

# 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.

*From the Notebook of  
Aurora Jones*

*The Emerald City.  
Some night this year.*

Dear me,

Tonight of all nights, there are piggels in the rafters, and the candles won't stop dancing. I think it's hilarious, but Quilla's already getting dizzy. And I don't have time to waste.

"STOP!" I tell them. "JESUS CHRIST!" The piggels giggle. The candles prance. It's hard not to laugh, but inside I'm uneasy. Wouldn't surprise me if Quilla's picking up on that, too. My poor little pen squirms in feeble protest; I hold her steady, reassuring but firm, popping her pointily-elegant head in and out of the lavender ink-rose blossom, then back to the page.

Again and again, I repeat the maneuver. "Sorry," I tell her. "I gots to do it. A girl needs to write, and a deal is a deal." But I'm not so sure that she understands. (Point of fact, I'm not so sure I understand, either. This writing compulsion. This need to set down. And not only that, but to measure up, too, while I'm pouring out my soul.)

I mean, it's not like Oz is crawling with expatriate writers. And it's not like anyone *cares*, of course, but ... oh, god. The crux is this: I'm pretty sure it's March by now, which means that Gene's probably on his way; and though I am utterly, *thoroughly* stoked — I am, I really am, can't you tell from my voice? — I must admit it's dragging up a few issues for me.

(Now STOP that! Damn piggels! They're nuts!)

Like, just for instance, this matter of Time. According to his letter, it's been, what ... *over two years* since I totally lost track, threw up my hands, gave up on the calendar chase and gave into the long trippy slip-stream-of-consciousness that is Oz in the moment to moment. It's been good. Very good. I have learned much by cutting loose.

Now, suddenly, I'm calling all that into question. I'm remembering that, christ, I'm almost fucking *twenty-five!* That was the year that I swore to myself I would make my mark in the world or die. All the wrongs would be righted. All the truths would be told.

It seemed so important.

Why doesn't it now?

Or maybe it does, and I'm just in denial. Or I just don't remember. Or maybe I do. When I write about this, it sure yanks me back hard.

When I think about Gene, it yanks even harder.

Gene and I met on the Internet, in the banner year **2000**: a couple of wacky e-mail freaks and part-time online 'zinesters. His 'zine was called *Exploding Clown Experiment*. Mine was called *Wait My Ass*. Both of them were intensely first-personal accounts of whatever the fuck happened to pop into our heads.

The point was that we were both compulsive. Anything that happened, and anything that *didn't* happen — in our minds, in our lives, in the greater World Outside — was totally fair game for our poisoned word processors. It was a trait we shared in common with just about every other lunatic both driven and alienated enough to go to all that trouble; but for some reason, we cracked each other up. Became fans of each other. And, very quickly, became electronic friends, bonded by our written words.

The fact that we were both Lost Angelenos made it easy for us to meet, though we put it off for a very long time, mostly through sheer inertia. The clincher was a tribute to Little Jimmy Scott at the Wiltern Theatre, in the spring of **2002**. The fact that Gene was a fan of Jimmy Scott's music — loved it as much as I did, and maybe even more — was all I needed to know.

We went to the show. Had a blast. Hung out some more. Got high and fucked around a little. Snapped out of it. Went "whoa." And

laughed: the best possible response. Came out the other side of that, not as boyfriend and girlfriend, but with total affection and appreciation for each other.

I love Gene a whole big bunch.

But we are all mirrors to each other; and what Gene reflects back — in my mind, right now — is the urge to catch up and just get it all down. To leave a record of my cranial trail, regardless of what happens to us, it, or me.

Of late, I have been lax in chronicling: a whole lot more do than tell.

Gene makes me remember how much I love to get it all in writing.

I size myself up in the Old Faithful Mirror: that gorgeous magick object I have mounted on the wall. It sees through souls, and tells no lies. It has no bias of its own. The too-big eyes reflected there, the too-large lips, are the ones I've always had. The body is my body. Perhaps I haven't changed a bit. Between the pink and blue lights of the floating piggels and the multifaceted firelight flicker, I feel like I'm back at a plug-in party: alone in my room, locked in cybercast transmission, desperately throwing myself at some weird projected abstraction of happiness. Like a dope. Not even fooling myself.

But this is the thing. *I am not in the world.* I'm in Oz. I'm in Oz. And I'm not even stoned. It's not like I'm sitting around in a room, dreaming dreamy dreamdreams that are just veiled excuses. It's not like I didn't make love to that dragon. It's not like I haven't been getting around. Every second I've spent here, awash in walking symbols — learning warrior tech from the Winkie King, conversing with the dinner plate, repainting Scarecrow's head — has been magick in action. *Astonishing* action. I mean, I always wanted to talk with the trees. Now I talk with the trees all the time.

Gene has never had that conversation, much as he's always wanted one. Back in the world, that shit just doesn't happen. Back in the world, it's banal as all hell. The magick is stunted. There is no belief. It's as gray as the day that cyclone scooped up Dorothy Gale.

But now I'm in a place where imagination matters. Where magick is a given, and its fruits are everywhere. And while I don't have any new, improved powers — I can't flap my arms and fly, I can't shoot fireballs

out my ass — *the magick I always knew I had* is appreciated here, and that is SO GRATIFYING. Every day, I can hardly believe it.

I mean, sure, I work in a Mexican restaurant; and sure, I sometimes have to moonlight as an artist's model. But there's never BEEN a restaurant like the Emerald Burrito; and you haven't LIVED till you've posed nekkid for a roomful of sweaty Munchkin artistes.

Fact is, everybody in Oz has got some kind of job, even if it means farming goomer cream (yeesh). I could even live with that, as long as I had wildness in my life. You get a spark that's called a soul, you wanna believe that it's worth something. And it is. It truly is.

At least in Oz.

And here I am.

So I guess I'll just stop agonizing, and wait for Gene to come. Maybe he'll like what I'm writing enough to think it's worth smuggling back. It doesn't have to be Jack Kerouac, Jr.'s *On the Yellow Brick Road*; I'll just call 'em as I sees 'em, and let posterity sort it out.

