

FROM THE FILES OF GENE SPEILMAN

3/14/07

That guy was right about the laptop.

OH NO OH NO OH NO!!!! Lovely to see you, how do you do?

Shut the fuck up, will you, I'm trying to write! I swear to God, I'll turn you off.

I'm typing this by the glow of the screen, down at the bottom of a sea of stars, the only sounds an occasional pop! from the crimson embers of the dying campfire, and the strange flanged chirping of the local crickets. There's a heady scent in the air, some strange local herbal melange, and multicolored fireflies are practicing figure-eights off in the deep, dark Ozian night.

I should be asleep, but I'm still a little wound up. A drink would help, but nobody around here seems to have any booze, and I neglected to pack another bottle. Figures Ralph is in a twelve-step program, and I get the feeling Nick doesn't drink. Wine. Probably kill him. A little would go a long way, that's for sure.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Maybe committing the day's events to hard-drive will help. I guess I should start at the beginning:

aginning, taginning, hooray!!!!

Stop it, please.

At seven-fifteen this morning, in Salina, on another planet far far away, I said goodbye to my Galaxie, socking it away in a gargantuan

long-term parking lot. I grabbed my backpack out of the trunk, and walked away. The rule is, if you don't come back for the car in a year and a half, it belongs to the government. Simple. Otherwise, the rates are pretty reasonable.

Next I wandered over to the U.S. Customs building, which was not hard to find; it was a monstrous construct easily as big as the rest of the town.

I walked up a long marble stairway leading to a single tall door in the center of the building. Pushing the door open, I found myself in a claustrophobic little waiting room, like in a dentist's office. It seemed a strange thing to find inside this huge building, like Dr. Who's phone-booth in reverse.

A plump little woman with glasses sat behind a little window with a door next to it. "May I help you?" she asked, without looking up from her paperwork.

"Yes," I said, "My acceptance letter says to show up here — today!" I smiled, but no return smile was forthcoming as she reached for my papers.

"Have a seat over there," the lady said, indicating a row of uncomfortable-looking chairs against the wall.

I sighed and sat down, plunking down the knapsack next to me. There were some eight-month-old, dog-eared magazines on a table next to the chairs. I picked one up at random and leafed through it, agitated.

Finally, fifteen or twenty minutes later, the portly lady called my name. Then she handed me a stack of documents as thick as a phone-book, and for the next hour and a half, I performed my dronely chores.

There was a form from the IRS, to verify that my taxes were all paid up. By signing another form, an "Official Record of Exoneration," I held blameless The United States of America and any or all of its agents in the event of "any unseemly and/or unusual transformation as a result of use of the Salina Gate."

There were the usual things, like asking for next-of-kin, DNA scan permission in case of death, and three or four things the ACLU will eventually be having a field day with, such as "allocation of any discov-

eries and/or scientific breakthroughs, blah blah blah, to the United States, in order to safeguard national security.”

Right. So if, while in Oz, I stumble upon a magic berry that turns water into gasoline, and by some miracle, it works when I bring it back (something that has never happened), I’m supposed to turn it over to Uncle Sam rather than make a kazillion dollars? I don’t think so.

I signed the damned paper anyway. I signed everything. I wasn’t going to throw away the whole trip on a technicality.

The guard at the front desk gave everything the once-over, then, satisfied, sent me through yet another door, which led into a covered walkway across a parking lot, and into the bowels of the Gate Building itself.

Once there, I presented my passport to seven different dead-ass functionaries, who each scrutinized it past the point of absurdity, then poked through my backpack, frisked me. Maybe there’s some counterpart to them in Oz, the Redunderheads or somebody, endlessly repeating the same meaningless task, banished to their own little happy gulag (for their own good of course) by Glinda. Luckily, I did not qualify for a cavity search. I really got the feeling that the government is not happy about allowing this whole thing to go on. But it’s not like they can do a hell of a lot about it.

I mean, since the shake-up and everything.

Who knew? Who would have ever guessed what the truth was? People were smelling the vapors since the forties, but everybody was dead wrong about the particulars. The most canny theorist was dead wrong. The most bug-shit lunatic could not come close to the truth. Forget the Philadelphia Experiment, forget Area 51, the Hollow Earth.

Who the hell could have predicted that Kennedy was offed because he was going to inform the world that Oz was real and we’d been closely involved there since before the end of World War Two?

