the handboard tucked beneath his belly like a golden egg.

People can surf time. The handboard is the key. The gnome brought Zep the handboard from the future. The future Zep will pass the handboard back to the gnome so

the gnome can deliver it to today's Zep. A perfect loop, with no beginning and no end. The handboard grew on its own.

Aum.

* * *

Del wakes from uneasy dreams. Urpy pizza. Wee hours. The rotten-cantaloupe-shaped moon lights the grungy walls of Del and Zep's surf-rat condo on the second floor of the Oceanfront Arms, situated just across the Great Highway from Ocean Beach in San Francisco. The surf is as loud as Del's ever heard here. He drinks water from a glass by his mattress, goes for a pee, then drinks more water from the sink. He wishes he was dead.

The far side of the living room is a pool of gloom, with Zep's closed bedroom door a plinth of silence. Naturally Zep was the one to end up with a woman tonight.

Waning moon, surf ka-boom, doom and tomb. Maybe Del should do a solo night-run. Who'd even give a shit if he drowned? His life is nowhere. He has a part-time job as a janitor at the medical center on the hill. He hasn't had a girlfriend since they moved back to California. Today's inspired improvised gambit paid off handsomely for Zep but left Del in the lurch. His head hurts, he's hungry, and there's no food. He hasn't eaten since lunchtime . . .

Lunchtime, when, for reasons unknown, he's approached by a taciturn, self-possessed woman with post-punk hair, odd piercings, and an oddly formal black silk business suit, almost an haute couture thing. She sits down next to Del in the hospital cafeteria. It's the week before Halloween, but somehow it doesn't look like she's in costume. She's got it all integrated. She gives Del an intense look.

"Hello, stranger," she says. "Boing."

"Have we met?" goes Del.

"We will," she says. "I'm Gother. We share a future."

"Me like," says lonely Del. "You work here? A doc?"

"Lawyer," says Gother. "My friend Sally and I are on a pleasure jaunt. With a bit of biz." The woman allows herself a smile. "We're here for men. Me for you. And Sally for—you have a friend called Zep?"

"Zep!" goes Del. "That's where I know you from?" He's perfectly willing to overwrite his certainty that he's never seen Gother before.

"Sally is sexually attracted to Zep," says Gother.

"Where is this Sally?" asks Del.

"She's upstairs in the psych ward watching cartoons on TV with the inmates," says Gother. "She filched a Sunshine Lady Vols pink smock from the gift shop, and bluffed her way in."

"Do you guys surf?" asks Del, not even trying to follow the Sally elaborations.

"Boing. We do."

Del imagines Gother in a bikini or wetsuit, her severe haircut plastered to her possibly tattooed scalp. In Del's overheated imagination, Gother is starting to seem vaguely like—how to say this—like a dream girl he imagined and has made real through force of will. The word *soulmate* goes through his body like a shudder. He babbles an invite.

"Come to Ocean Beach with us after work for a sesh, Gother. You and me and Zep and Sally. I'll bring some port wine, and I'll steal a gigundo subhuman hospital pizza from the freezer. We'll cook it on a trash fire, where Judah Street hits the beach." Del does a chef gesture, pursing his lips and making a circle of thumb and forefinger. "*Delish!*"

"Maybe you could be a cook instead of a janitor," goes Gother.

"Shoot for the sky!" goes Delbert. "I'd make a good house husband, what with you a rich lawyer and all. Mobile office on the beach. Adjudicating tussles in the surf

lineup. I'll be your paralegal. A Holy Family of Surf. You and me and little Gother Junior, carving gnarly tubes in the Law's divine light."

"So, this bright future, we kick it off tonight by drinking pukeful bum-wine by a burning tire?" says Gother, enjoying the give-and-take. Her mouth is like a crack in a boulder, with a wry twist. "I accept, you kind man. But I doubt so-called Gother Junior will join the fest. His name's Lars, by the way. And he's not my child. He's not anyone's child. He's a murg. His life is a loop."

"Never mind all that," Del blindly gushes. "You and me, we'll surf the dusk."

"Brrr," goes Gother. "Too cold."

"It's not even Halloween," says Del with a shrug. "You must not be an SF local."

"Sure I am, but my SF is warmer," says Gother. Whatever that means.

"Zep's got some spare flickercladding wetsuits that'll fit you and Sally," presses Del. "Smart, pulsing—like meat! I'll lend you a piezo exaflop board. Custom warez. Zep upgrades us every few months. We've got a board for Sally, too."

"Alluring," says Gother. "Sally might use the zefop that Lars brought. It's natural-grown, every murg has one. It looks like what you'd call a handboard?"

Again Del wastes no time on trying to decrypt Gother's spaced-out divagations. Steadily he presses his suit.

"Meet me in the parking lot after work, you and Sally. We'll go pick up Zep. Look for me in the only honest to god surf wagon out there—a total piece of shit with wood on the sides. We nailed on two-by-fours. Redwood. I hope I'm not being too—"

"Pushy? You have no idea about pushy. Boing." Gother gives Del a friendly poke in the chest, like a boat shoving off from a dock. She walks away, but, at the turn of the hall, shoots him an over-the-shoulder glance that, so far as lonely Del is concerned, closes the deal. His heart belongs to Gother.

* * *

Ocean Beach is like nothing so much as a vast off-season fairground parking lot, crisscrossed by blowing tangles of plastic trash—urban tumbleweeds. The sand is dotted with dog turds. The party of four assembles an easily-ignited pile of driftwood and construction debris near the highway, amid a clearing of tire-tracked sand in the patchy iceplant. From here they can see waves to the west and houses climbing hills to the east. Between two worlds.

Sally turns out to be a flashy, loose-mouthed cackler with ultra-permed blonde hair and a grainy rasp. She's wearing her pink Sunshine Lady Vols smock over her regular clothes, which are, like, an iridescent unitard body stocking with ribs of padding at her joints. Extreme red lipstick and eye makeup. Almost like a teen playing grownup for the first time—although clearly her teen years are lost in deep time.

She has an expensive-looking amulet on a chain around her neck. It's a curvy little teardrop shape embossed with a tiny ridge. Del's eyes keep coming back to it, even though he's mostly paying attention to Gother, and letting Sally and Zep work up their own deal, which seems to go well from the outset, even though they're only communicating via yips, gestures, and grunts. Meanwhile the vibe between Del and Gother, which started off so promising that afternoon, has gone kind of flat. Del's looking for a way to get back into it.

But now a distraction. Sally produces four pills and goes into an incomprehensible rant. Perhaps it's a sales pitch about the pills' properties? Del can't follow her at all. It's not just a matter of her accent, or that she might be using slang words he's never heard before, or that she might be talking Chinese. It's more like her noises aren't even language.

"Are those pills, like, liberated from the psych ward?" interjects Del, meaning to throw Zep a hint that maybe he doesn't want to go gulping Sally's meds.

But somehow Zep seems in tune with her. As if she's beaming images right into his head. He accepts one of the pills—and it unfolds in his fingers. Lots of little legs and feelers emerge; the thing is shiny, translucent, and dimly luminous. It crawls up Zep's finger and down the other side. Sally jiggles the other three into their bottle and screws the cap on, dimming their light.

"Jeez, Zep, those pills are alive. You're not gonna . . . eat one?"

"Aren't I?"

"They're supposed to be good for you," puts in Gother. "Sally calls them pillbugs."

Now Sally offers the port wine all around, but Gother declines, which makes Del feel a little better. Zep sucks his pillbug off the back of his finger. It's far from the weirdest thing Del has seen him eat. Poor little critter.

"Are you gonna be okay surfing?" Del asks.

"I'll be fine on the beach with fine Sally," goes Zep. "I have much to contemplate from this afternoon's sesh—and from Sally's diffuse but rewarding commentary. The era of time travel draws nigh, brother Del. My new handboard is of the essence. I got it from a gnome I met beneath Golden Gate Bridge this afternoon. Or the gnome got it from me. The gnome is from the future, Del. And so are Gother and Sally. Not blowsy barroom pickups, these ladies. They rode in on the undulatory aether."

"Either what?"

"*Undulatory* aether, pinhead. It has the ontological heft of like phlogiston. Or stem cells. Or vacuum-state energy. Or quantum foam." Zep has that quiet, serious tone he gets when he's totally high and jiving you.

"*Yubba yubba, zik zik*," goes Del, not taken in.

Slack grin from Zep. "This pillbug is amping my ass. I've never been so smart in my life. And I can read Sally's mind."

Sally emits another string of noise. Zep responds in kind. For a while they're jabbering gibberish by the trash fire and then they flip to coarsely making out amid the broken glass and rusty metal of the filthy beach, how vulgar. And then Del sees something quite improper. Sally is administering a second pillbug to Zep by—squeezing it into his butt crack? Please!

Awkward with embarrassment, Del nudges Gother's hand and makes a gesture toward the ocean.

"Boing," says Gother with a nod.

"What do you even think that word means?" asks Del as they grab their boards and amble toward the surf.

"I did research," says Gother. "For you Ocean Beach surfers, *Boing* means *Hello*. Or *Goodbye*. Or *Yee-haw*. Or *Aha*."

"Not so," says Del, kind of laughing in disbelief.

Gother pauses, momentarily at a loss. "Well, ah, maybe the word hasn't yet come into use by your crowd. My research could be off by ten or fifteen years, I suppose."

"Boing," goes Del, trying it out. And now he ushers Gother into the wildly scaled Ocean Beach wave-scape, which has a markedly richer power-spectrum than usual.

Del rides his trusty board Chaos Attractor, and Gother has selected Fubar from the array of boards piled on Del's surf wagon. Once Zep's cherished mount, Fubar is now a loaner, but he keeps it current with upgrades. The two wise boards find smooth geodesic paths through the twitchy peaks. The water is so cold that it seems thicker than usual. Like oil, or even mercury. But the low, beneficent sun turns all to gold. Even the dogshit beach looks paradisiacal in the misty distance.

Stoked and with her adrenaline up, Gother begins whooping and hooting, slyling down crooked, rubbishy waves the size of three-story buildings. All's well, better than well, until she goes over the falls and bangs her knee on a floating chunk of redwood, hitting it so hard Del hears the dull clunk of the impact and feels the reverb through

the water. Back on Fubar, she gasps for breath, clenching her teeth against pain.

"The redwood logs migrate through here in the fall," says Del. "Heading for their home waters in the north to spawn. Just give it a few secs, your flicker suit will fix your knee up, guaranteed."

"Doubtful," says Gother. "Would crude peasants have a wetsuit like that?"

"It's all thanks to Zep," goes Del.

"The legendary inventor," says Gother, sarcastic at first, but her supercilious smirk melts into a smile of relief. "I heal! All thanks to Zep!"

Back on shore, they perch on their boards across the fire from Sally and Zep, who have left off grinding for now. They're studying this funky chartreuse handboard that Zep picked up today. It looks like a warped, foot-long milkweed pod, with a tiny skeg, or fin. It has a stubby stalk for a handle. And the stalk twists all around, including somehow through itself.

"We call it a zefop," Gother tells Del once again.

"First I previsualized it," says Zep. "And then a kid gave it to me in the water this afternoon. What I'm thinking, this handboard grew itself, like a shell or a seed, but it's me who provided the psychic DNA."

"Go man, go," says Del.

"Sally tells me the little guy is named Lars," adds Zep. "He came with Gother. And he's gonna give me a lesson on the zefop tomorrow morning. Dawn patrol, dude."

"Where did you say you were from?" Del asks Sally, but whatever she answers is lost on him.

The zefop handboard has patterns on it, like mother of pearl, or insect chitin, or lichen, or pinesap. It's definitely a natural-grown organic. Sally gestures with the zefop as she speaks, and its shiny little skeg carves a reflecting trail in the air above the fire.

The fact that Del is seeing acid-trip-type motion blurs, well, it sets him to wondering how he can be so high when it's *Sally* who's batshit crazy, and *Zep* is the one who ate some unknown and probably poisonous insect.