At the very least, we're gonna have some fun. This is one vacation he'll never forget.

(Okay, Quilla. That's it for tonight. I'm gonna blow out the candles.)

And, piggels?

GOOD NIGHT!!!

# 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.

*From the Notebook of  
Aurora Jones*

*The Emerald Burrito  
Emerald City.  
Gift-from-God Day.*

Dear me,

Today, I witnessed a miraculous happening, extraordinary even by the standards of Oz. I was there. I was in it. I even helped!

Let me attempt to describe the unfolding.

Okay. It's daybreak at the Emerald Burrito. Fonzie's still out of town, so I have to open up. I arrive just as Pinky, the new waitress, comes barreling around the corner. She is teensy, beachball-shaped, and wheezing as she runs. Her huge cheeks billow, her eyes are wide as she rounds the corner, sees me there, lets out a *meep*, skids to a halt on her stubby legs and then waggles there, a tubby little puppet on a spring.

You gotta love Munchkins. I know I do. They are, as a rule, incredibly punctual, insanely polite, and on top of that, sincere. Like Middle America, without the psychosis. Like a midwestern dream, shrunk to workable scale.

Which doesn't mean that they're not neurotic. It's just that their lines are incredibly clear. She is terrified that I'll think she's horrid if she's just one minute late: not because I'll dock her or anything, not because she's afraid of anything I might do. It's just that, well, it would

be *awful* if I were to think that she was horrid!

“Hi, Pinky!” I say, unlocking the door. She attempts to unswallow her tongue. “You look so cute today!”

She nervously smiles, and wiggles a little. She’s a tiny puppy person, and it’s just too hilarious. “Am I late?” she peeps.

“No, you’re early!”

“Oh, YAY!” She’s all better at once. It’s just that easy.

And just as I wonder why *I’m* not so uncomplicated, Mikio Furi comes running up the street. He has, so help me God, a speaker cabinet in his hands. A *big ol’* speaker cabinet, just about as big as he.

Now, Mikio Furi has been here, what, six weeks? And already he understands things better than anyone else I know. He is utterly obsessed with the physics of Oz. How it works. Why it’s not like normal Earth. And what can we do to bridge the best of both worlds.

(Most all the native Ozians are pretty much like me: they accept the magick at face value, are pretty much just consistently thrilled that it works. And all the Joe Science Earth guys I’ve met — be they government or corporate — walk around cracking figurative cinder blocks over their heads. They don’t get it. It makes them crazy. It slams against the brick wall of their educated minds, admitting the inadmissible while belying all their rules.)

Mikio, on the other hand, is fiercely creative, thoroughly inquisitive, totally wide-open to the possibilities. Which makes me wonder why more guys like him aren’t here. Probably that one-of-a-kind rule again, god damn it (although, push come to shove, one beats the hell out of nothing).

He is also — as I’ve noted elsewhere in these pages — almost painfully delicious. He doesn’t seem at all aware of it, which of course is even better. He just shows up whenever, big ol’ smile on his face, long black hair streaming tendrils over bright almond eyes. He is scrawny, a-jitter with the natural speed that some hyper-smart guys seem to ooze from their pituitaries. And he always has some new strange device that he has just developed.

I bet he was always like that. But here in Oz, I really see him coming into his own.

Now, it's strange, how green is not always flattering. It can make you look sickly. It can make you look ... *bad*. Even the soft, benign glow of these wending emerald streets at dawn can, sometimes, throw me back to old George Romero films: packs of sallow, shambling zombie-folk, dressed up like the guys next door.

But Mikio, in this moment, looks more like something from a Mati Klarwein painting: like an acid trip I took eleven years ago, flat on my back on a good friend's back lawn. It was night, and I was lying in the grass, helplessly smiling, unable to rise, pinned to the Earth by bliss, drugs, and gravity, absolutely slaughtered by the glory of existence; and I remember that every blade of grass was *glowing*, radiant, brilliantly lit from within, a tiny neon filament of lifeforce burning. And God was everywhere.

I have always hungered for moments like those; and now Mikio is standing there. Verdant. Incandescent.

Which is to say, he looks good in green.

"Hi!" he says. "Look what I got!"

I feel like Pinkie, then. Utterly transparent. I catch myself starting to wiggle, stop. "Wow," I say. "Are you starting a band?"

"Even better," he says. "Like, a *thousand* bands." As I stare at him blankly, he adds, "You got your CD player?"

And I begin to understand.

Now, Quilla, you know how many times I've bemoaned the fact that I came to Oz with all this great music, only to find that I a) had the only CD player; and that b) my poor headphones were the only speakers here. Which meant that I could listen to Tom Waits, The Genritals, Patti Smith, Scriabin, Johnny Cash, Ween, Lester Loose, Mrs. Miller, Frank Zappa, or Frank Sinatra; I could pop in The Beatles, The Beastie Boys, ABBA, Smegma, The Sardonics, Grand Funk Railroad, Yma Sumac, Spike Jones, Patsy Cline, Porkchop Bones, Cab Calloway, Oingo Boingo, Kitty Krum or Nitzer Ebb; I could turn on Herman's Hermits, Mikki Bobbit, Lump, The Monkees, Jimi Hendrix, Funkadelic, Booker T. & the M.G.s; I could groove to Miles Davis, Iggy Pop, David Bowie, Tori Amos, Billie Holiday, Bjork, Beck, The Meat Puppets, Me'Shell Ndegochello, Pongo Domingo, or Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan; I could

worship at the altar of Tchaikovsky, Chet Baker, John Coltrane, Nirvana, and easily hundreds more.

But only on my headphones. And only by myself.

Yes, *I* could listen, any time I wanted, to the crowning glory that is human music: far and away the best thing that Earth people ever made. I could even turn on others, Ozlings who had never heard. Only one at a time.

Those days are over now.

Now picture, with me, what this moment is like. Behind Mikio — grinning and sweating and toting — comes a happy procession of Ozlandic goofballs. I recognize Ginko and Faffo Boff, the Quadling brothers who both love cheese. They are restaurant regulars, hilarious guys, and they're huffing and puffing with a cabinet between them.