Not even Blitzheimer knew that.

Good old Noel Blitzheimer.

A CIA operative for thirty years, Blitzheimer, risking life and limb, called a press conference on April Fools Day, 2002, to announced to the world the address of a web site. Here he’d assembled top secret docu-

ments, photos, video and sound files chronicling the U.S. presence in Oz since the forties.

Blitzheimer said, “The Cold War is over. There is no reason to hide the existence of this magical place any longer. I accept responsibility for this breach of National Security, and am willing to face the consequences.”

Some say that Noel was having a breach of mental security right around the time that he let that particular cat out of the bag, but that’s another story. Suffice it to say that he never faced any charges, and is now something of a national hero. But even Blitzheimer didn’t know everything, and the snowball effect he created was truly astounding. Once started, there was no stopping it.

Gore got on himself with a live feed to come clean, and the rest was history, as they say. Although anyone old enough to have been directly involved in the whole conspiracy and the subsequent cover-up has done a good job of evading history thus far. Funny how that works.

I was nearing the end of the gauntlet.

Finally, the last guy, a skinny bug-eyed creep, stamped my passport and handed it back to me. “Behave yourself,” he said as I cleared the last metal detector and hefted my knapsack back up onto my shoulders. “Oh — by the way,” he added, sniffing, looking more and more each moment like Barney Fife on speed, “you might have some problems with that laptop.” He pointed to the x-ray outline of my little Superbook. I gave him a quizzical look, hoping he might elaborate, but he just flashed a goofy smile, and turned back to the next customer, a long-haired, leather jacketed dude who he waved right through.

The long-haired guy had what I guess you’d call a swashbuckling manner about him. Sculpted dark blond beard-and-moustache combo. Kind of rakish and buff, with a twinkle in his eye. I was inclined to dislike him on sight, but he smiled at me, too, as he passed. I was still adjusting the straps, trying to get my shit together. It didn’t look like he had any luggage at all.

I made my way down a hallway that rivaled any architectural monstrosity of Soviet excess, a way-too-huge walkway to — what? I still

hadn't seen the Gate, didn't actually know what it looked like, or what the actual apparatus of movement from one realm to another was.

I had some ideas, but no one I'd ever spoken to who had first-hand experience of the process had ever told me anything useful. Evidently, it was different for everyone.

Aurora told me she'd had "Body and Soul" — jazz saxophone genius Coleman Hawkins' masterpiece version — on a disc in her Walkman, and when she came into the room, she hit play, closed her eyes, and started dancing. And when she opened her eyes again, she was in Oz.

Now, here I was, about to find out for myself. I'm a Hawkins fan, but Aurie's style is not exactly my style. I'm more of a "Hail Mary" kind of guy when undergoing great stress. I haven't gone to church for about ten years, but I still invoke the "St. Anthony" algorithm while looking for lost keys.

The anxiety I thought I'd shaken in the morning was back with a vengeance. I was terrified. I started saying what I could remember of the rosary.

The hallway ended in a cement wall, with a big garage door in the middle of it. Two guards with automatic weapons stood on either side of it. There were a few people there before me, including the longhaired guy, waiting to try their luck. I got into the line behind him.

Someone behind me was speaking. I turned around when I realized he was talking to me.

"Excuse me?" I said.

"Fifty-thousand to one." He was a beefy guy with a big beard and hornrimmed glasses. He was wearing a really tacky "Dorothy" tee shirt. "Fifty-thousand to one odds of exploding." He giggled. "Feeling lucky?" Giggle, giggle.

"Why don't you shut up, ese?" somebody said from in front of us in line. It was a young, well tailored latino guy with a suitcase. "You gotta bum my trip right when I'm having one of the best days of my life, eh?" Then to me, he said, "Don't listen to him, homeboy, only putos explode." He pointed at the fat guy. "Like you, maybe, Dorothy. Or like Kenny G. or something."

Just then the huge speaker horn hanging from the wall above the door shrilled, “Alphonse Gutierrez!” The latino guy smiled. “Vamanos,” he said, and strode toward the door. The garage door opened up slowly, and it looked so benign, like you could walk in there and get the lawn-mower or something. You couldn’t actually see what was in there, because there was yet another corridor to go down, this one low, dark and foreboding. I knew something was going to look really foreboding at some point.

The guy with the suitcase looked quite happy. Go figure.

happity n1 oh yay!!!!