Sally is pale to the edge of translucence, and even a bit beyond; also her hair seems to move on its own. Weird. Del really and truly cannot decrypt her noises—although, if he doesn't listen too closely, he keeps having the impression that, deep down, she's talking English. In fact, if he totally lets go, he can almost gather info from the wavering rasp.

By now Gother's knee is okay, but the fire-grilled pizza—which Zep and Sally are supposed to have tended—is burned to charcoal on the underside and the little button mushrooms on the topside have withered to hardened disks indistinguishable from actual buttons. Trembling with hunger, Del tries to scarf a big piece anyway—a broken-off chunk. But the cheese burns the living shit out of his upper palate, and a Madagascar-shaped frag of the carbonized crust gets stuck sideways in his throat. He chugs port wine to wash it down, but the rotgut hits him wrong. The whole evening crashes down on his head like a misjudged wave. He throws up into the sand. Pukeful bum-wine indeed.

"On that note, I'll board my bus," goes Gother, rising to her feet. "Boing. We're lodged in a tent along the shore. I told Lars I'd head back when Del stepped in dogshit."

"Wait!" wails Del. But when he jumps to his feet, he squishes barefoot into the predestined turd.

Gother laughs merrily. "*Cute meet!*"

It's all seamlessly choreographed, with the bus screeching to a stop at the edge of the highway, Gother hopping on, then gone. The party's over.

They load the boards onto Del's thrashed surf wagon, and Del drives Zep and Sally

back to their scurvy condo on the Great Highway. The whole reason they rent the place is because it has a reserved spot in the garage so he can leave all the boards in the vehicle, but half the time someone has parked illegally in their spot, or passed out in it. Tonight, the parking gods are merciful, but it's small consolation to Del, still missing Gother and mourning the death of his hopes for the evening.

The pinwheel-eyed lovers retreat into Zep's room, loudly doing the juicy. Del showers for a long, long time, then shambles out, throws himself onto his mattress and watches the one channel they can pick up via the apartment's inscrutable satellite cable, which, as he shades into sleep, seems to be running an endless infomercial featuring a pair of shrill, round-faced youths, like Swiss sweethearts, hawking an amazing new food: Murgburgers, made from a magical, ultra-nutritious meat. "*It's Always Murgburger Time!*" And from there, Del devolves into even more unpleasant dreams . . .

Until thirst and a sense of wrongness wake him.

* * *

So now we're all caught up, our time-wrinkles are ironed flat, and here's Del, back where we started, standing alone in the living room, slightly cheered by the sea's ever-growing chunky roar. He savors the delicate tracteries of moonlight on the near side of the living room. And finds a leftover box of crackers. No need to kill himself just yet.

And then comes—*plink*—a sudden line of light around the edges of Zep's closed door and—*garwowf*—a warning roar and—*skreeek*—Sally's scream and—

"The hell you doing, you skungy—" Zep yells, not quite finishing his question. He trails off into a horrible gurgle.

Del lunges across the room and flings open the door. The feeble ceiling light is on. A hairy, bearded, skeezy guy stands by Zep's bed. He sports a helmet with Viking horns, and he's got a pelt of fur across his shoulders. The marauder's face is framed and draped with braids in wild disarray, above a moustache that looks like an exploded rat. The Viking maniac holds a broadsword two-handed, and stands in proud contemplation of how efficiently he's sliced poor Zep clean in half, cutting right through the waist.

No, no, no.

Zep sags into the bed like two pieces of a broken banana, his organs and guts puddled in quarts of blood. An Upper Zep and a Lower Zep. Being the greatest surf inventor of all time means nothing when your backbone is severed—*ow*—with pathetic strands of dead muscle and fat and skin around the edges. So nasty.

The mad Viking turns, stares at Del, and unleashes an unholy laugh. Before Del can call the dude out for his wildly inappropriate affect, Sally slithers past him and into the living room, slick and flexible as a jellyfish. She's not running from the psycho with the sword, no, she's waiting for him. Ready for the next stage of whatever the eff they're up to.

The murderous hairball exits the death-room and stands by Sally. They grunt companionably at each other, like the velociraptors in the kitchen in the first *Jurassic Park*. Hefting his broadsword, the mad Viking focuses on Delbert. But Sally intervenes. She gets into the Viking's face, flashing her sleek amulet, making raspy *skreeek* sounds, and poking him in the sides as if herding a beast.

Delbert still can't explicitly decrypt Sally's scratchy singsong. But he has a subliminal sense that she wants to leave right now because she's worried about being late for . . . something.

"Bogus," says the Viking. "Time travelers are *always* on time. Goes without saying. And I need to twain Del before we go."

Sally makes sounds of demurral. But the Viking insists.

"Del's my friend. And I'm doing it for Gother's sake, too."

Sally makes an unusually long sound, with arpeggios up and down, and with a fair amount of body language involved. Her screed concludes with an action: She skips over to Del, and before he can stop her, she shoves one of her glowing pillbugs into his mouth, very intrusively grabs him by the chin, and drags her finger along his throat, meaning to force down the dose as if Del were a dog. The pillbug helps the process by digging its feet into Del's tongue and scrooching down his gullet. As if that weren't rude enough, Sally snakes her fingers into the crack of Del's butt and shoves a second pillbug into him like a creepy-crawly suppository.

"Slice him now?" says the hairy warrior.

Sally chirrups a rough aria that seems to mean the Viking should wait a while for the pillbugs to settle in.

Impatient now, the shaggy, sinewy man swings his sword around and around. Its glittering tip etches an odd tracery that makes Del think of a Sanskrit inscription. It's like he's practicing a gesture—and now he's satisfied with his flow. Several times he dings the sword against the walls and ceilings, gouging out shabby divots of dry-wall. Finally the Viking smiles and nods his head.

"Got it," he tells Sally. "I'll go outside and practice scribing the return sigil. And check on my board."

Sally makes an intricate mewl and holds up her amulet, twitching it in odd gestures. "That's cool, go on and hop right now," says the Viking. "You'll stop off to see Gother in 2222? Right on. And then you find me in Year Gazillion—and we *really* take a ride."

Another chirp from Sally. Again she manipulates the bright little pod that dangles from her neck. She kisses the Viking, sets her feet as if she's on a surfboard—and then, with a rapid strobing effect, she flickers out of visibility and is gone. Silence.

"What about Zep?" Del dares to ask the brutal man in the horned hat.

The Viking glances back into the bedroom where the murdered Zep lies oozing. "Those two pillbugs gonna heal him," he says. "One above, one below. I well remember. In an hour or so you'll see for yourself. After your own dose kicks in." The Viking grins and makes a chopping gesture with his free hand.

At this point, Del finally begins screaming. Someone downstairs yells for quiet. Del loses it. He jumps up and down on the floor, hollering, "Shut your crack, moron! They killed my friend! I hate your guts! I'll rip your head off!" Not much aloha spirit on Ocean Beach.

For the moment, the Viking just stands there watching Del, kind of chuckling. And then he opens the door and goes outside.

"Soon come," the Viking tells Del in parting. Del hears his thud down the condo's outdoor cement slab stairs.

He waits in silence for a few minutes, paralyzed with fear. Surely he should run down to the garage, jump into his truck, and drive wildly away, lights on, horn blaring, screaming for help. But the two pillbugs have him feeling sluggish. And of course the Viking is going to be down there by the stairs waving his sword. Plus the low-affect biker neighbor whom Del yelled at through the floor might come outside, too. Would be great if the Viking killed that guy instead of Del. Not likely. *Soon come*. Del wishes the Viking hadn't said that.

Sandbagged by existential despair, Del flops onto their couch, which is an old bike rack with a moldy futon draped over it. Sits there and stares at Zep, who is illuminated in his room like a particularly horrible art installation. The guy's down to his last two or three neurons, deep into the White Light, with his skin ashen, his eyes rolled back, and most of his blood soaked into the mattress.

Could this please, please be a dream? Nah. Delbert feels the multileveled reality of normal waking life. He smells the sad contents of Zep's sliced-open bowels. Outside the window, all the verisimilitudinous details are in place. And in here, the sight

of his own trembling hands is particularly convincing.

But if it's not a dream, how can the upper half of Zep's body be sliding around by itself now, hmm? And where did the lower half go? Upper Zep maneuvers into alignment atop the bloody mattress, like a primeval tectonic plate on a bed of lava. Lower Zep must have slid down behind the bed, but Upper Zep appears untroubled by the absence.

Bloody bedding turns white as vital fluids seep back into his flesh. The torn offal of his innards reassembles into a tidy set of viscera. Zep's skin is healing across the wound. And this is the least of it. Del creeps to the doorway and clings to the frame. He closes his eyes and peeks every few seconds, still not quite trusting reality to repair itself. Afraid to believe what he is seeing: the ragged bottom edge of Upper Zep is restoring the missing half. Extruding hips, and then an ass, and privates, and legs, with knees and feet. The whole enchilada.

Upper Zep is Entire Zep, lying there fully regenerated on his mattress, stark naked, the sheets all over the floor. He has a boner. The ceiling light glares down on the scene like the bare white one-hundred-watt eye of God.

Zep's own eyes twitch open. He notices Del.

"What are you doing there?" Zep sounds cranky, which is understandable. "Were you . . . were you watching me? With Sally? Where is Sally anyway?"

"I—I just thought you were in trouble," says Del. Somehow he doesn't want to voice what he saw. Or what is still about to happen. He doesn't want any of this to be real. "Sally went home."

With belated modesty, Zep rolls over onto his stomach and addresses himself to his pillow. "Well, okay. Guess she knew she wasn't gonna get any rest staying the night with me, hardy har. Turn out the light, dude. And turn off your frikkin TV. It's giving me nightmurgs. Get some sleep yourself. Dawn patrol tomorrow."

At least for the moment, Zep doesn't seem to remember getting cut in half. Post-traumatic stress? Or the effects of Sally's pillbug? Or maybe nothing happened? Del could of course check if there's, like, the lower half of a dead body on the floor behind Zep's bed. But he can't bring himself to take that step.

Delbert switches off Zep's ceiling light, and it's all dark again, except for the street-light. He sits dully on the couch for maybe an hour, listening to Zep snore, increasingly paralyzed by the effects of the pillbugs. It's like he's on the nod.

At some point Del hears footsteps going from Zep's room into the bathroom. That's Zep, right? Has to be Zep. Why wouldn't it be. Legs don't walk themselves. The apartment feels crowded tonight. Thinking of which, where's the Viking? Del pathetically stumbles across the room to double-check the latch on their apartment's flimsy door—and of course the door is wide open with the breeze coming in.

When he turns around, he notices the slow undulations of the tip of the Viking's sword in the darkest corner of the living room, with the blade lit by a single street-light ray. The blade swirls hypnotically, in butterfly patterns, infinity loops, like scissors snipping away at timespace, fluttery shreds of it blowing away into the sort of dusty detritus that iridescent pillbugs might crave . . .

Del should run for it, but already the Viking is upon him. He sweeps his sword through a full arc, and the vigorous stroke twains Del at the waist. His two halves drop to the living room floor.

* * *

Zep dreams he's a pillbug, then wakes to find that one has eaten him. Realizes in his dream that he's still dreaming, and he is actually a pillbug dreaming that he's been eaten by Zep. Which is true enough, up to a point.

Except that the pillbug whom Zep is in psychic contact with is a being wholly other than him. It's a creature with its own complex life-cycle—the next stages of which are to crawl out of Zep's mouth, spread new-grown wings, circle into the air, and

burst into a cloud of wriggling dustmotes that are in fact—tiny dolphins? The wee, flying cetaceans find their way to the open window and disperse into the night.

Zep moans appreciatively in his sleep, as if having heard a sweet guitar riff. His dream visions are adding a nice bit of warp to reality's edges, pleasing to the surf-board shaper within his soul.

His dreams now shift to the talismanic zefop that Lars gave him today. An incarnation of the patterns in Zep's mind. By all rights the magic handboard is Zep's invention. And—Zep now realizes in his dream—the object's very name confirms its origin: zefop = zephop = Zep hop. Yes! At dawn, Lars will teach Zep to use the great invention that Zep's mind hath wrought.