Also grappling with the speaker-type units are a Winkie, two Gillikins, and a clunkety robot, none of whom I know. Evidently, Mikio makes friends fast. I note that the Winkie and one Gillikin are girls, but I'm barely even jealous, so overwhelmed by the moment am I.

Above us, the sky is orange, purple and pink, on its way to brightest blue. The cobblestone streets and emerald-encrusted storefronts that line them are, of course, glowing green. The Quadlings wear yellow. The Winkie wears blue. The Gillikins both favor orange, and Pinky's all in red. The robot, a-glinting with unburnished brass, looks like Tic-Toc's bohemian cousin. And Mikio, pale-skinned, is dressed in black.

As it happens, so am I.

The keys are still in my hands. They, too, seem to glimmer with magick light. "Omigod," I say. "Umm ... did you want to come in?"

Mikio says, "That's the whole idea!"

So I step inside and get out of the way as they struggle through the doorway. There's a pileup in the foyer as they set down the speakers, gasping for breath; and though the shock has only just begun to set in, I find myself strategizing.

Looking around at the Emerald Burrito.

As if for the very first time.

*The interior of the restaurant is large yet intimate, dark enough to be cozy, with hacienda arches and squared-off pillars in glorious symmetrical*

*splay. There are twenty-three tables of dark burnished wood, in a variety of sizes, to accomodate all guests. Each table has a green stained-glass votive candleholder affixed to its center, awaiting spark and flame.*

*There are lanterns on the pillars as well. The walls are festooned with faux-Mexican tapestries, woven for us by Fonzie's old girlfriend, Tatale. (For a witchling who's never been out of the city, I think she did an astonishing job.) Though we played down the gleaming gem-pocked look — you get enough of that in Emerald City — strategic strings of flicker-stones are draped at the creases of walls and arches; and mounted on the cracked tile ceiling are fifty-seven upside-down flourescent sombreros: a multi-colored touch I stole from El Chavo, one of my favorite restaurants back in seamy L.A.*

It's a beautiful room. A great place to eat. Already, I can feel it transforming. I look at Mikio's cabinets, all four of them, start calculating how to mount them, in which corners of the room. The wood of the cabinets matches the tables. Once again, I am stunned by what a genius he is.

"But," I hear myself saying, "will they work?"

"Who knows?" He grins. "But I think they might!"

"Let's find out!" says Ginko, while the others let out a cheer. It's like a musical midget football team, psyching themselves as they take the field.

I guide them to their respective corners, clear tables out of their way. I'm the tallest person in the room, so I come in kinda handy. The Gillikins have brought their tools, which makes mounting the speakers a snap. For the first time, I really look at what the speakers are. I start laughing.

"Popo shells?" I say.

Mikio nods. I shake my head. Popo's a lot like cocoanut. I use it for certain dishes. But I've never seen popo shells chopped in half, scooped out, and mounted in speaker cabinets. He's got a big one on the bottom — his bass popo shell — then a smaller one for midrange, and a dinky popo tweeter.

All of these are wired together in a fine twiney matrix of gibberdeen vines, assorted charms and fetishes (including a plastic Elvis nightlite),

and ... “Are those language bush branches?” I ask, finally getting the picture.

“Exactly,” chirps in the Gillikin girl, who has picked up on my boner for Mikio. Clearly, she has one, too; competition now, rearing its adorable head.

“That’s why I think it will work,” Mikio sez, completely oblivious to gurl-politics (yay!). “It’s so simple, it *has* to. That’s just how Oz is.”

He certainly has a point; and I find myself thinking, *why didn’t I think of that?*; and that’s when he says, “Why don’t you get your CD player and, you know, pick out something perfect?”

It’s in that moment that the panic begins to claim me. My pulse soars. My breastbones squeeze. Little blobules of sweat start to knock at my pores. I realize how much I’ve already emotionally invested in this experience, even though it’s patently absurd. A stereo made of nuts and kindling? Am I fucking joking? Is he putting me on?

“You’re not putting me on, right?” I ask him sincerely. “Because if you are, I will just cry ...”

“... no ...”

“... cuz this would mean so much to me ...”

“... um, Aurora ...?”

“... I’m sorry, I’m freaking out. I’m just so *excited* ...”

“Aurora,” says Mikio, taking me gently by the shoulders. “Just pick a song you want to hear.”

At which point the door flies open, and in struts Señor Poogli, the six-armed chef. He is swarthy and squat and hyperbolic, brandishing his new faux-Mexican mustache with Pancho Villa swagger. When he gestures, he gestures large.

Behind him, Pim and Bom and little Cheeba sneak in.

“AND WHAT,” Señor Poogli demands, “IS THIS?”

“It’s music,” says the Gillikin girl. “And I would like some wavos rancheros.”

“*Hmph!*” Poogli says, with a gesture that suggests that it doesn’t look like music to him. All the same, the first order of the morning is in, and he is nothing if not duty-bound. With a last caustic glance at the lot of

us, he goes tromping off into the kitchen. The g-girl smiles, then looks at me. We size each other up.

Her face is cute and round. Her hair is bobbed and purple-brown. They don't need dyes to get those shades. It just happens. But it's great. Her eyes are purple-violet too, intense and determined. She would make an excellent terrorist. Four foot two, intensely buxom, with just enough waist between bosom and hips to imply an hourglass exploding.

I wonder if Mikio's fucked her yet, can only imagine he will. I see her thinking the exact same thing, and we catch each other there.

"Pinky? Pim?" Breaking the spell, returning to the power-spot that is my job. "I think we've got some hungry people here. Bom? Get these tables set up? Little Cheeba? Go help Señor Poogli, okay? We're about to open for business."

Already, outside the door, the first morning diners are amassing. I can see Ambassador Spang and Enchantra; the twelve blond Winkie children and their mannequin nanny; Squinko the boot-salesman; Bing the extra-smart hamster; and some other characters I don't know. I gesture through the window to them, *uno momento, por favor*; they nod and go back to curiously watching, or talking amongst themselves.