Stop it, you little asshole! (Sorry. The Thing in my laptop is trying to learn English, I guess. It’s really starting to bug me. But I’ll get to that in a minute.)

I heard the closest guard on the left say to him, “walk slowly towards the opposite wall.”

“Some people actually implode,” the guy behind me was saying, gleefully, “they find these little inside-out bags of skin, all bloody and disgusting.”

Alphonse Gutierrez walked inside, and the garage door swung shut. I remember thinking, I hope this guy isn’t a puto and doesn’t explode, or implode, because I don’t want to have to hang around in Kansas for a week while they clean up and try to figure out why.

I spent the next few seconds staring at the woman directly in front of longhair man, then I heard this total Don Martin sound come from behind the garage door. There was a *Thurm!Thurm!Thurm!* thing that kind of ramped up to a liquid *Sproiing!!!* sound. Then that was it. They called the next guy’s name.

I guessed Gutierrez made it through, cause he didn’t come out, and all systems were still “go.”

I found the sound effects to be a little disconcerting. The combination of those and the rosary effect made me about ready to lose control of my bowels.

The lady at the front of the line didn’t seem to mind. She was blonde, about forty, gauzy cotton skirt and turquoise jewelry everywhere. She was clutching an enormous, phallic-looking crystal to her

chest. She had her eyes closed, chanting something to herself, or maybe she was just out of her mind, babbling, I don't know. She opened her eyes, saw me looking at her, smiled. She put her palm to my forehead for a few seconds, I guess to give me some sacred vibe or whatever, and then slowly turned back and resumed her chant. Okay.

By the time it was her turn, I'd heard a *BorkBorkBork*, a few *Feeemm!!s* and a couple of other ones too hard to write down. The big nerdy guy had been regaling us with Gory Details of Gate Disasters until the longhair guy threatened to slap him if he didn't stop.

Her name shrilled out of the loudspeaker. Her name was Linda something. Linda looked like she would orgasm soon, and I kind of hoped she would do it on the other side so I didn't have to watch anymore. She stepped forward, and got the same advice from the guard that everybody else was getting. Without slowing down her chant, she walked forward past the open garage door. It closed again, and I happened to catch the look on the long-haired guy's face. He was watching the door, with a big smirk on his face.

"Watch," he said to me, shaking his head.

I listened for the sounds, but this time, there was nothing.

After a minute or so, the door swung open again, and two of the guards went inside. They came out after a little while, one on each of Linda's arms. I guess she didn't want to come out. She was crying and pissed off.

"Let me GO!!!" she screamed. "It's not fair. I know I can get through! It's just taking a little while, that's all. Let me GO!"

And so on, back down the long hallway, back to Kansas.

I noticed that the big nerdy guy was down the hall way ahead of them.

"I knew he would talk himself out of it," longhair guy said. He looked me in the eye. "Don't freak out, man. You're gonna do fine."

"Yeah?" I said, in no mood to be patronized, "how the hell do you know?"

"I just know," he said.

I looked at him, looked away, thinking about his lack of luggage and the apparent ease with which he'd cleared customs. Like maybe he did

this all the time. He certainly looked that way, all nonchalant, when his name was called.

“Ralph Dudley.”

“See you on the other side,” he said, and sort of jogged through the garage door. I remember thinking what an Errol Flynn-type asshole this guy is. Ralph Dudley? Whatever. I heard the noises. He didn’t come out, and his body evidently hadn’t done anything unusual.

I waited.

“Eugene Speilman.”

The Horn of Doom had blown.

I walked forward.

The door swung open again, this time for me. I felt like a skydiver. Houdini going over Niagara in a barrel. Gene Speilman walking through a doorway to Oz.

The guard on the left side started to open his mouth.

“I know,” I said. “Keep walking towards the opposite wall.”

On down the tunnel. It was dark, and smelled like old dry horseshit, dirt, hay. Like a barn.

Of course it smelled like a barn. It hadn’t changed since old Joe Snelling, in a fit of patriotic fervor, had given it to the government back in the forties. He’d sat on his little discovery through the fifty or so years since he’d found little Dorothy Gale asleep in the hayloft; why he’d waited so long to tell someone about his discovery is something of a mystery. Maybe he was so awestruck, he felt that some harm would come to him if he exposed it to outsiders. Perhaps it was his growing dementia.