Zep hears a noise, and he wakes again, for real this time (probably). He aches enough for two of him. The noise—footsteps. Someone just exited his bedroom, walked to the bathroom, and slammed the door. But who? Had Delbert come back in? Was Sally back? Zep's too fuddled to figure it out, and he's dropping off to sleep again when—

Delbert is screaming! More like gurgling. Zep flashes on a memory of more or less the same horrendous sound coming from his own throat. The Viking with the broadsword. Oh, shit. Groaning, dehydrated, eyes exploding with painful throbbing and migraine sparks, Zep drags himself to his feet and stumbles out into the living room.

Sure enough, Del's been cut right in half, clear through his splintered spine, and there's this handsome hairy dude in a horned hat standing over him. The guy looks, um, it's gotta be said, a lot like Zep. Viking Zep. Sword-bearing Zep. From the future, no doubt. Like Sally and Gother and the gnome. Surfing the undulatory aether. It's obv.

"Fear not," booms Viking Zep. "The pillbug cures all. I did Del like I did you. Give our boy a few minutes and he'll be sitting pretty. Be you later, dude."

The Viking turns to leave, then pauses, raising an *aha* finger.

"What?" goes Zep.

"Almost forgot," says the Viking. "Your purse. Ours. Payback, or payforward, for the long time-surfing run we're supposed to do. From the murgs." He fumbles beneath his shabby fur, then produces a fairy-tale-style leather purse and hands it to Zep. It's heavy, bursting with coins of gold.

Words fail Zep. "*Whoah. Dude.*"

"Don't carry it with you," counsels Viking Zep. "Hide it here."

The Viking Zep gives a high-five to Regular Zep, but skips the down-low because he's got to go. "My board's outside," he says, then exits through the door and trots downstairs.

Curious about what's going on, Zep looks out the window, and sees Viking Zep in the sandy courtyard down there, standing on—shit—he's got Zep's best board Sq-wonker, with some crufty mod glued onto the tail. He makes a time-sigil-type gesture with his bloody sword, and then he's going, going, gone. It's not a *poof-I-disappeared* vanish, but more of a slow, dwindly fade.

The ocean sound fills the apartment, but by now Zep knows it's not just the ocean, it's the undulatory aether as well, a ceaseless seething roar that has been there all along and, he assumes, always will be.

Hefting the purse in his hand, he looks down at poor Delbert. Sitting pretty? Not hardly. The dude's upper half is trying to grow a bottom, and the severed lower half is weirdly worming across the floor toward the bathroom door, leaving sick trails of blood.

The bathroom door opens. A hand drags the Lower Del inside. *Zip!*

By now, Upper Del is having some success growing legs. They're very spindly but rapidly thickening up. Zep staggers to the kitchen sink and gulps half a gallon straight from the faucet. When he straightens up, having barely relieved his thirst, he sees Del just gaining his feet. The dude braces himself against the kitchenette

counter and stares over it at Zep. An iridescent understanding flits between them, like they've both got the same bug.

"Way, way, way gnarly," goes Del.

"Sleep," goes Zep, and careens off down the hall. He doesn't bother telling Del about the purse of gold. He stashes it under his damp mattress.

Goodnight, moon.

* * *

Dawn is barely a dim spark in the mind of the One-Hundred-Watt God when they head for the beach. Del and Zep pile in the wagon, wait for the creaking rusty garage gate to pull up and let them out, then haul ass straight across the Great Highway and into a sandy vacant parking lot, where they stop with their headlights shining on the seawall. Total drive time: twelve seconds. Del kills the engine. They've got a thermos of gritty 7-Eleven coffee they didn't drink on last week's dawn patrol; it'll have to do.

The surf-wagon starts to tick, cooling, then remembers that it barely warmed up and lapses into an embarrassed silence.

"Hell of a night," goes Del, meaning to break the ice. "I've got serious blurrage."

Zep starts laughing like a hyena. "Who the fuck is in our bathroom is what I want to know."

Del looks back at the weather-beaten, mist-dampened Oceanfront Arms condo hulking in the fog across the street. "We got out with our boards," he says. "That's the main thing. And we've already burned through our security deposit. Maybe we leave for good."

Zep looks thoughtful. "Yeah, dude, we're starting a quest. I can feel it. The undulatory aether, Del. It's real."

"I don't want to be a janitor anymore. I miss Surf City. I miss Hawaii."

"Surfari," says Zep. "The one true trip. Let's get on it, brah. Everything looks different from out there. We'll figure it out."

"Looks like we're gonna have help," says Del.

Gother has just appeared in their headlights, already suited-up, walking toward them from a weird, ultra-modern tensegrity tent set up in one of the parking spaces. So she was camping right across from their place? The world seems to have a ramshackle serendipity when this woman is around.

"Boing!" she cries.

The wind may be cold and unwelcoming, but Del's spirits continue to lift. No sign of Sally. Oh, right, she left last night. Jumped to the future? Gother has her arm around the shoulder of a smaller companion. Must be—what did she call him? Lars. Del feels he's seen the kid somewhere before. It's like something threw the déjà vu switch in Del's brain and all incoming sensory data are coming through that filter.

Gother doesn't so much urge Lars along as tug at him; he trails in her wake with scant friction, spin-sliding like a shopping cart with one wonky wheel. Del blinks away morning sleep, wondering how the headlights can be lighting the asphalt beneath Lars's sneakers as he pokes along in Gother's wake. In a way his walk is like the typical sullen shuffle of a tired twelve-year-old. On the other hand, he looks like he might actually be levitating. And there's something old and strange about his face. Never mind. Make nice to Lars and impress Gother.

"Lars, dude, I'm Del! And this here's my old buddy Zep."

"Already met him," mutters Lars. Zep has a strange expression, a mixture of respect and fear.

Del presses on. "And I think I heard Gother's not your mom?" he says to Lars.

"Gross," says the kid.

"I'm his lawyer," says Gother.

"Lawyer!" explodes Zep, and shakes his head. "Lawyers suck!"

"But what's with you and Lars?" Del quickly asks Zep before Gother can respond.

"Lars here is the one who gave me the zefop," says the gnarly surfer. "It's based on my vision. Didn't I tell you last night? Lars isn't really a kid. He's more like a gnome from the subdimensions."

"A murg," puts in Gother. "Murgs start as little eggs. Each egg holds a loop that's the circular worldline of a murg holding a zefop. Time-surfer gnomes."

"The murgs had zefops before I invented them?" goes Zep.

"Boing," says Gother. "Don't be tense about tense."

Are Zep and Gother jiving Del? He's still seeing Lars as a boy with a trendy vibe. He wears a propeller beanie—not a thing Del thought had ever been in style, let alone a fashion newly come raging back. Suspenders with collectible pins and buttons, some of them reflective or maybe self-illuminated. And Del could have sworn this curious being was playing with a yoyo when he first appeared . . . a yoyo with no visible string, just a silvery line of light. It floated up and down beneath his palm, but now it's disappeared into a pocket of Lars's striped dungarees. His face is as round and white as the surf-wagon's sand-scoured headlamps. What had Zep called him? A subterranean elf?

"So, um, you and Gother are here to surf with us?" Del says to the murg, stubbornly trying to be the little dude's buddy. Lars doesn't answer.

"Boing," says Gother once again. She's standing close enough that Del can feel her warm breath cutting the chill wind on his numbed cheeks. "Our path is planned."

Conceivably Gother might now deliver a kiss, but she doesn't. Nevertheless, Del can dream. He tries to wink at Lars, but his eyes are gummy from the weird night of seeing Zep get chopped in half and regenerating his body, and then Del himself having the same horrible thing happen to him. And the ultra-sick dreams that followed, involving pillbugs and the undulatory aether and an infomercial that looped and looped endlessly, like a Mobius advertisement sucking him in and stuffing him full of Murgburgers. That's where Del has seen Lars before! He was on that infomercial! Him and a girl.

Del dabs his eyes with coffee, cutting the goo. But by now he's lost the audience for his wink and nobody's listening. Zep, Gother, and Lars are all at the back of the wagon, rooting around.

"We might have a beater board Lars can use," says Del, joining them.

"This one." Gother straightens up, holding the zefop that Zep—in some convoluted sense—invented yesterday. "Lars will show Zep how to use it."

"What if I don't feel like helping him?" says Lars.

"It's historic fact that you'll do it," Gother tells Lars. "You know this. You know you'll make a deal with Zep and Del."

"What if I want to hatch a paradox?" presses Lars.

"Which you know the universe won't allow," says Gother. She hardens her face and switches into full-on lawyer mode. "Show Zep how you time-jump or I'll beat the crap out of you."

"Hey!" goes Del, interrupting this profound discussion on the philosophy of time. He points at Lars. "Zep, this is one of the Murgburger kids I saw on TV!"

"I was prepping you for meeting me," Lars tells Del. "So it wouldn't be too much of a shock. I know I tend to dazzle."

"I got Lars the Murgburger trademark," interjects Gother. "Lars's people are called murgs, right? And murgs have access to some unusual animals. I can't say what they are. But very nutritious. I watch over the rights."

"The murgs raise cows?" says Del.

"Not cows," says Gother. "And they don't raise them. Their meat-stock creatures

grow wild. The murgs view them as an inexhaustible resource. Theirs to slaughter.”

“You’d be surprised how many people think they can just mash up any old kind of meat and call it a Murgburger,” interrupts Lars. “You can’t stop the mashing—but if you want to call your product a Murgburger, you gotta pay us a fee.”

“But why do you *care* about money?” demands Del. “Gother says you’re an alien gnome. Money is bogus pieces of paper with pictures of bullshit human overlords.”

“We like pots of gold,” Lars says curtly. The murg gives Del an appraising look. “We use our gold to buy favors. We hire skungy, bedraggled guys like you to do chores.”

“The murg gold is real,” Zep volunteers, as if he knows. “But I wonder about those chores.”

“Let’s not go into the details yet,” interrupts Gother. “We need to have our ducks in a row.”

“Lawyers suck,” repeats Zep, being a complete jerk. As if lovely Gother wasn’t standing right there. “Always fiddle-fucking with common sense words.”

Gother glares at Zep. “I’m *your* lawyer too, dimwit. Negotiating on your behalf.”

“And what if I already got paid?” says Zep.

“Think of your adventure as a maze,” says Gother, like she’s talking to a kid. “A time design. A vine. It weaves in and out. It’s what you dubbed a time sigil. The point is that even though something’s already happened to you here, you still have to set it up later. Like two centuries from now. Respect the integrity of your time sigil, Zep. Accept that you have no choice.”

“What are we talking about?” goes Del.

“Basically this is about a time travel technique based on the zefops,” goes Gother. “And Zep can take some credit for it.”

“Yah, mon,” goes Zep.

Gother passes the pod-shaped zefop handboard with the tiny fin to Lars. The murg glides down toward the beach, descending the crumbling concrete stairs as if they’re a smooth ramp. He really *is* floating.

Del and Zep follow Gother down the steps to the flat gray beach, hauling Chaos Attractor and Sqwonker. Gother’s got Fubar again. A scouring wind blows at calf-height, sandblasting hard enough to strip away what fine colorless leg hair Del has. In the morning fog, it’s impossible to see the waves, but he can feel them breaking, thrumming through the sand and mixing with the all-pervasive undulatory aether. The vapor seems to thicken as they approach the water’s edge. And now there’s surf sloshing around Del’s ankles, the cold like a biting ice cream headache.

Lars doesn’t slow for a second, plowing straight through the surf fully clothed. Gother throws her board down right behind him and starts stroking. Del bends over, fastening Chaos Attractor’s leash to his ankle. When Del comes up, Zep’s hand closes on his biceps.

“I got a feeling,” his friend murmurs. “We’ll be riding large.”

“These waves are monsters.”

“We’re talking *time-surfing*, dude. So stick close.”

Del shrugs off his friend’s insistent grip. “Don’t I always?”