And so, at last, the moment has come. Despite the pulse-pounding pressure, I make my way to my bag. The CD player is there, along with a folio containing fifty CDs that for some reason were on my mind. I take out the player, set the folio down beside it.

"Where should I set up?" I call across the room to Mikio.

"How should I know?" he says. He's right.

"So it doesn't matter where I put it?"

"Only to you. It's your CDs. I'll tell you when I'm all set up."

There's a counter just inside the kitchen door, to the right of the service bay. It's a place where we mostly keep cook books and stuff. I move through the swinging doors and set up there.

And as I peruse, Mikio comes to me, ready. He's got one end of his miracle cable in hand, with a language bush tip carved like an audio jack. "Plug it in," he says, and I do.

At that moment, the only possible selection leaps into my head.

Grinning, I say to Mikio, "Tell Pinky to open the doors."

He leaves the room. I open the player, take out The Plimsouls and slip it back in the folio. The song that I want is the very first track on the gleaming gold CD I then take in my hand.

The name of the song is “Never Been To Spain.”

The artist is the immortal El Vez.

I put the disc in the machine. I close the little lid. I crank the volume to eight and pray. Then I quick kiss the sky and press Play.

I leave the kitchen, just as the first customers enter, and the first susseration of sonic wave whispers out from those beautiful speakers. It’s the sound of the ocean, and it is *loud*, but not as loud as it’s going to get. I think about pinning it back just a little, but then I see the mounting confusion on all those magick faces.

*Why cheat them on their first time?*, I figure.

Then I just stand back and enjoy.

Out from the sound of crashing waves comes a single distorted guitar. It’s buzzing around one note, like a wiggly bee, and then it starts a steep slow crazy tension-building climb.

When the first clipped power chord in the history of Oz rings out, loud and clear, I watch the crowd lift off the floor.

And by the time they land, one split-second later, the greatest Mexican Elvis of them all is crooning his way into their sweet virgin hearts.

Well, I’ve never been to Spain  
But I’ve heard about Columbus.  
Well, they say the man’s insane  
Cuz he thinks he discovered us.  
In fourteen-nine-two,  
Who discovered who?  
Here’s how it happened:

Words struggle to fail me, but I can’t allow it. All I can say is: *you shoulda seen their eyes*. You shoulda seen their eyes: all those Munchkins and Gillikins, tourists and traders and bigshots and locals, suddenly lost in astounding sonic places they’d never known before.

You should have seen the way they moved, so totally instinctively. Freezing up. Or letting go. Intensely moved.

Or scared to death.

Well, I've never been to Tikal  
But I've been to Chichen-Itza.  
The Mayan culture: man, it thrived, boy  
Before Columbus had a teacher ...

Remember: these are people who never heard rock 'n' roll. Who had no nostalgia. No connection to its history. Not a trace of the stuff in their genes. They weren't responding ironically, from some post-modern dreary ground zero of contempt or knowing mock-embrace.

They were responding to the music, purely on its own terms. And it was fascinating to witness the actual nature of their response. Like watching the first Norwegians to stumble across the bossa nova.

By the time El Vez & Co. cranked the song into high gear, a good chunk of the crowd was really truly gettin' down. They didn't know what to call it, but they knew what it did; like magick, that was good enough for them. Mikio and I were busy struttin' our stuff, from our respective corners of the room, so those near us could pick up on a couple of shoulder-snappin', head-cockin', hip-grindin' moves. I liked — no surprise there — the way he moved.

But the room was full of surprises.

First off was the wily Enchantra: official mistress to the Winkie Ambassador. While the obsequious, every-quivering Spang seemed startled and skittish in his Ambassadorial togs — eyes as wide as his built-in squint allowed, triple chins a-jitter in the river of sound — Enchantra appeared to be channeling the spirit of Uhura from the old *Star Trek*. Her golden feline eyes, black mane, and slinky chocolate physique made the overblown serpentine slinkster moves alluring, despite my post-modern inclination to giggle. I realized that some seduction ploys are not learned at all, but unspeakably natural. (I don't know if this is reassuring or not.)

The fact that she was aiming the ploy at me was not in the least surprising. She's been trying to get me into bed since we met last year, when I first started hanging out with Scarecrow. But beyond that, the

music really seemed to be getting her off; and creepy as she often strikes me, I still thought it was kinda cool.

The mannequin nanny seemed unmoved by the groove, but the little Winkie children were going wild. Several of them had found their way to Mikio's speaker cabinets, where they held their hands up to the sound and laughed as the bass waves whuffed them. And Mikio's friends belonged at the ENIT Festival, all over it like ravesters at some three-in-the-morning peak.

There was more. There was more. More people, flooding through the door. Pinky wasn't sure what the protocol was, but neither could she stop her butt from swaying. I kinda lost sight of Bing, but later on I found the tabletop skritches from where he'd been kicking up his heels.

And onward it went, through the chick singers wailing "*agua ...*," mimicking George Harrison and his "Wah Wah" refrain. Onward it went, until the song faded out. And the wild applause erupted.

I will never be the same.

And I don't want to blow this thing out of proportion, but I suspect that Oz, too, will never hear itself in quite the same way again. Before the day was done, I played *Swordfishtrumbone*. I played "St. Alphonso's Pancake Breakfast." I played luscious Jeff Buckley and righteous Rev. Horton Heat. I played psychotic Thrill Kill Kult, spritely Cindi Lee Berryhill, and the red-hot sounds of Dizzy Gillespie, plus a little Latin Playboys and Debussy on the side.

While half the Emerald City tried to pack its way inside our doors.

I'll tell you this much; the Fonz is definitely going to shit. He wanted the most exciting restaurant in Oz, and it looks like he's finally nailed it for sure. Mikio's looking into the logistics of extension speakers, and the possibility of wiring the city for sound. There've already been over a thousand requests. Business is going through the roof, walls, and floorboards; we've never really taken reservations, but it's starting to sound like an awfully good idea.

And, at last count, it seems that three count-em' *three* brand new local bands are forming, as the young-at-heart of Oz claim Earthly music as their own.

Sound like a ripple in the normosphere to you?

It's the dead of night in the Emerald City, as I write down these final words. The place has been closed for about three hours; I've been alone with the room and the succulent sounds.