Probably nothing much had come through to Earth on Joe Snelling’s watch, judging from the few people that had gotten back through it in the subsequent sixty years. Farmer Joe seemed to have been too scared of the Gate to try it himself, though we know he’d seen little Dorothy go through it several times.

Dorothy seems to be one of the few to reappear back at Salina. Ozma’s Gate in Emerald City, the counterpart to the Salina Gate, tends to land its travelers in a random variety of locales throughout North America.

What, if anything, had gone back and forth through the Salina Gate

while Snelling had custody of it remains a mystery. We know that he'd had some kind of contact with the Gate, and that this had somehow adversely affected his sanity. By 1943, Farmer Joe was too wacked out to tell anyone much of anything; he was too busy shooting at the imaginary Zeros that kept buzzing his cornfield. He gave the Gate to Roosevelt so that he could use it to fend off the Imperial Japanese invasion force that was threatening Kansas.

“Keep walkin’” he'd cackled at the four FBI men who'd come to check out his story, pointing to the far side of the barn. “Keep walkin’ and see where ya get.” Two agents had followed his instructions, and the two remaining men had watched in disbelief as the pair seemingly faded into the far wall. Two months later, the disappearing agents had reappeared, one in Taos, New Mexico, the other in Pensacola, Florida, both with the same fantastic story.

I could see that famous wall of the barn opposite me now, and the closer I got to it, the less it seemed like I was getting anywhere near it. It was like I was on a treadmill, but I could see my feet moving forward on solid earth. It was as if someone was matching my pace, pulling the wall away from me as I walked toward it. But I knew that nothing was moving except me. And I was moving in a truly weird way.

It got more and more like one of those dreams where you're trying to do a perfectly easy, normal thing like dial the phone, and the dial comes off, or the buttons stick or misfire, and meanwhile you're starting to be distracted by other features of the dream, other shadowy, orbiting detritus taking on a certain tangibility. It was getting just like that — where objects, things and ideas were malleable, and interchanging their properties.

I thought of my cats, about whether or not Penny would take care of them while I was gone, whether or not I'd see them again, and there they were, spectral, walking on with me for a little while until I realized that they weren't there, couldn't be there, and then they weren't.

But then I'd see other things, snaky brown Lovecraftian phantoms slithering by this way and that, and wonder who was thinking of them, if it wasn't me. And even though I was still technically trying to enter the barn, the landscape was changing. Water was running, I could hear

it off to my right, then I stepped in it. A little stream was rolling past in and out of the wall, which was starting to smoke up and become indistinct. It was actually lightening and dissipating.

Things were starting to really swarm up on me, and I heard the Don Martin noise revving up. The lightening and dissipating stuff accelerated. I could see sunlight through the smoky walls. I started running towards the far wall, panicking, still not getting any closer, screaming, when the final *SPLANG-OING!!* occurred and I found myself standing up to my knees in water.

The rays of the late-afternoon sun were slanting through the trees and glinting off the stream I was standing in the middle of. In Oz. About five feet away and to the left, a fiddler crab was sitting on a boulder, pointing at me with its claw and convulsing. It took me a few seconds to realize it was laughing at me.

I flipped off the crab and slogged out of the stream, following it down a gentle slope where it joined a larger river. Setting my pack down, I reached into it and got out my Fodor's Guide, and the little U.S. Government pamphlet entitled, "So You're Going to Oz ..."

I opened the pamphlet, and shot down to the section on "Arriving." It said:

Congratulations!

By now, you've probably made it through the Gate, and are a little bewildered. This is understandable, and is a completely normal reaction.

Take some time to look around you. Most visitors from Earth find themselves arriving somewhere in the general vicinity of Pawt'kwee, or, as it's known in its Gale-ized form, Munchkinland.

The Pawt'kween are not only quite happy to be called "Munchkins," but find it an amusing and endearing term. The older, long-lived Munchkins have very fond memories of their first visitor from Kansas.

I did what it said; I looked around me. I unfolded the Rand McNally Map of Known Oz. If this was Munchkinland, what I had been soaking

in was probably a tributary of the Munchkin River; I assumed that was what the wide rushing waterway in front of me was. It made sense. Beyond the river I could see farmland, and strange looking barns and farmhouses dotting the landscape.

I flipped the pamphlet open again:

There is probably foliage all around you. If there is, see if you can find a bush with large purple and yellow leaves. The leaves should have a large pattern of concentric circles. This is a "Language Bush." It should allow you to converse with anyone or anything that you come in contact with.