* * *

Zep lets Del and the others get a bit of a head start, partly because he’s trying to work out his body’s new connections, especially the veins, tendons, and nerves to his legs. His hard-worked anatomy is ginchy this morning. But his system boots into full-body synch when he pushes his board through the first of the breakers. A towering cliff of gnashing foam, enhanced by detergent pollutants, imminent as death.

The suck of the outbound shore-slush pulls him out so fast he has to shove the nose of his board down into black water and himself along with it, feeling the inbound churn pass just over him, waiting for the worst of it to fade, so he can tip up toward air and

light, kick hard, surface. Kelp lashes his cheeks. The adrenaline admits him to a new reality, as if the splattered, gothic night had been a drive-in double-feature.

The next wave is already on him, and he's gulping the biggest breath he can in the shortest time imaginable, then diving again immediately. An ordinary board wants to go right back to the surface, but Sqwonker is wide awake now as well; it pulls him down and stays there for a bit, arcing along the sweet trajectory it's plotted to the calm water behind the breaking wave.

The intervals between monsters get gradually longer as Zep works his way outside, but a long and arduous campaign ensues before he can finally rest on his board and check to see where the others are at.

Del has fallen behind and is still fighting his way through the last line of surf between here and the beach. Chaos Attractor must be overdue for an update. Annoyingly, the murg with the zefop is already even farther out than Zep, and Gother is right beside him, hunched over Fubar in the low-angled light. There's a bunch that he hasn't figured out about this pair, and for now he's not trying to.

As a matter of principle, Zep is forever trying to lower the resolution of his perceptions. He likes to turn bustling, officious reality into blocky chunks. Surfing is a good way to get back to basics. Concern yourself with sea, sky, a southwesterly swell. Everything more granular than that can take care of itself.

Well, except for yesterday. His standing-wave vision of an undulatory aether flowing outside of quotidian time. And then Lars the murg bursting in on Z's head session with, basically, the very device that Zep was thinking about. Lars setting himself up to steal credit for Zep's brainstorm.

"Present at the birth," Zep mutters to himself, deep into a resentful borderline-psycho head-trip. "Lars is a subdimensional patent troll." And as he catches up with Gother amid the waves, he eyes her with sour suspicion.

"Boing," says she, reading his mood and flashing a blank eff-you smile.

Tough woman. She's good on a board, especially for someone with a job. He'd almost want to say she's rad.

As many tweaks or innovations or outright inventions that Zep has tinkered with, he'd never bothered claiming official credit for any of them. Fencing off intellectual property is for uptight assholes, right? For business majors, who are, goes without saying, the scum of the earth. On the flip side, Zep wouldn't necessarily *want* to be deemed the official creator of his hacks, given that most of them turn notoriously and dangerously to shit.

But maybe, just maybe, it's time to get all honky and profesh—given that Zep has, in his opinion, essentially invented the time machine. So, yeah. If Gother really wants to be his lawyer, let's see how it rolls. More gold where that purse came from, right?

As if keenly aware of the shifts in Zep's internal psychodrama, Gother lines up next to him.

"Here comes Del," she says. "And then we're good to go."

"You don't wanna paddle out further for the ultra epic waves?"

"Right here is as epic as it gets," says Gother. "Ready, Lars?"

"Kaboom," says Lars, finally giving a smile. "I'm a joy-buzzer tickling the giggly ribs of time. Here today, here tomorrow." This is a game for Lars, a lark—or perhaps a ritual. He's submerged, with only his head above the surface, beanie propeller whizzing in the brisk breeze. He raises his zefop into view and tilts it back and forth, sending reflections off its little skeg.

"We're riding the undulatory aether today," Gother tells Zep. "Understood?"

"That's my phrase," blusters Zep. "Did this little murg teach it to you?"

"Everyone knows about it where I come from," says Gother. "Year 2222."

“Is that where Sally is right now?”

“She craves you,” says Gother. “All the yous. Egg, larva, pupa, and moth. Wants you to time-surf to her scene in the Year Gazillion, and on from there to the end of time. Doomed lovers jumping off a bridge, hey?”

Zep gropes for words. “So, ah, Sally’s thing for me is more than a Viking hat fetish?”

“She likes your moves,” says Gother, and angles a sharp splash of water into Zep’s face.

Boggled, cheered, and maybe a little scared, Zep scans the seascape, which is clarifying as the yottawatt sun frees itself from the hills and burns away the fog. From out here, the shore beyond the seawall is a rampart of weathered apartment blocks, cheap ones, putty-colored, with no trim. Peeling wood frame flats slotted in among them. Beyond that, the long slope of the Richmond is covered with row upon row of houses, wave upon rectangular wave, their faded pastel faces in deep shade. But the shore is too complicated to include in Zep’s sea-and-sky worldview, and he often wishes he could ignore it.

Somewhere beyond the houses, miles away, is the whole of downtown SF and everything it represents: the one-percenters and the homeless, the skyscrapers and the street markets, the champagne and the cheap drugs. None of it’s in his face though. The ocean is dotted with surfers—the perfect analog to the dog turds on the beach? No, man, don’t think like that. Today’s different. Today is *mint*.

Here comes Del, paddling one-handed while stripping kelp from his hair. The four bob on the swell in their own little zone.

Del is like, “That trek was a mofo.”

“Boing,” goes Gother. “We’re all set, Lars.”

“But look who’s coming,” says Lars.

“Sral,” sighs Gother, narrowing her eyes and squinting toward Lands End. A boat or something is moving fast enough to shoot up a rooster-tail of spray. “Does she have to come along on this hop?”

“Who’s Sral?” asks Zep.

“To Gother, a fifth wheel. To me, my bride,” says Lars. “This part of the loop is, among other things, our honeymoon.”

“Let’s get on it.” Gother makes a stirring motion with her finger. Zep, Del, and Gother form a three-pointed star, with the noses of their boards together. Lars begins to paddle a circle around them, kicking at first, still in his sneakers and dungarees, though none of his clothes seem to be soggy or bogging him down. Then his zefop kicks in with power of its own, and he’s just holding on, letting it pull him. The pattern is recognizable to Zep: it’s a version of the time sigil he visualized before.

“I invented all this!” Zep exclaims to the others. “Right when Lars showed up. My big idea.”

“My idea,” calls Lars, his voice high and mocking.

“You knew I was hatching it, and you glommed on!”

“Vain, deluded, man,” sings Lars. “Mentally ill.”

“Boys!” chides Gother. “We’ll work it out after the jump. Royalty co-licensing, full buy-out, whatever you want.”

Zep stays quiet. Enlightened adept of high bushwah that he is, the weathered surfer knows to know without knowing. And surely there are sly legal reasons to keep mum till he’s talked to Gother in private.

The zefop carves a tight little circle around the three of them—once, twice, thrice. Lars is super into it, his mouth a lipless line. His expression doesn’t go with the goofy propeller beanie or those groove-dog suspender buttons. The slow ocean swell rocks them up, down, up. Something in Lars’ circular course amplifies the swell. With each cycle, they’re higher than before. They’re at the center of a ring of overlapping

ripples carved by Lars' zefop handboard. The ripples intersect and interact, with growing spaces between them as they spread, their crests very sharply defined.

The next time the surfers bob down, the ripples invert—that is, their curiously narrow crests turn to grooves. The crew sinks into a deep bowl, with the water taut and elastic, and the grooves like calligraphy. And when the swell rebounds, they're on a water-hillock that's fifty feet high.

Lars kicks and splashes, steadily orbiting. The zefop shimmers like an iridescent dolphin. It's carving ever more intricate tracers, like the ancient nested paths of Minoan mazes, or like the scumbled grooves of a DJ-scraped vinyl disk—it's a lively line that meanders out and in, like a skinny Celtic serpent who bites his tail and spits it out again.

The next downward plunge is so deep Zep's afraid they might scrape sand or reef—and when they rise, they're flung up into the air, high enough to break up a line of passing pelicans. Squawks and a drift of stinky brown feathers. Lars veers in toward them and sprays an aerosol at them, a vapor that smells like roast turkey and gasoline. Zep feels a weird quaver in his head, as if he's been staring too long into a mirror.

"It's Happy Lift," calls Lars. "You'll float for a while." He gets back to his sigil-scribing.

Apparently the murg has applied some kind of levitation treatment to the three surfers. Rather than falling back down, they hang in mid-air, like shreds in the marmalade of the undulatory aether, in a state of weightlessness, awaiting the time jump.

Sral's fantail of foam pulls into range, less than a hundred yards away. There's no speedboat or watercraft, just the murg herself, waist-deep in the water. She looks like Lars, but with pigtails and puffy red lips. Cute, in a wooden-Christmas-ornament kind of way.

"Boing," says Gother.

Lars beckons to Sral with his free hand, and she rises a few feet into the air and glides across the surface to be at Lars's side while he's busy finalizing the zefop's sigil.

Looking down from on high, Zep can almost understand the pattern. The nearest arc of the curve will carry them through a short interval, but as the sinuous line ranges further and interlaces with itself, it forms a connection to more distant times. The scribed sigil is a shimmery, watery road through the undulatory aether. Zep can precisely see how the ocean's mass works into it—the pressure of the undulatory aether is what makes the line thick. Yes. They're gonna be time surfing, for true.

"Sral is his wife?" asks Delbert.

"Lars says so," goes Gother. "He's been living with me for a month, up in Year 2222."

"Have I been living with you too?"

"You'll see." Flirtatious dimple.

"Do Lars and Sral have sex?" asks Del.

"Who cares." Gother gives Del a hot look. "You should be asking about you and me." She takes Del by the hand, and tugs him and his board closer. Del visibly glows.

The complexly scribed multi-person time sigil flows up from the zefop onto the land. The beach ripples. The unreeling curve warps through the condos and the houses and the hills beyond. The sun, a cigarette burn in the sky, has become the only fixed point of reference—it's like when a strip of film in an old, old movie catches in the sprockets and the projector lamp sets it on fire. And there's a bit of a flicker to Old Sol, similar to a strobe settling into the sweet spot for psychedelic visions followed by epileptic fits. Days go rushing by, but they only see one instant of each, with the timestack aligned so the sun holds to the same part of the sky, tracing lazy infinity signs above the horizon.

Meanwhile downtown SF is changing. Its skyscrapers didn't used to show above

the hills. Different now. The towers are growing like magic crystals in a kid's science kit, stop-motion accumulations of jagged facets and mirrored shine.

The lapping sea presses landward, swallowing the parking lots, flooding the Great Highway, eating away at the ground levels of the weathered gray apartment blocks. The tide pushes to the upper floors, turning them to flotsam. The sad old Oceanfront Arms building is one of the first to glug and go under.

Zep feels a twinge. He's remembering that fat purse of gold he stashed under his mattress. He should have brought it, even though Viking Zep advised him not to. Someway Zep's gonna have to wend his way back to early this morning and bag the stash. Or not. What the hey. It's just gold.

As Zep lets this worry go, the pastel houses on the hillsides seem to come alive, as if a crazed animator has been tasked with giving personality to each. They shrink away from the waters, pulling up their skirts and hems, creeping up the hillside. The houses are in a tizzy. The younger ones shove the older ones, feeding them to the rising tide. It's like a slow mosh pit, a shallow of ruined walls and crumbled foundations that deliquesce into sand. The shoreline creeps up the hill, spawning kinky, futuristic craft with jointed oars that scull the tide on their own, like mechanical waterbugs hatching in the surf.

* * *

Del is enjoying the group's fast-forward journey, and sneaking peeks at Gother all the time. The whole time they're holding hands, which is great. Lars the murg hovers upon the water beneath them with his wife Sral, the two of them always moving, always in the same place.

But just as they near the end of the timeroad to Year 2222, Lars powers upward with the zefop and bonks into Del, sending the two of them tumbling. The motion sends them on a tangent, and they hit the water a mile away, close to downtown San Francisco. And they're back into taffy-slow normal time. They tread water in the Bay, looking around.

The landscape has changed, namely there's less of it. The old monolithic waterfront is gone, with now an extremely irregular shoreline of inlets and canals and harbors touching the slopes and bluffs of San Francisco's hills. A few recognizable iconic landmarks remain, to the extent they were on high ground, although some of them seem to have moved uphill. People flit from building to building like bright gnats. The mystery of levitation has been solved.

