

FROM THE FILES OF GENE SPEILMAN

3/13/07

I bought a pint-sized bottle of Jack, down the street from the Comfort Inn — at a little corner liquor store, right here in Salina, Kansas — and I don't mind telling you that I'm loaded right now. I'm not used to drinking this crap, and I don't know why I got it, except that I'm really nervous. Hell, I'm terrified.

This could be my last night on Earth. But hopefully not my last night alive. Or my last night human.

I never thought I'd feel this scared. I mean, by the time I'd gotten the notice of acceptance from U.S. Customs, I'd run the statistics that I'd downloaded, modeled a profile for myself that told me my odds of making it through were really good. Still, there's always that chance that you could wind up like poor old Michael Jackson.

Poor bastard thought he was gonna be the first kid on his block to go moonwalking with the Munchkins and instead — *kablam!* — winds up wetly decorating the walls of the Gateroom. Heard it took them three days to clean up. Lots of scrubbing and scraping involved.

But that kind of stuff doesn't happen very often. Usually, you make it through, or you're standing there wondering why you're not in Oz yet, until somebody taps you on the shoulder and tells you to go home.

I remember holding that notice in my hands, just staring at it, and thinking, Gene, your life is never going to be the same. You just turned a corner. Like one of those probability nodes in some alternate universe story. I just split off into the universe where I get to go see Aurora. Not

the one where I work in the record store until I turn into a fat old bald guy. Fuckin' A.

Right? And I didn't get scared then. But I'm scared now.

I made good time today; it was pretty clear all the way down I-40 from Albuquerque to Oklahoma City. It started to turn shitty right outside of Wellington, rain you could see falling in broad gray sheets miles across the plains.

I passed through the border check on Route 35 about ten miles past Wichita. The patrolman scoped the California plates, slowly shined a flashlight into the backseat of my Galaxy, and asked me where I was headed.

"Topeka," I said, lamely, "visiting my mom." I didn't want to be messed with right then. It was too late, and there was half a joint in the ashtray.

He gave me the hairy eyeball for half a second and waved me on.

If I told him was headed for Salina and the Gate, he probably would have taken my car apart. Well, could have, anyway. If he thought I was trying to bring any contraband through.

I switched the wipers up a notch, and started looking at the billboards for a Motel Six or some other variation on a theme of crap motel. A quick glance at the gas gauge told me that I needed to fill up; I'd failed to notice through my stoned reverie that I was almost on "E."

I pulled off at the next exit that had a Chevrex station. I got out of the car, pulling my coat up over my head against the rain, and went into the snack shop to pay.

For about a half a minute I stood there, occasionally yelling "hello" before I realized, much to my chagrin, that there was actually someone behind the counter.

A very short person.

"Can I help — you?" he said, as he climbed up onto a stool that put him at roughly eye-level. He spoke with that unmistakably weird accent, and his long unnaturally red beard hung down over his Chevrex uniform. I could see the curly tips of his prayer-shoes peeking out under his wide pant-cuffs.

“Fill it on six,” I said, trying not to stare. The closer you got to the gate, the more immigrants you saw working at the burger joints, gas stations, as maids in hotels. Sure, Ozians headed for Earth didn’t use the same gate we did (you could go through it from this end, but it was really hard to find), but for some reason they all seemed to materialize somewhere close to Kansas. Of course there were exceptions. Whether or not these conditions were natural or artificial was anybody’s guess.

I handed him a hundred and walked out.

I still couldn’t understand why they came. True, Oz was dangerous as hell, but no more so than parts of New York City or Lebanon. And no one starved there. No one got sick. Usually.

Of course, in Oz one could actually wake from uneasy dreams to find himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.

It happens.

So now I’m sitting on the bed in my shitty hotel room, with my laptop on my lap and the puzzle-pieces of my future splayed out absurdly all around me. The tacky bedspread looks like an oversized fortune teller’s table, covered with misshapen tarot cards.

For example: just to my left is the Fodor’s ’07 *Guide to Known Oz*, with the Rand McNally map in the back of it. It contains almost everything I currently know about where I’m going.

Just above it, directly before me, are the papers that allegedly will get me in.

To my right, scrunched up against the edge of the bed, is a loose fan of photographs. There’s a shot of my cats. My bedroom. My roommate, eating Thai barbeque (we made it ourselves) and grinning, waving, sauce all over her face.

There’s a shot of me behind the counter at Aron’s Records. Co-workers mill around me, hip Los Angelenos all. I am holding up a recent piece of gruesome Millennial nostalgia — the *Boyz 2 Men* commemorative boxed set — preparing to ring it up; and my pain is hard to miss.

There are also postcards of places that I always wanted to see, right here on Earth. Hong Kong. The Australian outback. Morocco. The Cave-man Room at the Madonna Inn.

In the center spot of the photo-fan is the shot that basically brought me here. It's a shot of me.

And Aurora Q. Jones.

I'm staring at that picture of the two of us: Aurora and Gene, true buddy-pals forever. We are drunk as skunks, throwing firecrackers into the bathtub. God bless America, it's the Fourth of July. Almost three years ago. It was one of the best parties ever, and the photograph makes me smile.

She's got a grin on her face that almost reaches her ears, and those green eyes of hers are flashing madly under a wild tease of red-orange hair. She's tall and curvy, and I want to reach into the picture and kiss her on the lips, just as I wanted to do that night. Kiss her hard, in that perfect moment, on that perfect summer night.

And there I am, in that otherwise-perfect photograph: besotted, bemused, about half a head shorter than Aurora, holding a lit fire-cracker contemptuously between my fingers. My long brown hair — back in the day, before I buzzed it — framing a roundish, long-nosed face.

I look at the picture, and I find myself wondering just what in the hell I'm thinking. I feel stupid and scared and unprepared and at least as drunk as I was at that party.

But as much as I'm feeling all of that stuff, there's a part of me that just can't wait. I want to see what Munchkins look like in their natural habitat. I want to hear what kind of music they play. I want to go somewhere where a little girl named Ozma and a good witch named Glinda actually run the government, instead of winding up in mental institutions or, worse, taking campaign contributions from the NRA and the Christian Right.

It might suck really hard. It might be just okay. It might be the best thing that ever happened. But fuck it, that's what I'm doing with my summer vacation.

God help me, I'm going to Oz.

Now I'm gonna watch tv until I black out, soaking up the drone of vapid talk show banter and commercials for sneakers, amusement parks, and fast food/movie tie-ins. It may be the last time I ever see Jay Leno.

Jeez, when I look at it that way, maybe I'm not so stupid after all.