You will want to pick a few handfuls of these leaves and eat them all at once. One word of caution: only a small percentage of Language Bushes are sentient, but it's always best to assume that they are. Always ask permission before plucking off any of the leaves.

I looked behind me, and sure enough, there was a big bush with purple and yellow circles all over it. I walked up to it, and feeling really stupid, quietly asked, "Uh, is it all right if I, uh, grab a few leaves off of you so I can talk to some Munchkins and ask them where I am?"

A branch shot out from the rest of them and shook around, then stopped, then shook around again as if to say, "Go ahead, bonehead, what are you waiting for?" I reached for a handful of leaves, plucked and started chewing. I started on my second handful when somebody reached up from behind me, covered my mouth with his hand, and pulled me roughly to the ground.

Quiet as the breeze rustling the foliage, smooth as silk, a voice whispered into my ear, just loud enough for me to hear, "Don't make a sound, and look through those trees."

I did what the voice said. I looked through the brush, and not twenty feet away saw one of the biggest, ugliest guys I had ever seen in my life. In addition, the breeze shifted, putting him upwind, and I found out that he was also one of the smellier individuals I'd encountered up until then. Luckily, besides being big, ugly and smelly, he evidently didn't hear too well.

He was green, all tricked out in black leather and chain mail, and carried a gigantic broadaxe, which was covered with what appeared to be blood. There was a oversized Nazi-style helmet on his head with large horns poking out of either side. He was pissing against an old stately oak tree, one hand hanging on to the axe while the other directed the pee-stream. There was a human head hanging from his belt by its hair. It belonged to the latino guy from the gateroom, Gutierrez. I stifled the urge to puke.

After a few moments in which I experienced still, sheer terror, the Biker/Viking from hell turned and walked away. The poor, terrified tree waited a few seconds and shook itself vigorously, letting out a moan of disgust and humiliation. I felt kind of sorry for it, but it was a tree after all, and you'd think it would be used to that sort of thing happening all the time.

I got up and turned around to thank my savior. It was Ralph from the Gate. I decided maybe he wasn't such an asshole after all.

"Jeez, thanks," I said, "it kinda looks like you saved my ass just now."

"Don't mention it," he said, staring through the trees, "they're getting closer in all the time. Son of a bitch." He looked at me. "The rest of Gutierrez is hanging from a tree a little northwest of here. Really messed up his suit. Let's get the fuck out of here."

I was reeling from several different shocks: the shock of the transition from Earth, the shock of actually being in Oz, the shock of almost being butchered by a green neanderthal, and oh, I don't know, could have been any number of things at that point. I stuck out my hand and introduced myself.

He ignored it and said, "There's a bridge about half a mile south of here. Let's move."

He didn't have to ask me twice. We both took off in the direction of the bridge, looking behind us every once in a while to see if the incredible hulk was following. He wasn't. I didn't know it at the time, but he was already way out of his territory — some kind of advance scout.

We kept up the quick-step, though, until we were over the bridge Ralph was talking about. It was a little funny narrow thing, wrought

iron covered with strange curlicues, which I found out later were some kind of Munchkin hex signs.

“We can relax a little now,” Ralph said, finally, slacking his pace, “those bruisers won’t go past that bridge. Big magic on it.”

agiconic! agiconic!

Shut up!!!!

Ralph went down to the edge of the water and stuck his face in it, cupped his hands and took a big drink. I followed him down and did the same, kind of amazed by how natural it seemed and thinking, wow, there’s not a place left on the poisoned Earth where you could do that anymore.

He sat up and let the water run down his face. “Ralph,” he said, finally, and held out his hand for me to shake.

“I know.” I shook. Then I reached into my pack and took out my laptop.

Up until then, Ralph had seemed pretty blasé about everything that was going on, even the rescue. But he looked astonished when he saw the laptop. “What is that?” he asked, incredulous, pointing at it.

“What do you mean? It’s a Superbook Plus, with 1 gig of ram, and a terabyte hard —”

“NO. I know what it is, I mean, how did you get it here? I’ve never seen a computer get through in one piece. I’ve been coming here since before the Gulf War, and the only ones I’ve ever seen have been thrown together from whatever junk components happen to make it through. This is a goddam first. Congratulations.” He whistled at it.