At sea level, strider-boats splash and purr in and out of ramshackle docks and mooring areas, some of the piers running directly into building lobbies. In the sparkling waters lie ancient slumps of cement, rusted beams and rebar, overgrown with barnacles, adart with fish.

Lars still has the time-machine zefop handboard in his grasp, but rather than using it, he emits a bright chirp that summons a strider-boat. The craft carries them to a jetty, then ambulates on its stridery legs the length of the dock, and lowers itself into another body of water; this one entirely enclosed by buildings. The streets of this new San Francisco, in morning shade, are mostly canals. Many of the structures are alive, like living coral with bubble domes, enormous hollow stumps with knotholes and leaves, giant cornstalks with inhabitable cobs, beanstalk vines with families in the bean pods, pastel crystal prisms with workshops inside. Everywhere the citizens flit from perch to perch.

Looking down into the water, Del sees they're floating over flooded ravines that, two centuries ago, carried utilities under the street, and are now laid open to light. Silvery lily pads dot the surface, partially metallic, and surely harvesting sun. The boat passes over an especially deep trench with rails glimmering at the bottom—the remains of San Francisco's quixotic and never-fully-completed subway system. And

now the watercraft grabs onto a candy-cane-striped stanchion and hugs it close.

Del and Lars step onto a boardwalk extending over the water, spongy and springy. Possibly it's a shelf fungus. They cross the boardwalk and enter the lobby of an old brick apartment block, highlighted with fashionably corroded metal, and coated with a preservative matrix of glassy lichen. Slowly shifting moss reliefs decorate the walls. The elevator shaft is a hollow tube with lights going up. You're expected to levitate. To Del's relief, Gother's apartment is on the ground floor. Lars pulls him down a hall to an old fashioned chunky wooden door.

"We'll live with the original Gother for a month," says the murg. "She's already my lawyer, because of Murgburgers, but she doesn't know you yet. Go ahead. Charm her."

"Gother's in here?" Hardly able to control his excitement, Del lays a heavy thud on the door's center. It irises open like an oak-textured sphincter.

And there's Gother. She happens to be wearing the same chic suit she'd worn in the hospital cafeteria. Del catches his breath. Seeing the unfamiliar-to-her Del, this one-month-younger Gother cocks her head, taking in her visitor, gauging his qualities, and perhaps drawing reassurance from the familiar presence of Lars.

"What is it?" she asks.

"I love you," blurts Del.

Gother pauses, then smiles. "I like that in a man. Come in."

Score. A miracle? But, hell, why shouldn't the very simplest of stratagems work in this context. After all, Gother already liked Del by the time she came to Ocean Beach, so basically it's foreordained that something's gonna click, has clicked, will continue clicking. Love at first, last, forever, whenever sight. Del goes in, feeling confident for maybe the first time in his life.

* * *

A month later, in Del's time, or a second later, according to Zep, the main group's hop to 2222 ends. The sun is just a sun again, in a sky that looks swampily bluer than before. The air is vaporous and hot. They, too, are back in the muck of shared, consensus time. During the jump, they'd been hanging in the air like translucent sprites, but now they drop into the sea.

Zep crawls onto his surfboard Sqwonker and looks up, expecting to see Del hovering above them, but the sky is blank. He scans the sea from shore to 'zon, and sees no sign of his perpetually chapped and peeling pal. Gother looks at her empty hand, which had been holding Del's hand a moment before. But she doesn't seem surprised.

Although Del's board Chaos Attractor is still here, Del himself is gone, along with Lars and the wondrous zefop.

"Ripped off!" screams Zep. "They bailed early." A low wave slaps against his face, sending him into a meaty coughing fit.

"Boing," says Gother. "Lars and Del are with me."

"Negatory," says Zep, trying not to shout. "You're here, and they're *not*."

"They've been with me for the last month," says Gother. "Sally was visiting with me too, but never mind that." Gother's no-nonsense expression softens. "Those were wonderful days, living with Del. Sad to think they're about to end. As soon as you and I meet Del and Lars at my office."

"I'll see him there? Has he got the zefop? Why is this so complicated?"

"I don't like time travel either," says little Sral, Lars's wife. "I hate it when Lars veers off. It's hard not to feel neglected." She stifles a little sob. "If Lars is with the younger Gother, then that's where I must be." The murg sinks below the surface and speeds off, leaving a ripple in her wake.

A cross between a gondola and a waterstrider emerges from the agitated mass of boats by the old Ocean Beach and self-sculls toward them. Zep immediately spots Sally standing in the nose of the thing. It takes his slightly transparent girlfriend

only a minute to reach them, and then she's helping Zep and Gother scramble into the boat, hauling in the boards Sqwonker, Chaos Attractor, and Fubar as well.

This is the same Sally who was in Ocean Beach. And she remembers the fun. She's all smiles. But with no pillbug juice in his system, Zep can't understand a thing she says. It's just crazy yowling.

Gother explains to Zep that Sally's been here for about a week. She hopped here from Ocean Beach and introduced herself to the younger Gother, who had not, at that point, ever seen Sally before. That was one reason Sally had come here—and the other was that she'd known Zep would be showing up today, and she wanted to see him again. Sally really likes the Z-man. She wraps her arms around him, and before long they're fulsomely making out.

"We'll go to my office now," says Gother, and tells the boat to take them there.

"Anyone want a Murgburger?" offers the boat.

"Not I," says Gother. Sally smiles at Zep and makes an encouraging gesture. What the hey. The boat flips open a hatch and presents him a hot bundle, wastefully wrapped in a plastic bag that features a portrait of the round-headed pair, Lars and Sral. Their slogan is simple: "It's Always Murgburger Time!"

Zep unwraps the large, juicy-looking burger. It looks fairly legit, although there's maybe something a little odd about the patty. Is it beef? Gother throws the plastic wrapping over the side of the boat.

"How is the sea not completely full of garbage if you people do that?" Zep asks Gother before his first bite.

"Our twenty-third-century fish love the stuff," says Gother.

Indeed, the water's surface is bubbling where Gother cast the trash. Toothy minnows close in and devour the garbage, leaving not a jot or tittle. The little fish are inordinately shiny. They've integrated plastic into their metabolism.

Zep bites into his burger. You might say it's *feefy*, that is, fishy and beefy. For someone who's just traveled through time and craves a juicy burger, the taste is an unpleasant surprise. The meat is pink, with a faint opalescent glimmer.

"Is this ahi?" asks Zep. "It's not one of these trash-fish, I hope?"

"Boing," says Gother. "Not fish at all. An intelligent sea mammal that the murgs trap. The murgs look cute, but they're ruthless."

"They're not all that cute," mumbles Zep. He tosses the Murgburger overboard and wishes for some of the previous era's 7-Eleven coffee to rinse out his mouth. It occurs to him to ask Gother a lawyer-type question. "How are we supposed to patent the zefop if we don't have one?"

"Lars already gave me his," says Gother.

"Huh?"

"Duh? I'm talking about last month, in 2222 time. When Lars and Del bailed from our jump, they came to my apartment."

Zep's having trouble juggling the tenses. "And when did my zefop really and truly start existing?"

"It has a circular timeline with no beginning and no end. Just like Lars. You still don't get it, do you? Nothing really happens before or after anything else. It's a cosmic tapestry."

Groping for credit, Zep recalls his dreamed illumination. "Zefop is Zep hop."

"Boing," Gother brightly replies. "The divine nature of language. Supporting our contention that the zefop's authentic birth was when Lars met you beneath the Golden Gate Bridge!"

"Is Lars going for that?" says Zep. "He'll pay me for the rights to use the patent?"

Gother studies Zep. "I hope you remember you already got paid?"

"Um, yeah, right," allows Zep. "Last night Viking Zep from the future gave me a

purse of gold coins.”

“Yes,” says Gother. “And if it’s gold coins, that means it’s murg money. Therefore I deduce you’ll soon don a Viking hat and collect the purse from Lars. And, reasoning further, in time you’ll hop to Ocean Beach and pass the purse to your original self.”

“Boing,” says Zep.

Shiny blond Sally yodels, as if wanting to footnote what Gother said.

“Be quiet,” Gother tells Sally. “Let us think for ourselves.” But Sally only ululates the louder. Gother sighs, and interprets a little bit.

“Lars and Sral have a clutch of fertilized eggs,” Gother tells Zep. “Each egg holds the time-loop of a murg’s whole life. Lars wants you and Del to sprinkle the loops across spacetime.” Sally is still squawking. “Yadda yadda yadda,” says Gother. “That’s enough now, Sally. You’re boring.”

Sally blows Zep a wet kiss and waggles her tongue. Zep’s starting to find her a bit much. He needs a break. “Could you please leave now?” he asks her.

Sally makes a stagy shriek of outrage, but she’s flirting with Zep at the same time. She flounces into the hold of the boat and emerges with—a very nice Viking helmet. A leathern cap embossed with studs, and with genuine horns from, like, a Norwegian musk-ox.

“She says you should wear this Viking hat,” says Gother. “The younger me helped Sally make it for you this week. We made about a hundred of them, and we’re selling them all around town. It’s quite the Year 2222 San Francisco fad.”

“Sally wants me to wear the hat—because?” goes Zep.

“She knows it turns her on,” says Gother with a shrug. “One of those chicken/egg loops, isn’t it? When Sally sees you for the first time in Year Gazillion, you wear the hat because she gives it to you now. And she gives it to you now because you wore it then. It’s like what Del did when I first met him here last month.” Gother smiles in fond recollection. “Right away he told me he loves me. Boing!”

“Check,” goes Zep. He puts the silly hat on his head, and right away, Sally comes over and rubs her full body against his. Despite himself he’s starting to respond, but then Sally breaks it off.

“Oork,” she goes, or something like that, and steps back, favoring Zep with a final come-hither look.

She places her hand on the streamlined amulet that hangs from her neck. Suddenly Zep understands what it is. It’s a tiny zefop. The sun sends reflections off the little time machine’s surfaces. Voicing a thin, wavering descant, Sally jiggles the miniature zefop in Lissajous patterns, then takes the crouched, knees-bent pose of a surfer, and—fades from view.

* * *

The boat carries Zep, Gother, and the three surfboards into the intricate recesses of the San Francisco waterfront. Hopping along the meaty sidewalk, they wend their way to Gother’s office, which is partway up the retrofitted Transamerica building, redesigned to keep itself above sea level—and to weather the apparently rather frequent quakes.

The building has been segmented into a stack of polyhedra, a bit like a giant, irregular Rubik’s Cube puzzle. The chunks levitate near each other, and are caged in place by a frame of pencil-thin girders, evidently cast from a levitational material as well. Any seagull who tries to perch on the building ends by hovering a few inches away.

Gother levitates Zep and the three boards up to her office, and they stash the boards in the front part of her office, which features a giant banana slug, resting comfortably on a polished wooden table. Like a receptionist, though really she’s more like a paralegal or a tech. She’s gently twitching. Her stalk eyes fixate on Zep.

“Boing, Miss Brooks,” Gother says to the slug. “Update please.”

Miss Brooks opens a slit in her back. Gother leans over and shoves her head inside the creature’s body. For a moment the mollusk’s flesh shudders, and then Gother straightens up. Miss Brooks produces a towel for Gother to wipe her face.

“All set!” goes the lawyer, bright and tidy.

Sitting on an oozy couch in the back office are Del and a second Gother, holding hands, very much in love. Del’s made good progress here. Lars and Sral stand to one side, leaning against each other. A regular love nest. The window looks onto a levitation path, with fashionable locals drifting by. Zep even spots one of them wearing a Viking hat like his. Inside the office, sweet music drifts from a tiny orchestra of trumpet-shaped mushrooms on the wall. Kind of blows away Zep’s notions of a lawyer’s redoubt.

Zep chats with Del a bit, catching up. The dude’s had a great month here. Del’s glad Zep brought his board Chaos Attractor. And Zep’s relieved to see that Lars brought the zefop.