Now the last CD has gone to sleep, and I'm listening to the silence of the Emerald urban night. No squad car ululations. No drunken roars. No shots. No screams.

It's funny how the music takes me back, gives me tacit sense-memories of the days before I left. How unhappy I was. How hemmed-in by the blindness. How starving for action, in whatever form it took (or, more often, *didn't*).

How glad I am to be gone.

But there's something about sitting here, with the songs and the memories, that makes me weirdly proud of the place from whence I come.

And much as I love this endless smorgasboard of strangeness, I have never been so grateful that there is such a place as Earth.

*From the Notebook of  
Aurora Jones*

*In the Emerald Burrito.  
Creepoid Interlude.*

Dear me,

Something deeply weird just happened. Lemme get it down quick.

About an hour before dinnertime rush, and I'm back in the kitchen with Señor Poogli. We are discussing tonight's specials: a nice Rump O' Goomer with mole sauce, and Poogli's new innovation: the Mexican Goomer Weave. It's this elaborate process, which he's trying to explain — something about making threads of shredded goomer meat, then weaving them into sculptures — and it's really fascinating, but then the kitchen door blows open.

And in walks this character I've never seen before. A kind of icky man-weasel, slightly taller than me. He's got slicked-down salt and pepper fur with a musky, slightly-oily sheen. Up on his hind legs, slinking into the room, there's something oddly prim about him. Maybe it's his pantaloons. But the vibe gets unnerving, the second he enters. And I don't like his eyes.

In the background, Dead Can Dance are playing, and I can tell that he doesn't much care for it.

"Hello," he says, with his long skinny snout, and I notice he loves to show his teeth. They are many and pointed; and without hesitation, I

imagine them taking a chunk out of me.

He enjoys my reaction. It's the one he had in mind. That pisses me off, and I summon up steel. To my right, Señor Poogli looks equally tense. He's got one hand on a cleaver, and the other five are fists.

"Excuse me. Miss Aurora Jones?" the weasel continues.

"That's me."

"I am here to discuss the ... dinner reservations."

"Okay. And just who might you be?"

He pulls himself up to his full height, draws his thin black lips into a condescending sneer. "Perhaps you've heard of me," he says, still showing teeth. "My name is ... Rokoko."

I laugh. "As in Rocky Rokoko?"

"Er, no." Displeased. I'm guessing he's heard the joke before.

"Ah, well. So how can I help you, Mr. Rokoko?"

He takes a couple steps closer, and now I can see Pim and Pinky in the doorway, with their big worried eyes. It's so clear that they're already blaming themselves for this little confrontation. I flash them reassurance, and hold my ground.

Rokoko is confident, self-absorbed, but his danger radar isn't bad. Or maybe he knows a little something about me. Either way, he stops. Flashes ugly teeth. And makes a quite bogus conciliatory gesture.

"Miss Aurora," he says. "I beg your pardon. I am merely attempting to confirm reservations which were already made ..."

"By whom?"

"By your partner. He was given instructions to reserve all twenty-three of your tables for a very special dinner, after your regular working hours, five nights from this evening."

"What *kind* of 'special dinner'?" I ask him.

He looks slightly annoyed. "You weren't informed?"

"No, I wasn't. Nobody mentioned this to me." Glancing at Poogli, who adamantly shakes his head. "Who is this reservation for?"

Rokoko smiles. "A good friend of Mr. Gutierrez."

"That sure narrows it down. Anybody I know?"

"I sincerely don't think so. But that's unimportant. The point is that there are certain ... dietary requirements that would have to be met."

“I’m listening.”

“In particular,” and now Rokoko can’t restrain his evil grin, “there are certain ... meats which we would want to see prepared in your restaurant’s singular fashion.”

Now my hackles are up, and my temper is climbing. I can see Fonzie’s hand in this, and it’s the hand that I don’t like. My partner is a fairly remarkable man, and his charm is only heightened by his hunger for authenticity. But meat is a serious issue in Oz, and not only just for me.

“I’m sorry,” I say, “but as I’m certain you know, we only serve goomer meat ...”

Rokoko rolls his eyes. “That’s not what Mr. Gutierrez said.”

“Well, Mr. Gutierrez isn’t here. I have no idea what he told you. And you know what? I don’t care. If he has some sneaky meat deal going on with you guys — whoever you guys are — you might as well forget it. Nobody here will cook it, and nobody here will serve it.”

“Oh, be *reasonable*,” he insinuates slyly, leaning into the word with his entire body. “After all, you’ve lived on Earth. You know what these recipes actually call for ...”

“Excuse me. I was a vegetarian for ten years before I even got to Oz. For what it’s worth, I stopped eating cows and chickens and pigs long before they started throwing me birthday parties.

“But why am I explaining this to you? The simple fact is that it’s wrong, and you know it.”

“*Wrong*.” He snorts dismissively.

“Yeah. *Wrong*. Look it up.” I take a step forward now. “And while you’re at it, why don’t you take a fuckin’ hike?”

He tenses, insulted. I like that a lot. If there’s a battle to wage, let’s get it over with now. I can feel the air contract, preparing for the scent of blood to drench it.

He doesn’t take the bait, but hatred simmers in his veins.

“You are not welcome here, Mr. Rokoko,” I tell him. “And neither are your mysterious ‘friends.’ Which means your special dinner reservation doesn’t exist, and never will.

“I suggest you spend the evening sitting on a tack.”

Rokoko sighs and licks his chops, black rodent-eyes locked on mine. “Too bad,” he says, sneering and turning to go. He flashes his fangs. Just on impulse, I show him mine.



All this went down ten minutes ago, give or take. And the more I think about it, the more pissed-off I get.

Maybe I shouldn't get too mad at Fonzie just yet. It's entirely possible — well, at least *remotely* possible — that he didn't have anything to do with it. In the early days, god knows, he was insanely indiscreet; that this restaurant survived at all is a recombinant miracle of charm, yum and vision. I mean, you can't go telling chickens how much better some *chicken* would taste with this sauce. It's insulting as hell.