I looked at him, then down at the Superbook. “Yeah, well, congratulate me after I see if it boots up.”

I flipped the switch, and listened for the little chime to sound and the smiley-face-in-the-monitor logo to come on. I heard something like a slide whistle, then the face came up. And winked at me. That should have been my first clue. I saw the desktop and icons appear as they should, except that every few seconds a couple of them would plow together like bumper cars, and careen to the other side of the screen, or zoom to fill the whole screen and then shrink again. I tried opening up

a few applications to check it. Aside from the slight weirdness, it appeared to work fine.

“I’ll be damned,” Ralph said, looking over my shoulder. “I think it’s been Mickied.”

“What?”

“Animated.”

I scrunched up my face at him. “Come again?”

I thought I knew about most of what was involved in coming to a place with slightly different physical laws, but I just kept learning new fun facts.

“There’s somebody in there. I just hope it’s one of the good guys. Wow. It’s the One.”

“The one what?”

“The One That Got Through. That’s the way it usually works out.”

After I put the laptop back in the pack, I did a quick check to make sure the other things I’d brought were still there. As far as I could see, they were, though I couldn’t be sure they wouldn’t start jumping around or crying or singing a song.

We started walking again, and Ralph pulled some smokes out of his coat, lit one up, and began to elaborate.

“Y’see, One of Everything seems to be the general rule, with exceptions. Not with people, or even most of their personal stuff. You already know how that goes. Toothbrushes, cooking utensils, camp gear, usually no trouble. I’m talking about consumer items. TV’s, washing machines, electric can-openers, guitars, disposable cameras. It’s really tricky with those things for some reason. Almost like the more labor saving or frivolous the tech (no offense), the more some — force — wants to screw it around. It might be Glinda or Ozma doing it, we don’t know. They say not. Anyhow, maybe one in five hundred gets through. So what people here generally do with the stuff that gets sent over as good will offerings, trade items, insidious advertising ploys, whatever, is make it community property. Well, everything produced is technically community property here, so it’s not that revolutionary of an idea.

“Sometimes the item will do something novel that allows it to move into this existence more smoothly than it otherwise would have.

“I’ll bet you never heard about the Humvees.”

I hadn’t.

“There were six army Hummers. Army colonel decides to give it a try, he and his men drive ’em into the Garage, so far so good. He makes it through with all of them! They drive about twenty miles, make camp for the night, park by the side of the Brick, and fifteen minutes later, they hear tires squealing and horns beeping.

“They jump up, but it’s too late. The Hummers are rolling away, off onto the plains. Eerie as hell, no engines running, lights flashing. That colonel was in a world of hurt for that one.”

I thought he looked a little wistful there for a second, trying to recreate the scene. I said, “you sound like you know this guy.”

He stopped gazing off into space. “Yeah, I guess you could say that.” He offered me a smoke, I declined.

“They’re still around,” he continued. “Run in a pack. We might see ’em tonight, actually.”

“The army guys?”

He looked at me like he might slug me.

“Then there was the Mustang tree. This guy I know, works for the State Department. Brought over a Fender Mustang guitar. He takes it out of the case maybe a day after he got here. Fucking thing had started to bud. So this guy plants it, and about a week later, there were little green electric guitars hanging all over it. Weirdest little things you ever saw. They took about another month to ripen, and then they were ready to harvest.”

I realized then that the guy at the x-ray machine probably thought my computer would melt or turn into a loaf of bread. Any one of those guys could have warned me to leave it behind. But since they weren’t required to by law, since anybody’s allowed to bring through a few items, no matter what they are, as long as they’re U.S. legal, they let me go and potentially wreck my expensive toy. I started to get really pissed off. I told Ralph what I was thinking.

“Yeah, you have certainly beaten the odds today, my friend. Best to forget about those shitheads in Salina, though. They’re just jealous

because they don't fit the profile. Probably be sittin' in there checking luggage till they're old and gray."

We kept walking until we hit a bend in the dirt path; it plowed through some brush and met a wide, brick thoroughfare. Yellow. I looked at Ralph, then back at the road again.

"Yep," he said, confirming my thought, "this is the one. The Big Brick."

It really didn't look as impressive as I thought it would. It was just a big dirty yellow road. I felt sort of ripped off.