Miss Brooks creeps in and uses the sticky edge of her mantle to acquire the zefop, then swallows it into that slit on her back, thereby getting very up-close and intimate with the zefop’s makeup. A second lump begins forming in her tail end.

The older Gother addresses herself to Zep. “We’ve had a month to write up a description of how the zefop works. Miss Brooks generated some spline patches to match the pod’s shape. Lars calculated the twists and curves of a typical time sigil path. And I wrote up your idea that the undulatory aether is a partial shadow of the Earth’s past and future seas.”

Zep gravely nods his horned head. “Yep, that’s how I invented the zefop I got from Lars.”

Gother smirks. “Except that actually he’s had it his whole life. And, just between us, nobody can actually construct a zefop from the mumbo-jumbo in our claim. But we’ll file it anyway. The patent office slugs will like it.”

“But, um, how will we make more zefops?” asked Zep.

“Boing,” says Gother holding up an aha-type index finger. “We clone them. Like Miss Brooks is doing right now.”

“Or you can borrow zefops from murgs,” puts in Lars. “Given that every single one of us has one. And that’s why we’ll own this stupid patent.”

“Not fair!” yells Zep. “I was there at the earliest moment of Lars’s life-loop, and Lars was looking at me. I need to get paid!”

“We already talked about this,” Gother tells Zep with a sigh. “You put the murg money under your mattress yesterday.”

“Me, I want one of those Zep-hop zefop time-jump handboards for my own,” goes Del, totally ignoring Gother’s weird logic.

“And you shall have it, my lamb,” says Gother.

By now, Miss Brooks is done munging on Lars’s zefop. Gother leans over the talented yellow slug and extracts a newly fabbed and slightly slimy zefop from an orifice in Miss Brooks’s rear. She hands it to Del, and tells her assistant to grow one for Zep.

“Thanks for helping our Del,” the by-now-only-slightly-younger Gother says to the older Gother. “Don’t you just love him to death?”

“I do,” says older Gother. “I can’t say I like sharing him with you, though. Twerp.”

“I’m hopping to Ocean Beach today with Lars,” says younger Gother. “And later I’ll hop back here and I’ll be you, older Gother. Boing.”

“Gothers all around,” says Del, cradling his new zefop, and happily confused.

“Not for long,” says Zep.

“How do you mean?” goes Del.

"Don't you ever pay attention to anything?" says Zep. "The murgs want us to surf out toward the end of time. Stocking the timestream with murg loops as we go."

"Screw that!" blusters Del. "Do I look like a farmer? That's hodad, and I say nodad! I'm not leaving my Gother!"

"Here's your payment," says Lars right about then, handing Zep the heavy purse of gold coins. Del falls silent and his eyes bug out.

"Let me see it," says older Gother, snatching the purse from Zep. She counts the coins, frowns, badgers Lars into producing a dozen more coins, pockets two of them, and hands the fattened stash to Zep. "Miss Brooks, please record the transaction. This is a one-time payment, in full, for (a) release of all claims in re the zefop time machine patent, and for (b) murg egg dissemination services to be performed."

"Sweet," goes Zep, hefting the purse. He and Del finger the shiny coins, turning them into the light, ringing them against the windowsill, and even biting them. Real gold.

"And I get half?" says Del, his mood brightening.

"For sure," goes Zep. "And screw all that uptight legal bullshit. Gold is where it's at."

Del turns to the Gother. "Will one of you surf to the future with us?"

Ruefully the two women shake their heads. "Don't think so," says older Gother. "That's not our path."

"But, but—will I ever see you again?" asks Del.

Older Gother pulls Del to his feet and gives him a very long kiss. "We'll always be together," she offers. "In happy memories of our shared spacetime."

"I want you more," says Del. "Can't you hop to Ocean Beach again?"

"Who knows if you'll be there," says this Gother with a sigh. "Sally might run you right off the edge of spacetime. And that skungy Lower Del who you left in your apartment's bathroom—I'm not sure about him at all. What if he's a butthead zombie?"

"Like—a crude surfer who wholly lacks our Del's *savoir faire*," adds Zep.

"I guess I could just stay here," Del slowly says. Gother nods encouragingly. But Zep won't have it.

"It's the ultimate surfari, Del. A righteous death run. Don't flake on me, brah."

As so many times before, Del honors his reckless friend's sense of fun. "I have to do it," he tells Gother. "I can't miss this one."

Gother sighs. "Boing. I'll wave goodbye."

"We'll launch tomorrow," says Zep. He glances over at Lars and Sral. "Where's the eggs?"

With a shy smile, Sral pushes her hand through the wall of her belly and extracts an accordion-like egg case.

"How many?" goes Zep.

"A trillion," says Sral, quietly proud.

"I don't really get what we're supposed to do," complains Del.

"Each of these so-called eggs contains a murg's entire lifeline-loop. The idea is to be embossing these murg lives onto the undulatory spacetime aether," says Lars. "There's plenty of murgs out there already, but we'll be adding our heirs."

"Murg-loops like puddle-circles on the sea," goes Sral.

"And if we don't do it?" says Del. The prospect of losing Gother has him sour and contrary.

Lars plays the little professor. "Given that spacetime is an immutable whole, the murgs you add are in some sense already present. Nevertheless we must trace our ordained paths."

"*Mektoub*," says Sral. "It is written."

"Enjoy your purse of gold!" adds Lars. Somehow he sounds sarcastic.

* * *

With the older Gother's help, Zep and Del spend the rest of the day preparing for their long run toward Year Gazillion. Gother scores them some biotech Year 2222 hoodie wetsuits to deal with whatever enviro hazards the future will bring. They'll be riding their good boards Chaos Attractor and Sqwonker. Miss Brooks uses her potent slime to glue zefops to the rears of their surf sticks. Also she glues the murg egg-case to the back of Zep's board. The case will puff out new murg lifeline-loops on its own—one loop per egg.

And in the late afternoon, Gother takes them out to the remains of the Golden Gate Bridge, where Zep's beloved standing wave has proved resistant to changes in sea level. The bridge above is mostly decorative now, in the absence of cars, but it hasn't yet fallen into the state of advanced decay that Zep caught sight of the last time he surfed it. The local kids have made a game out of levitating at high speed down the sweeping suspension cables and flying off the far side. It looks thrilling, but Gother urges them to focus on the wave.

Gother herself rides Fubar, which Miss Brooks has tricked out with a zefop as well. She and the boys get to sliding on that big old soliton hump of Zep's, forever going down, and forever lifted up. In dynamic surfadelic stasis.

Just now, Gother is a little farther down the slope than them. She begins teaching them the rudiments of time surfing. The technique is simpler than Lars had made it seem, what with his baroque carving of a vast, knotted sigil of curves.

"It's really just a jiggly-doo," says Gother. "Watch."

Wagging her hips, she sways her board from side to side in a rhythm that evolves from monotony into chaos. At the twitchy climax she disappears—for about thirty seconds. And then reappears ten feet above them on the face of the wave.

"From now to then to when to huh?" says Gother. "Boing."

Before long, Zep and Del are executing their own tentative forays into the near future and past, putting little curly kinks into their timelines that don't mess with the overall structure of the great eons-long time sigil they're fated to trace—a pattern that Delbert has given up trying to understand.

As a special bonus, at the end of the lesson, Gother endows the boys with the power of levitation. She produces a nebulizer like the one Lars used on them in Ocean Beach. Giggling with a seldom-revealed sense of fun, Gother circles around them on the slope of the standing wave, puffing mist into their faces. Rather than turkey and gasoline, the smell is more like pizza and bleach. Gother sprays some of it onto the boys' boards as well.

"Fly now," she tells Del.

"Can't," says Del, feeling as heavy as the waterlogged trunk of a tree.

"It's about having the right point of view," advises Gother.

"Spare us the gnomic bullshit," goes Zep. "Give us more of that drug."

"Happy Lift," says Gother, sending a heavy pulse right into Zep's nostrils and eyes.

"I rep the legal rights for this product, you know. It's like a vaccination. Takes several doses. Boing. Does something to your Hilbert space wave function. Once it settles in, you're lifted for good."

"Me more too," says Del.

Zep's feeling looser now. He holds out his arms, balancing, and flaps them a little. But he's still stuck on his board. "Change your point of view how?" he asks Gother.

"It's like a—flip," says Gother. "You know how sometimes you look at, say, a wooden chair, and you think the front is the back and the far leg is the near one? And then the chair kind of twinkles and it flips into the right perspective? Boing. If you can stay in that instant of flip, you can float. Come on, boys, try it."

Gother blasts Del so hard with her atomizer that his face is dripping wet. "Be the chair," repeats Gother. "Boing."

"Happy Lift," goes Del, squinting at his fingers with stinging eyes. He begins swaying back and forth like a snake-dancing dervish. He writhes several feet into the air—then falls headfirst into the water. But somehow his humble board has already learned to fly. It floats over to him like a loyal dog. He climbs onto it and reclaims his spot on the eternally humping static wave.

Gother extends her lesson, peppering the boys with visual analogies and koan-type maxims and increasingly heavy doses of Happy Lift until, finally, just as the sun is going down, it clicks, and Zep and Del are levitating for real, zipping along the barrel of that standing wave like pelicans hunting fish, and loop-de-looping to the low-hanging underside of the GG Bridge and back. They have it together.

"One thing," Del asks Gother. "I get how we humans can levitate. But how do the surfboards know? And what about the chunks of your office building? It's not like a piece of board or a hunk of stone can change its point of view."

"Sure it can," goes cheerful Gother. "If you drench the object with Happy Lift. It's a quantum computation thing. Boing. Let's go back into town."

"Will the younger Gother still be there?" wonders Del.

"By now she's hopped to Ocean Beach with Lars and Sral," says the older Gother. She gives Del a hot look. "The coast is clear."

They float across the city. Gother installs Zep into her office, where he's supposed to sleep on the couch. And then she takes Del home to her apartment and screws his brains out for what might be their last time.

* * *

The plan is to launch themselves from the peak of Coit Tower, a version of which still stands atop Telegraph Hill. The remains of this earthquake-shattered monument have been painstakingly reassembled into a levitating mass and coated with paisley slime mold of a pleasant saffron hue.

In full levitation mode, Del and Gother meet Zep at the top of the tower, amid tourists and local families flitting about like butterflies with picnic baskets. Zep has remembered to bring along his purse of gold. He tightens his Viking helmet and uses a sub-atomic comb to enhance the length of his hair. He looks like he did when Delbert saw him standing over the bed swinging a sword.

"That's good," says Del. "I mean . . . you were more crazed looking, but that was mostly in the eyes. You've got the hair right. And the sword?"

"I think Sally's gonna give it to me in Year Gazillion," says Zep. "She has, like, a kiosk."

"You should yell something cheerful to start your epic surfari," Gother says to Del. She's blinking away tears. "Some colorful twenty-first century phrase. *Cowabunga?*"

"Moo," says Zep.

Del leans far off his levitating board to embrace Gother. "You're the best woman I ever met," he tells her, his voice cracking.

"And you're the cutest man," says Gother.

The high emotion of the conversation is attracting amused glances from the mostly naked floating picnickers. But Del's anything but ashamed. He's proud. He's finally had a romance.

"I'm counting on you coming to see me again," he tells Gother.

"Well, maybe I'll see *other* you," she grants, kissing him yet again. "*This* you is going to die."

"Don't say that!" cries Del. "I—"

"This is the ultimate run," interrupts Zep. "Surfers at the end of time. We gotta do it. The lower-half guys in the bathroom will replace us."

"The buttheads," mutters Del.

"Boing," goes Gother.

Even at the top of Coit Tower, there's plenty of undulatory aether—it's the still-accessible shadow of the primeval planetary sea, or possibly an echo of the future, even-higher ocean. The boys nose their levitating boards into the lapping aether, and the tide of time raises them high. They weave their boards, tracing Gother-style jig-gly-doops.

"Turn and burn!" cries Zep. They're off.