He's gotten a whole lot better, and more sensitive to the issues, but the simple fact remains that he is jonesing for beef. I know the feeling, vaguely, but I know too many cows. And, goddamit, so does he! I mean, I've *seen* him flirt with Bessie!

And I don't care how good his mama's recipes are.

When Rokoko left, I watched him broadcast his charms at Pinky and Pim. They responded with predictable terror. It seems fairly clear to me that there's no one Rokoko *wouldn't* eat.

Oh, Fonzie ... what have you gotten us into now?

# FROM THE FILES OF GENE SPEILMAN

3/17/07

We've been moving almost nonstop for two days. Four hours to sleep every night, which I've hardly been taking advantage of. I'm a fucking wreck: my feet are sore (even with hiking boots and two pairs of socks) and I've probably got permanent scars on my shoulders from the straps of the backpack weighted down with all the extra gear. To top it all off, I'm probably going to be dead by sometime tomorrow afternoon, judging by the way things are going. And for what? This is so incredibly frustrating. They made me come. I HAD NO CHOICE.

Okay. Let me back up a little bit. Here I am again. Tired. Too tired to sleep. Wired, or something.

Alright.

**alight allwhite awrrrritey**

*Look. Laptop. How's about I make you a deal, awrittey? You let me type what I want to for awhile, uninterrupted, and I'll leave you on all night to blabber to your heart's content, type whatever you want. Deal?*

**allwhitey**

Okay. In the morning, after I last wrote, I woke up to the languorous sound of flutes. Kimbod (of Ev) was up in an old oak tree, legs akimbo, tucked into a wide spot between several large branches. The song that came from his flute was beautifully eerie, like some chill breeze from an

ancient summer, hanging in the air somehow, magically, for centuries. The tree was gently swaying, obviously digging it.

Gombo, the winged monkey, was sprawled on a big carpet near the ashes of the campfire, harmonizing on a similar wooden flute. Obviously, these guys had no trouble entertaining themselves during downtime.

Ralph sauntered up to me, quietly, sleep still creasing his features, and asked, “Well, whataya think?”

Everything was taking on grand, hallucinogenic proportions.

“What do I think about what?” I said.

“Whatever.”

I decided to change the subject. “I met your friend last night.”

His eyes widened considerably. “You met Nick? No. Shit. When was this?”

“After you went to sleep. I couldn’t, so we stayed up and had astronomy lessons. Is he, uh —” I searched for the proper phrasing.

Ralph looked around once, quickly. “Nuts?”

“Well, no, that’s not what I was asking.” I tried again, so as not to sound ridiculous if I was wrong. “Is he who I think he is?”

“Uh huh.” He smiled, and started a little two-step, quietly sang, “*If I only hadda heaaaaaart.*” Ralph nudged his lips with his index finger, maybe to remind himself to shut up, covered his mouth for a second. “I thought you’d get a kick outa that. Yeah, well, he does have a heart, a big one, and he’s also nuts. Somewhere between wacky, happy-go-lucky nuts and dangerously insane, depending on who he’s with, and what’s going on.” He pointed at me. “I figured he’d like you.”

I was beginning to think maybe Ralph, too, was a few dollars short of cab fare, but reserved comment. He had saved my life after all, and seemed to know with deadly accuracy what was going on here. I, on the other hand ...

“I told him what you wanted to tell him.”

Ralph looked at me warily. “How did you know what I wanted to tell him?”

“Well, I didn’t. He asked me what you wanted to tell him, and I told him I didn’t know, so I sort of gave him a rundown — ”

“You didn’t tell him about —” He looked around, lowered his voice. “Gutierrez, did you? Did you?”

My look told it all.

Ralph spun in a circle, did a petulant child dance. “Awww, fuck. Fuck!”

“What?”

“I was going to tell him that the Ogres were dangerously close, nothing more. You have screwed the pooch, pal. Not only have you compromised U.S. intelligence — there’s no telling what — he —”

Just as I was about to tell him that U.S.intelligence had been compromised for some time, Nick strode out of his tent, in all his glory, looking about ten feet tall, gleaming in the morning sun. He was much scarier in the daylight.

His boys gathered around him from out of nowhere: the five I’d seen before, and a few others who must have been in their tents the night before. They hung around him, waiting for him to speak.

Nick stood stark still for about thirty seconds, then said, “We move out.” He eyed Ralph and me, waved the hilt of his ax absently in our direction. “You, too.” Then he spun around on his heels and went back into his tent.

The band of merry men immediately started into a frenzy of activity, pulling tents down, packing gear away.

I’d just about had it. I don’t like being led around by the nose, even if I am on unfamiliar turf. Past a certain point, I’d rather take my chances. And this was getting just too weird for me.

“Look,” I said to Ralph, “I’m sorry if I told Nick something I wasn’t supposed to. Thank you for saving my ass so far. But I think it’s about time for me to cut out. Now, if you’re going with these guys, good luck and all that, but I’ve got a friend in Emerald who’s expecting me. If you —”

He was shaking his head, smiling that smile of his. “Are you crazy? It wasn’t a request, man. He wants us along, we go along. Wherever. You don’t argue with the Tinman. Or you don’t — exist, get it?”

I thought about it for a few seconds, thought about my first meeting with Nick the night before, the bone-chilling certainty that this creature

could do away with me without batting his remaining eyelash. I thought about it.

“What do you think they’re having for breakfast around here?” I asked.



Breakfast wasn’t half bad. A couple of eggs, strange oblong green biscuits, my first taste of dried Goomer jerky. I was hungry.

Less than an hour later, we were heading northeast, first through the genuine forest that the oak grove had stuck out from, then cross-country over broad, flat hills with sparse patches of trees that look sort of like Sonoma valley, or Marin.

Three hours into the march, Ralph went up to Nick and talked to him for a few minutes. Then he hung back to where I’d been quizzing Kimbod about the flute music.

Ralph was looking miserable. I’d begun to get a sense, which has increased with time, that it is a bad thing when Ralph looks miserable. We backed up to the end of the line.

“This sucks,” he said, “this really sucks.”