A tiny horsecart drawn by a tiny horse drove by. The Munchkin farmer driving it waved and smiled. There was a cage full of ridiculous Dr. Seuss-looking animals piled onto the back: long ring-necks reminiscent of rodent's tails; fuzzy heads and bodies, with ludicrous hairy wings; big watery eyes that looked like coke-bottle lenses; big-lipped maws with slobbery tongues on the end of blunt, wide-nostriled snouts. They looked incredibly stupid, and smelled only slightly better than the troll. They gurgled at us as they passed. Ralph waved and smiled. I just stood there.

"What the hell are those things?" I asked.

"Goomers," he said. "The national dish. Most animals are smart enough to have citizenship. It's considered cannibalism to eat a cow, for instance. But these things are so stupid that *nobody* feels bad about eating them. Even dumber than turkeys."

"Oh," I said, as they and their fragrance receded.

We started walking down the "big brick," and it occurred to me that I didn't have any idea where we were going. Maybe it was the stress, maybe the disappointment over the condition of the road; all of the sudden all kinds of questions burst out of me:

"I assume this goes to Emerald, right? I mean, that's the conventional wisdom, but that doesn't really seem to be worth much lately. That *is* where I'm going. Where are *you* going? And who was that big motherfucker anyway? And how come you know so much about everything anyway?"

Ralph stared at me sidelong. “Emerald, huh? I’m going to Emerald. Yes, you follow the yellow brick road. That is accurate. As for the big motherfucker and why I know so much about everything ...

“Look, it’s starting to get dark. Whataya say I take you to meet a friend of mine? We can sleep out on his land, and I can fill you in on some recent history. But right now, I’m kind of all talked out. So let’s just walk.”

Ralph didn’t strike me as the kind of person you’d want to have a big argument with, and I didn’t have any better ideas. The sky was beginning to darken to a deep Maxfield Parrish blue, and the biggest moon I have ever seen in my life was starting to rise, cartoonlike, over the horizon.

Soon the moon was the only light we had, save the occasional distant glow from a farmhouse. Downtown Munchkinland was in the other direction. We were headed out into the sticks.

After about an hour of this, walking silently, a few people on horseback occasionally passing us and politely saying hello, we left the farmland behind. We finally came upon a side road, more a dirt horsepath than anything, that led straight into a grove of trees. I took my fluorescent lantern out of my pack and was going to turn it on, as it looked pretty dark in there. Ralph’s hand shot out and stopped me.

“Don’t do that,” he said. “First of all, you’ll wake up all the trees. Second, you will be wondering how you got so dead all of a sudden unless I do this — ”

He let out a loud, warbling whistle.

Somebody awfully close by said, “Hello, Ralph. Back so soon, friend?”

Three guys were standing behind us, and two in front. I don’t think there was any magic involved; I just think they were really good at sneaking up on people. First they *weren’t* there, then they *were* there.

The guy who spoke wasn’t a guy at all. I mean he was a guy, but he wasn’t exactly human. He was a monkey.

At first I thought he was wearing a big cape, but as he moved around, I realized that what I was seeing was actually a large pair of wings. They were poking out of holes in a long, satin jacket.

He had a ruffled shirt on, and a black cravat around his neck. His friends were similarly attired, but human as far as I could see in moonlight. I thought they looked a little over-dressed for camping but didn't say so.

There were greetings all around. Ralph introduced me. "Gene, this big ape is Gombo. This is Tiltel, Sool, and Pimbi. And this tall guy here is Kimbod of Ev."

They all said "hi."

"Hi," I said, "Gene of Los Angeles."

We moved off down the Brick, into the grove of trees, Ralph hanging on to my arm. Evidently everyone but me could see in the dark. After a few minutes, I could see the light of a campfire off the road, through the shadows of the great trees. As we moved off the road towards the fire, I heard Ralph say to Gombo, "So where is he?"

"Thinking," Gombo said. "Hasn't really left his tent for a couple of days. You know how he gets when he's got a heavy problem. Brooding. Weird. You want to stay far away from him when he gets like this."

"I've got something he needs to hear."

"I'll stick my head in there and tell him, but leave it to me. If he doesn't want to see you, you can camp until tomorrow, then you'll have to move on. Things are pretty tense right now, and we can't afford to have you around if you're not working."

"Understood."

We were close enough now to see the tents: eight big geodesic-looking things in a large semicircle around the roaring fire, taut plastic skin over skeleton domes. Three big logs were spaced around the fire, I guessed to sit on, so I went over and sat on one, throwing my pack up against the other side of it, upside down so that I could untie my sleeping bag.