The motion feels different than their short hop from Ocean Beach to Year 2222. That was the equivalent of surfing a double overhead. This is more like being towed into monster surf and slung straight into the tube of a thousand-footer. They're in time's foamball.

The sun, seen through the gleaming tunnel of the aether wave, breaks into dazzle, pinched out into points, filling the sky and reflecting into the waves so that Del feels he's surfing the infinite asymptote of a galactic lens flare. His brain can only take in a fraction of the experience, and switches to interpreting it through a default New Age filter.

Back in Surf City, when Del was growing up, the beachfront boardwalk had a timeless little old hippie shop full of crystals and prisms and laser art and greeting cards on a spinning rack. Del would stand in front of the rack and idly turn it, watching the cards go slowly past. They were full of airbrushed, perfectly tubular waves. There was likely to be a lotus or a crescent moon and a sky full of stars and a sun with symbols around the rim. And there was always, *always*, a frikkin space dolphin.

Del's lamed brain gloms onto this cheesy memory as he surfs Chaos Attractor down the face of eternity. And, ow wow, here come some literal space dolphins, leaping and chirping and chittering in the aether around their boards. Apparently those tripped-out hippies had seen something real. Del bursts into happy laughter and is surprised to find he somehow still has lungs and a mouth and a body.

In this ocean of time, darting among the dolphins, are small figures who look like Lars and Sral—but just differentiated enough that he can see these are new murgs. A whole race of time-looped elves infesting the whorls and eddies of spacetime, like bubbles in a jet-ski's wake. The huffer on Zep's board is rhythmically pulsing out seeds, augmenting spacetime with more of Lars's and Sral's ilk.

It only takes Del a moment to realize the murgs in this region are busily trapping space dolphins—splitting off adults and calves from the school, and herding them into a corral, constructed from eddying curls of time. A pod of twenty space dolphins breaks free of the corral, streaking right in front of the surfers, using Del and Zep as interference. The murgs head after the breakaway group, but not before the adults among their number have provided cover for their calves to escape. The freed youngsters fin up into the twisting curve of a shimmering wave tube overhead.

The irate murgs descend upon the remaining escapees, whipping a virtual net around them with little pucks that flicker to and fro, and then slashing into the dolphins with these lines of force. It occurs to Del that Lars's seeming yoyo had been in fact a cruel tool. Blood drifts through the undulance, and a glimpse of the pale pink meat reminds Del of all the Murgburgers he's eaten in the last few weeks. The murgs are butchers.

By dint of hand gestures and hoarse cries, Del communicates this insight to Zep.

"Save them!" roars the surfer.

Delicately balancing himself on his speeding board, Zep turns around and disables his puffing murg egg-case with a kick. It's a satisfying screw-you to Lars and Sral.

Not that there aren't already plenty of murgs here. The boys are by no means the first ones to work a murg-seeding run across the capacious expanses of spacetime. And, as it happens, the local murgs don't give a damn about the offspring of Lars and Sral. If anything, they seem amused by Zep's gesture. A murg's essence at any time

seems to be an embodied smirk.

Remembering how the breakaway pod had worked to get the surfers between themselves and the murgs, Del noses Chaos Attractor between the corralled school of space dolphins and their elfin butchers—herding the herders. Zep brings his board Sqwonker into play, heavily into the mission. No half measures. The boards braid a powerful wake of turbulent bubbles, a counter-weave to counteract the lashing yoyo-whips, and to flatten out the time curls that frame the corrals.

The grateful space dolphins escape the murgs, and rejoin the flow of their mighty onrushing school above, a cascade of sleek, sporting bodies, thousands of them. The murgs have been butchering the migrating space dolphins all along. Perhaps they imagine their prey's great numbers dilute the agony the slaughter inflicts.

The motions of the spiraling, braided school of dolphins thrill Delbert, and he marvels at the way that some of them punch free of the undulatory aether, disappearing here and reappearing there, as if briefly surfacing into a zone beyond our cosmos.

Our boys dance and weave for hundreds of thousands of years—not that it feels like more than an hour. Along the way they free more and more schools of dolphins from the murg corrals, and by the end they're amid an increasingly vast and joyful company of space dolphins, sounding a cacophonous concerto of chaotic clicks which soar as the venal murgs recede into whatever passes here for distance. Wonderful.

A dark solidity appears ahead of them, a presence in the water, like a reef, or a low island. Is this the remains of San Francisco, uplifted by millennia of tectonic slip?

The aether wave they're riding might sweep right over the outcropping, or it could break and drop them here. The shimmering wall of totally tubular time is thin enough that Del can see outside their pocket.

"Eternity Break!" whoops Zep. He digs in with Sqwonker's tail, pulling them back into regular time. Sweeping across the wave's spacetime face, up and over the shoulder, they settle into the quiet water just behind the mane of blown-back spray. It's as if the great wave has gently set them down. When? Year Gazillion, of course.

The powerful wave rolls on without them. And somewhere above our two surfers, out of sight but not out of hearing, the vast braided coil of space dolphins swirls and chitters, pausing in their progress, awaiting the boys' return, prepared to accompany them beyond the end of time—and thence into a higher world.

* * *

Zep pulls back his Viking braids to survey Eternity Break, a vast amphibious settlement thickly clustered and colonized with bustling, brachiating life. Swimmers and flyers and floaters—few of whom are recognizably human, or even bipedal. An immense transparent sea cucumber lumbers past, the size of a dinosaur, with a branching snout and hydraulic legs. A fanged manta ray flaps around Zep and Del, clearly wondering if it can eat them. A kraken-style giant squid wrestles amorously with a weightless whale. The ultimate downtown floor show.

The odd city's buildings are a single mass, a wave-slapped, crannied reef with sponges and colorful polyps the size of houses. Giant sea fans wave like trees. Zep sees tall anemones with tower-like bases and shocks of writhing tentacles on top. The sessile invertebrates are perforated with holes that serve as doors and windows for those who dwell within.

Many of Eternity Break's denizens are radically modified humans who sport tentacles, fins, and claws. Stalk eyes seem to be quite the fad, along with immensely long lobster-feelers. The scattered pools and sloughs reflect the dazzle of a sky that glimmers with wings and the iridescent bodies of those aloft. It's always high tide here—future Earth's highest ever.

Zep's original insights into time-travel and the undulatory aether imply that Eternity Break is a natural watering-hole for time travelers. Scores, hundreds, thousands

of time surfers are continually coasting in or departing, drawn to the never-ceasing cosmic surf jamboree at the last settlement before the end of time. Wild-looking time-surfers abound—tough, crazed, gorgeous, stoned, rangy, burnt, and fried. Skeezy, cartoon-looking weirdos mingle with Tiki gods and goddesses, burnished and glowing as if lovingly crafted from dark rich extinct woods.

Zep would love to hang with them, worshipping the sun-worshipers, but he and Del are on a mission. Sally's absence is like a phantom limb, beckoning to him through their subdimensional love connection. Her magnetism draws them through a commercial zone, heavy with phosphorescent displays, an open market for gear, food, and what must be time-travel souvenirs. High thin music flutes above the shifting crowd. Smells of strange spices and decay. The smoke of a thousand tiny fires.

Although Zep can't decipher the glowing signs or understand the fluid cries, the basic action is easy enough to grok. He snugs down his Viking helmet, feeling confident about his next encounter. Surely the next jiggle of his time sigil is near.

Yes. He hears a familiar warbling screech. It's Sally, hawking some wares nearby. She doesn't recognize Zep. She's never seen him before. This will be their first meeting. But Zep's helmet instantly catches her eye. Even across the marketplace, a total stranger, he has her full attention. He ambles toward her, savoring the efficiency of his time sigil's loops. Guess what Sally is selling? Pillbugs and swords.

"Where you going?" calls Delbert.

"Over to Sally!"

"Where?"

Zep tries to see Sally as Delbert does, momentarily setting aside his innate empathetic bond with her. Well, okay, this creature doesn't look like Sally—or even human—in any conventional sense. She's more like a deep-sea starfish, with long, striped, lashing legs radiating out from a vivid face. Or, no, she's more like an albino octopus, as her legs and arms are so very flexible. But her features and her voice—they're the same.

"It's all in the eyes," Zep tells Del.

He leans on starfish-Sally's coral counter and gives her a wink. Sensing a language barrier, she cordially offers a sizable bowl made from—the skull of a bird whose grinning beak is lined with teeth? Or, no, it's a dolphin skull, with the top of the cranium trimmed out. The interior is chockablock with twitching pillbugs. Sally's all-purpose nostrum for healing and telepathy. Like Halloween treats.

"To us," Zep says, popping a wriggly pillbug into his mouth. Primed by prior pillbug consumption, Zep finds himself instantly communing with Sally via the psychic channel she refers to as *teep*.

She's already laying on a sales pitch, trying to interest him in a sword, though her eyes hardly stray from his Viking cap. He gets a visual overlay from her—a massive stone version of his pointy helmet, rising in some desolate distant land. The vision is overlaid with Sally's wild yen to go there.

"Quick, dude, you need to get in on this." Zep tosses Delbert a bug. This time, his friend puts up no resistance.

In the subsequent psychic three-way, Zep tries to impress on Sally his certainty that they'll be good friends. The convolutions of time come as no surprise to her, and she merrily accepts that they are meant for each other, but it takes a bit longer to convey his sense of the form in which he met her.

"I'd turn into a starfish if I could," Zep tells Sally, "but that's not a move I know. You do like before, okay?"

He visualizes Sally—kittenish by the bonfire at the beach and passionate in Zep's condo bed. Delbert tries to pitch in, but his most vivid image of Sally involves her rushing out of their Oceanfront Arms apartment—soon after Zep's murder by Viking Zep.

"Oops," goes Del. "Did I harsh the vibe?"

"No prob," says Zep. "Sally's deft."

Indeed, Sally easily integrates the full info-inflow, and suddenly she's a comely woman, standing behind her coral-stone counter, leaning on a giant broadsword as if it's a cane. Her hair is a blonde tangle, her skin translucent, cutting a figure more lurid than Zep remembers.

She unleashes a peppy screech, and in his head, Zep hears Sally's first clear human words. She teeps in a high singsong, like a little girl, or like a cartoon.

"Hey, surfer! Let's rave!"

Zep vaults the counter and takes Sally's hands, which are fluctuating in form between tendril-edged paddles and the more expected shape. They kiss a bit, with Sally slowly learning how to make the proper shape of a human tongue.

"You're the missing chord," Sally teeps to Zep.

"Enlighten me further," goes Zep.

"I always wanted a man along for my final run. Someone soulworthy. Me and my surf-crew, we're going to jam on from here to as far as it goes. To the end of time."

"I'm with you." This is just what Zep's been expecting.

"Uh . . ." puts in Del.

"No moping," teeps Sally. "We'll make backups for both of you. So even if you die, you don't."

"She's talking about the sword and pillbug routine," Zep tells Del. "She means those copies of us that are wedged into our Ocean Beach bathroom."

"You've already threaded that move with your timelines?" comes Sally's chirpy teep-voice in their heads. "Awesome. Pillbugs are the best med ever. I see the memory in your noggin, yes, Zep. You put a pillbug in your mouth, and one in the butt. Hairy Viking Zep twains you. Same for Del. One self stays sluggish at home. One self time-surfs to me here now in Eternity Break—and makes our run past the end of time!"

"Hairy who twains what?" goes Del.

"Idiot," says Zep.

"Totes," teeps supercilious Sally. "And now, Zep, you replay the grisly backups from the other side." She gives him a heavy look. "Be the mad Viking slicer."

"Oh shit," goes Zep, who has not in fact thought of this necessary chore, obvious though it now is. "What if I don't do it?"

"No flinching," singsongs Sally's teep. "No yes-and-no, no branches in time, no cop-out. Accept the cosmic synch of the time sigil. The machineries of night. Your scribed life."

"How do you know that particular expression?" asks Zep. "*Time sigil*."

"Some wise-ass made it up a long time ago," teeps Sally, having read the answer from Zep's mind. She gives him a cheerful shove, then hands him this enormous sword. "I dub thee Sir Logs-a-lot. I'll come along to help. And I'll bring four pillbugs. Let's zefop outta here!" Sally pauses, then glances over at Del with a hard grin, as if wanting to make him cringe. "Slicing time!"