“What sucks,” I asked, “besides being kidnapped by Colonel Kurtz over there, heading at full speed in the opposite direction from where we’re going? What could possibly suck?”

“Well, for starters, I thought we were just going to do some reconnaissance, but now it turns out — why the hell did you have to tell him about Gutierrez?”

I was really sick of hearing that guy’s name. He had been bad luck since before I got here. I mean, he was the one who got beheaded and all, but he was continuing to put a serious dent in my plans. I told Ralph as much.

“Well,” he said, “I forgive you; you didn’t know what you were saying. I should have warned you. I was tired, it was late.”

“You forgive me. Oh good, I was worried. Ralph, where are we going?”

He said it like he didn’t quite want me to hear it, turned his head kinda sideways: “Hollow Man’s Fortress.”

“Hollow Man’s Fortress. Hollow Man ... Hollow Man ... doesn’t ring a bell.”

He looked pained. “You wouldn’t have heard about him. Nobody’s been really worried about him until recently. Wasn’t much to worry about, outside of the usual Bad Guy stuff. There’s always been wicked witches, and plenty of wanabees hanging around when one of ’em slips on a banana peel or gets it with a bucket of water or whatever it is that happens when they lose their edge—

“Hollow Man’s an outworlder. Some say he came over from across the Deadly Desert; people in Ix will tell you he came from across the Ocean. Farther than our survey maps go, anyway. He’s become a very nasty wizard, or warlock, or some kind of shit. Bad, whatever it is, real bad.

“He started out as a little straw boss up in a town to the extreme northeast, Togollu. But he’s working fast. Now he controls half of Munchkinland, and he’s working on getting the rest of it, and beyond. And — oh — he’s that jolly green giant’s fearless leader, if you hadn’t figured that out already.”

I hadn’t. Call me stupid, but there was a lot going on right then. I chewed on that for a few seconds, then started in again.

“Okay. Hollow. Man. Hollow Man. Why the name? Is he indeed — hollow?”

Ralph looked at me really strangely, as if I’d said something to spook him all of the sudden. “Yeah. He is. At least that’s what I’ve been told. He calls himself Bennie, how about that? Spells it B-h-j-e-n-n-i-g-h, but it sounds the same. He started out pretty normal looking, for an evil bastard, and gradually started going ... all black. Wait. I’m not saying this right.”

We all started climbing up a particularly gnarly hill right then, so conversation stopped for a little while, as we had to devote all of our attention to breathing. When we got to the top, everybody rested for a few minutes, and Ralph continued.

“He’s not like, black on the outside, like a black man — ”

“No, I guess they would call him the Black Man if that were the case.”

“Shut up. They say when you look at him, into where his eyes used to be, it’s dull black. More than that. Like the absence of light. And when he opens up his mouth, you can’t see teeth, or that little thing — ”

“Uvula.”

“Thank you. It’s just black. And little things floating in the air, dust, smoke, just kind of suck in towards him, like there was some kind of vacuum, or gravity pulling them in.”

“Maybe like a black hole ... ” I offered.

“Yeah,” he said, “like a black hole. Anyway, they say that every day there’s a little more of the Hollow, and a little less of the Man. And logic would dictate that maybe that would make him go away eventually. But it’s making him stronger, whatever it is. There’s a Something in the Nothing.”

Inexplicably, I started thinking of “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad.” Well, not inexplicably, because what Ralph was saying was giving me the same creepy feeling I used to get when I was a little kid, chills up and down my spine during that song, when you got to the part about “someone’s in the kitchen with Dinah, someone’s in the kitchen I knoo-oo-oo-ooow ... ” Like, who the hell is it exactly in the kitchen with Dinah? Where did he come from out of nowhere in the middle of this nice railroad song?

I think that was what freaked out Ralph, too. In a land of already insane physical impossibilities, here was something so mysterious and terrible that nobody knew what it was, where it came from, what the fuck it was doing in the kitchen with Dinah — and it was trying to Take Over.

We moved out over a ridge not quite as steep as the last one, and Nick called a halt. Everyone got really quiet. I looked off where I saw Nick looking, and saw smoke coming up, far away. Thick, acrid looking black smoke, six tall columns rising up, evenly spaced over about a third of the horizon. It reminded me of something, something terrible, but I couldn’t think of it right then. Later, I remembered: it was like descriptions I’d heard of the ovens at Auschwitz. I didn’t know at the time how right on that was.

Nick Chopper turned around, and from the looks of him, was about ready to give some more orders. But he didn't. Instead, he got a really preoccupied look on his face, and headed back down the ridge toward us.

Gombo folded his wings across each other, and perched on his tail, using it like a tripod. Sool, a squat, peach-colored guy with purple-gray dreds, sat down next to him, and they both started smoking pipes of something, as if sure that we'd get an extra long break. The others seemed to take their cue from this, and relaxed into various leisurely activities: pissing, smoking, scratching.

As he passed us, Nick said, "Ralph, Gene of Los Angeles — with me."

Our eyes widened at each other, and we followed him down to a little copse of funny-looking skinny trees, next to some big boulders. We sat on some of the smaller rocks, and were silent, waiting.

"Gentlemen," the Woodsman said, "I am at a loss." Then he shut up again. He took out a little stone, and started honing the blade of his ax, slowly, delicately.

Ralph waited a bit, then, with his brow properly furrowed, said, "Nick, do you mean, about what to do next, or ...?"

Nick fixed him with a pleasant Charles Manson-meets-Fred Astaire smile and replied, "Yes, of course." More honing.

I cleared my throat. "Excuse me, Nick," I said, "I don't know what I was thinking of, maybe I'd gotten too much oxygen; I was temporarily insane. "Nick, why don't you do something like you did in the movie? You know, like when you guys snuck into the witch's castle?"

He actually stopped honing, turned towards me. I couldn't tell if his look meant "I'm interested, go on," or he was marveling at the incomprehensible hogwash I was spouting, waiting for the perfect moment to split me in half. Ralph was behind him, waving his arms, pantomiming, trying to make me shut up. But I was on a roll, and I guess I just didn't give a shit right then.

"Movie?"