Ralph sat by the fire too, along with Gombo and a couple of the others, bullshitting about this and that incomprehensible shared thing which I had no reference to. Soon I started to feel kind of left out.

I'd had enough anyway: I was tired, disoriented, with a bunch of strangers, one of whom had saved my life twice, and in a different universe on top of that. Of course, behind the exhaustion, deep down, I

was excited and full of questions, but the questions could wait until tomorrow. I unrolled the sleeping bag and got into it, a little way back from the fire, behind the logs.

I rolled around in it for an hour or so, unable to shut my eyes, too hot, too cold, until finally I got up. I had to pee anyhow.

It looked as though everyone else had crashed out by that time. Ralph was not far from where my sleeping bag was, snoring under a pile of blankets someone had brought him.

I found a spot on the other side of the fire from the tents, not too close to the trees. After what I'd seen that afternoon, I was a little sensitive about offending any trees. Since I hadn't asked about the pee protocol, and this seemed to be the least offensive place around, I went for it.

The trees stayed asleep, and nobody jumped out and strangled me, so I smiled to myself and enjoyed the new sense of emptiness for a moment. I zipped my fly and looked up into the sky, now brilliant with stars despite the full moon. I knew most constellations by sight, but none of these belonged to any I was familiar with. Shooting stars crisscrossed the sky, and an ephemeral aurora hung at the top, draped like neon silk. I crossed back to the campfire and sat on a log, looked up to see more of the show.

"Spider and the Fly," said a deep, dark, craggy voice. I jumped, looked up to see a hooded figure on the log with me, about five feet away. His huge, buckskin-clad arm was stuck in the air, his gloved hand pointing straight up at a group of stars.

"See it? There's the spider, over to the left is the fly."

"Oh yeah," I said. "There it is. Listen, is there any particular reason why you guys like to scare the shit out of me every time before you introduce yourselves?"

I got a laugh for that one, but I still couldn't see who I was talking to. I could see his legs, though, poking out under the bottom of his robe or whatever it was. They looked like prosthetic limbs, metal and cable all down to the feet, no shoes or boots covering them. It seemed pretty amazing that a handicapped man could get around so stealthily.

There was a serious lull in the conversation.

Finally, I pointed up at random. “What’s that one?”

“The Cauldron,” the raspy voice said. “See? Poomba is the bright green one on the end, then down further there’s Elgi. The two legs.”

It went on this way for a while, Astronomy with Dr. Doom, until he said, “What is it that Ralph wants to tell me?”

Talk about non-sequiturs. “I don’t know,” I said, “but, hey. I don’t know a lot of things, like for instance your name. I am Gene, Gene of Los Angeles. And you are ... ?”

“You may call me Nick.”

You may call me Nick. He said it so silkily, so calmly, so non-threateningly, that it was suddenly the most menacing thing in the world. A man-eating tiger was purring and letting me pet it on the head. I regretted having been so flip a moment before.

“Well, Nick,” I said, my voice cracking a little, “I really can’t guess on that one. I’ve seen a lot in last ten hours or so — Goomers, giant green bikers with human head trophies — ”

“Where?”

I gave him the rundown on my trip through the gate and the near-death experience. As I spoke, he reached into a pocket and pulled out a pipe. He puffed on it, and it lit itself.

Smoke billowed around his head, and he pulled back his hood. I could see him now, see that half of his face was missing, part of his throat, and the fire-light reflected off the metal that replaced the missing parts. He produced an ax that had lain next to him and toyed with the blade, spun it around.

“So,” he said. “Gutierrez is dead.”

Silence fell over us then. I could see his eyes, something in his eyes, one dark and deep, the other chromium-shiny, that made me think of that fine line people talk about, the one between genius and madness.

Then Nick got up and, without another word, disappeared into the shadows. He moved so silently that I almost thought he’d just ducked behind a tree. I got up to check, once I got up the nerve. Sure enough, he was gone.

I sat there for a few moments with my hands in my lap. I couldn't imagined sleeping, so I went into my pack and got the laptop out, and now I'm typing this, while the firelight crackles down to its end.

The sun will be up soon, unless even *that's* different.

anywoo HOORAY!! ooo-LoO runny LATE.

This enchanted computer thing is getting really old.

But I guess I'll get used to it.

Guess I'm going to have to get used to a lot of things.