"Wait, wait, wait!" goes Del. He's shouting all of a sudden, red in the face, backing his words with intense teepage. "You don't know it all, Sally. You can't just go back, kill us, and jump back here. How do you meet the old Zep, huh? That time sigil you keep talking about, it's twistier than you know."

"How so?" teeps Sally, stifling a supercilious yawn.

"When you get to Ocean Beach, you need to connect with this woman called Gother," Del tells Sally. "She'll go to look for me at the hospital cafeteria. You can go upstairs there and watch cartoons!"

"Love cartoons," teeps Sally.

"Gother will set you up with the old Zep," continues Del. "Heavy sex."

“Log-a-lot,” chirps Sally.

“And then Viking Zep busts in and kills everyone,” says Del.

“Smooth,” goes Zep.

“So who’s the idiot *now*?” preens Del.

“You are,” teeps Sally. “You think I didn’t already teep all that from you two?” She verbalizes a prolonged screech that’s probably another laugh.

With graceful moves of her hands, she conjures up a shimmering body-stocking for her wear, adding bands of extra material at her joints. While she’s at it, she turns her cheeks pink and her lips bright red. And crafts Zep a funky, prehistoric-type fur to wear on his back.

Zep fetches his board, goes into levitation mode, and begins twitching the board’s tip in an intricate sigil-like knot. Sally is jiggling her zefop time-machine amulet. She strikes a surfer pose—and they’re gone.

* * *

Del spends an uneasy five minutes or so alone at the kiosk counter, avoiding the skull of pillbugs, pretending to study the swords, trying not to look like a total noob. Or like food. Then Zep is back, and Sally a second later.

Sally emits a particularly obnoxious cry. Four surfers spiral down from somewhere overhead, land by the kiosk, and tuck their surfboards under their arms. Sally and her crew have a plan. It’ll be an insane and self-destructive rush to the end of time, which she stubbornly regards as a specific place.

Zep politely asks Sally if she wants him to slice her in two.

“To heck with that,” teeps Sally. “I’m ten thousand years old, would you believe. I want this trip to take me off the map. Who knows where? That’s the fun part, isn’t it?”

“Fun for who?” mutters Delbert. “Silly me. I wondered why Gother wouldn’t have come along on this run. But, um, maybe she didn’t feel like dying at the end of time.”

“Don’t you want to see what’s out there?” Zep asks Del, and is answered with a shrug and a sigh.

Perhaps the other four partners on this mission have made backups of themselves, but there’s no way to tell. They’re not teeping; they communicate with squeaks, slurps, and rumbles. Sally introduces them as Skul, Gooza, Meentsy, and Fwob. They come from different epochs, but they’ve been hanging around Eternity Break long enough to seem like locals.

Skul, despite his name, is round as a blowfish, with luminous nested scrolls adorning his thickened protective skin. Gooza is a woman, perhaps, with stark, high-cheekboned features. She too has evolved past needing a wetsuit, and has pebbled, pale-green skin with six breasts, and with those popular lobster antennae in place of hair. She insists on feeling all over Zep’s body, as if she’s never seen regular skin before.

Meentsy is shaped like an ant with six human legs. She’s gone very far into her body-mod, to the point of having compound eyes and a set of mandibles in place of a mouth. And Fwob is, for whatever effed-up freakazoid reason, shaped like a sea pig, that is, like a glassy sea cucumber with branching tentacles in place of his mouth, and with watery transparent legs—just like the leviathan Del had noticed on their way in. Fwob is very, very good at clinging to his surfboard. His voice, that is, the sound he makes, is so wet and gargling that it makes Del want to throw up.

Odd as they are, this crew gives the impression of being hard-core surfaholics. Fully focused on the upcoming run.

To kick off the trip, the seven surfers head for the very spot that earned Eternity Break its name. What had seemed like a shimmering auroral atmospheric effect hanging above the reef, always visible from wherever they strolled, turns out to be sunlight dancing in the face of a thousand-foot high standing wave, formed where

the ocean intersects with the undulatory aether and wicks off into a hyperdimensional abstraction. The seven surfers levitate to its foaming peak. With the vast face beneath them, they drop and slide down the face of the monster. Somehow Sally is able to surf on her bare feet.

Digging into the water like never before, the surfers scrawl a vast, orchestrated time sigil across the glassy surface of the static wave. The world begins strobing. The tubular fold at the peak of the crest leans impossibly far forward and enfolds them. The seven surfers are not alone. They're in the midst of the vast school of space dolphins who've been waiting for Del and Zep. Weaving their worldlines with the paths of the dolphins, they're rushing forward through time even faster than before.

Looking out from the static wave, Del sees the slow decay of Eternity Break, the last Earthly settlement of all. The ocean level is dropping, but they're still in a great wave—constituted more of undulatory aether than of water by now. Mixed in with the foreign speech of Sally's crew and the chatter of the cheerful space dolphins, Del hears a high keening chime, as if they're sliding along the edge of a crystal goblet, a pure tone from beyond spacetime. The space dolphins steer them higher, as if to better hear the sound, but then they back away, and the celestial music fades. Del feels a plangent sense of loss, a nostalgia for a place he's never been.

Earth's landscape is increasingly dry, and the undulatory aether is growing thin. They're moving too far beyond the last of dying Earth's seas. Till now the aether has been glowing with a pale, warm phosphorescence, like that of a South Pacific sea. But now the glow shifts toward a sullen orange, heating up like black iron that glows luminous in a forge.

There's no more trace of a water wave at all, and the undulatory aether wave is losing power, draining away beneath them. If Eternity Break was a high water mark, they've been descending ever since, skidding into a dried-up desert. As the undulatory aether continues to attenuate, their passage into the future slows. Del has the distinct sense of having left everything behind.

He feels a jolt in his legs. They've landed. They're back in normal time. He looks down and sees his surfboard in two inches of thick slime.

"Whoa," goes Zep. "We've beached. No more undulatory aether. We can't jump back." Zep pauses, looking around. "I never realized this was gonna suck so bad."

Del croaks a response. "We came all this way for a puddle in a desert."

Yes, a puddle. It's all that remains of Earth's majestic seas. Even calling it a pond would be to exaggerate. It's barely a hundred feet across. Thick, slow bubbles poot softly in the middle. The only sign of life is this gas of decay. Every ripple dies before reaching the puddle's edge. If Del were to levitate off his board, he could land on the rocky strand, but he's wary of leaving his goodly craft Chaos Attractor.

For the moment, he, Sally, and Zep are alone here. The other four surfers haven't yet arrived—if they're still coming. Zep's board, like Del's, is mired in the shallow sludge. Sally is hovering just above the slime.

The puddle sits amid an arid waste carpeted in clinkers and scree, lumpy with meaningless hillocks. The closest feature of interest, really the only feature, is a weathered peak, domed and somewhat pointy, with a couple of mineral outcrops thrusting out from either side.

Sally points at the formation and makes a harsh cackling sound. "Zep's hat, I saw it in dreams," she teeps. "Visions of the end of time. Omen of things to come."

Zep's in a bad mood. "This isn't the frikkin *end of time*," he snaps. "Our hearts are still beating, Sally. Seconds are passing. Time is rolling on. Earth is trashed, yes, and we're stuck here, and we're going to die, but it's *not* the end of time. The *real* end of time would be something different, you wave? Way more surreal. Worth seeing. This is shit. You ripped us off. I hate you."

For once Sally doesn't have an answer.

Del stays silent, too. He feels sluggish. Too discouraged to move. The sky is full of sun. The bloated star's wavering shape is an amorphous smear across the atmosphere.

The four members of Sally's surf crew come sliding in. Skul the paisley blowfish, Gooza the woman with dinosaur skin, Meentsy the bizarro humanoid ant, and Fwob the gelatinous sea pig.

By way of greeting, Zep forces a dispirited whoop. Del feels some perverse relief at the arrivals—at least he, Zep, and Sally aren't going to die completely alone. How long will they last, with only their wetsuits to protect them, and nothing to eat or drink? The acrid air is minimally breathable, but you'd never want to try sipping the slime of the puddle. It's thick, gelatinous, the color of no potable water ever.

Sally and the four other Eternity Break surfers jabber and squawk, as if trying to make a plan. But now, above their borderline unpleasant jabber, Del hears a wonderful sound. It sounds like rescue. And, yes, in the air around the grubby Viking peak, the overheated sky comes alive with silvery darting shapes.

"You two can stay here and bicker," Delbert teeps to Zep and Sally. "Me, I'm gonna hitch a ride with the space dolphins."

"Down with it," goes Zep. "And I'm sorry I said I hate you, Sally."

Sally makes a sound like a normal, happy laugh. "Zep and Del are the kings of curl," she teeps.

The seven of them levitate and make their way to a point high above the hill that looks like Viking horns. The squeal and twitter of the space dolphins grows, and now the friendly creatures are all around them, bumping and nuzzling, ready for the final jump. Yes, they've reached the last shore of the Earth's last ocean and they're all out of aether. And, okay, it's not the end of *time*—but hell knows it's the end of Earth. But there are other seas, other undulations, other lands to love. High above them sings the inhumanly beautiful chime they heard before.

Sally nods. "I knew the dolphins would help us cross over," she teeps. "I was right all along."

Swirling like dust in a whirlwind, the space dolphins and the seven surfers rise up, up, up—and leave all Earthly ken.

* * *

Zep awakens in the Ocean Beach condo's bathroom with Delbert's knee in his face. Huh? Crazy scenes last night. He, like, died or something. Cut in half. And he grew back from his legs up and scrambled the hell in here to hide. And later Del's headless, torsoless and bloody legs came crawling in, horrible, like in a sick monster movie. Vintage Del, Zep thinks to himself, and smiles.

He elbows his friend awake, and they do a what-happened session. Those two women they'd been with, Sally and Gother—gone. Del is really upset about Gother. Says she's his first true love. Even though all they did was meet in the cafeteria where Del works, and then go surfing last night, with Gother leaving for good right after Del stepped in dogshit. Zep goes over this with Del, trying to talk the dude down, but Del digs in his heels.

Del: "Gother is the love of my life."

Zep: "Whatev. Ready for a dawn dip?"

Del: "It's not dawn, dog. Getting near noon."

Zep: "We slept like the dead."

Del: "You know it, brah."

And now they start chuckling, quietly at first, then louder. They're happy idiots, buttheads, Lower Men, and glad to be alive, no matter what kinky, skungy, extravagantly unnatural shit has gone down.

When they go to get their boards from the truck in the garage, the truck is gone, but then they see it parked across the street. When they walk over there, their three best boards are missing, also that kinky zefop handboard that Zep got off the creature under the Golden Gate Bridge yesterday afternoon. Lars the gnome.

They stare out to sea, looking for the thieves, or maybe for their other selves. But the waves are blank. That part of the story is done. Oh well, they can use their beat-up boards. Zep gets to rooting in the back of the truck, and then, *whoah*, he remembers about the gold that Viking Zep gave him last night.

Z: "Come back upstairs before we go surfing, Del. I got something to show you."

D: "Don't want to go in there. The condo's a bad place. We need to move."

Z: "You're gonna love what I show you, dude. And half of it's yours."

D: "Something is mine?"

The Lower Men spill the coins onto the floor beside Zep's bed, and crouch there, counting their take. Grinning like awed peasants in the presence of the party god Bacchus.

A moment of joy, for true.

And then—*dzinnng*. The gold coins disappear. Faint murg laughter in the air.

Z: "No!"

D: "Not surprised."

Z: "Bullshit!"

D: "Elves' gold, dude. Like in a fairy tale. Always disappears."

Z: "It was all for nothing?"

D: "Let's go back on the beach. I got a feeling."

The ocean is crunching away, tireless, eternal, still here. They walk down to the water's edge. Zep stares up the beach toward Lands End, and Del peers south. He sees her. Yes. She's come. Carrying a board. Gother.

Del runs to meet her.