"Yeah, you know. Don't you? *The Wizard of Oz*? Anyway, you dressed up like the Winkies in the witches' army uniforms, and got inside the castle to save Dorothy."

He was looking, then, inside of himself at something impossibly remote, impossibly long ago. “It didn’t happen quite that way,” he said, looking down at his metal feet. Then he got up. “But what a good idea. Hmm. Disguises.”

Then he stomped off back up the hill, spouting orders to make camp for the night, leaving Ralph and me perched on our rocks with our jaws hanging open, each for a different reason.

I slept a little bit last night, but mostly sat around the fire with Kimbod and another guy, Zem. Zem was a Quadling, who tended toward the classic Quadling features, according to “So You’re Going to Oz”: straight coarse white hair, pale, almost vampire-white skin, covered with dark brown to black freckles, wide faces, almost like somebody wearing a stocking over his head. It took me a while to resist the urge to put my hands up, or give him my wallet.

Zem the Quadling was really quiet all night, let Kimbod and me do all the talking, occasionally grunting at something we’d say. This seemed a little strange to me, as he’d talked my ear off the night before at dinner; I’d actually wanted him to shut up and let me enjoy a few minutes peace, but hadn’t said anything.

Also, while Kimbod and I talked, Zem would disappear into the woods every once in a while. I didn’t think anything of it at the time, figuring maybe something wasn’t agreeing with him and had the trots, and that it also accounted for why he wasn’t speaking.

I found out the real reason later.

Kimbod told me about the land of Ev for a while, all about his family, about all the different wacky royalty they have; I guess he was homesick. I told him about my trip east, and how we have truckstops and Walmarts and titty bars out in our deserts, how ours don’t directly kill you if you step on ’em, like the Deadly one.

He hunched his cadaverous frame in toward the crackling blaze. “I haven’t been back for awhile,” he said. “It’s getting harder and harder to find a quick sandboat or a zeppelin these days.”

“Yeah,” I replied dreamily, half hypnotized by the brilliant glow of a dry branches’s combustion, like I knew all about that problem, “I know what you mean.”

The conversation flagged after that, and I eventually climbed into my sleeping bag, gazing up at the moon through the crisscrossed skeletal tree limbs. I started to freak out then, a little bit, thinking stuff like the branches were dried-up witch-claws bending down to grab me. Then I noticed an owl up there, high up on top of one of the witch's thumbs. It had a half-chewed mouse in one of its talons — I guessed carnivores had a special dispensation when it came to the cannibalism thing — or maybe they only ate stupid mice? I filed the question away for another Ralph conversation.

“Whoooo?” it called quietly.

I wasn't sure if it was asking a question or was just being an owl, but I figured — why not?

“Gene Speilman” I said.

As it flew off, I wondered if I'd just now subscribed to some weird Oz version of a mailing list somewhere. And whose list? I should have kept my mouth shut, I finally decided. But it was too late.

The next morning, *this* morning in fact, the flute music was conspicuously absent. We had our breakfast, packed up and started marching again. My legs were sore from yesterday, and it was tough going until I warmed up a little.

Early on, we paused briefly in the middle of a vast meadow, while Gombo and Nick wandered off and had an earnest conversation with a large pig wearing some sort of pig overalls. I wondered how he got in and out of them, and how much of a nuisance it must be to wear clothes if you had no hands. I said as much to Ralph.

“Most of 'em don't,” he said. “This one's kinda ritzy for a pig, if you ask me. He must be somebody important.”

Later we found out from Gombo that he was the traditional spiritual leader for the pigs who lived in an area half contained within the domain of the Hollow Man, half in Quadling. Part of his vows were to keep his body covered at all times except when bathing. The reason it came up in conversation was this:

Around noon, we noticed Nick hanging back to talk to Zem, the Quadling I'd been sitting with the night before. Nick put his arm around the guy and spoke quietly into his ear, as if imparting a great

secret. Then, faster than I could follow, he swung his ax around and up, and Zem's head flew off into the shrubbery. The rest of him stood there for a second spouting blood, as if not sure what had happened, wobbled on its legs a little, and collapsed.

After I finished puking, I heard the Tin Man addressing the rest of his men.

"You are all my brothers," he said, as he wiped his ax down with a cloth, "but this one has betrayed me. My heart is broken. But I would do no less to ANY of you. To ANY of you. If you dare to do what this one has done. This — treachery."

And then he reached down into the canvas sack the man had been carrying, and pulled out a contraption that looked like a mirrored lantern, with a sliding cover on one side.

"The Hoyteb of the Quadling Pigs saw some interesting signals coming from our camp last night. This is where they came from." Nick heaved the lantern over in the same direction the lobbed head went.

The mood has been pretty somber from then on, to say the least, and as we hiked, the scenery began more and more to match it. The sky was darkening, clouding over, and the vegetation started to look decidedly sickly and lacking in chlorophyll, like it had all been growing under some rock. We occasionally spied a farm that had the same sort of sick look, even though crops were growing, and animals were grazing in the fields. The trees, of the long skinny witch-claw variety, turned towards us as we passed, and gradually grew more and more cheeky, trying to trip us with low branches, dropping nuts and birds nests on our heads. A few well-placed thwacks from Nick's ax seemed to spread the word quickly that we weren't to be messed with.

Luckily, there were still language bushes to be found every so often, which is something I continue to be glad of. The only thing I can think of that's worse than being in this situation is being in the middle of all this shit and not being able to understand anyone. I continue to be polite as hell to every bush I pick on.

By late afternoon, it was starting to look full-on like Halloween. Great big clouds of bats flew overhead, perhaps emptying out from a cave nearby, and and it seemed as though massive gothic spiderwebs

spanned every available gap. A pale bug twitched in one of them, as a huge arachnid with glowing purple eyes made its way down towards dinner.

This, of course got me thinking about the whole cannibal thing again.

As I leaned up towards the web, I could hear a tiny voice shouting, "Help me! Help me!" Yeah, I know.

This was just too much for me, of course. I reached into the web, and grabbed out the little pale-green insect, much to the dismay of the spider, who started yelling, "Hey, you bastard!" in an equally tiny voice, "that was my dinner, asshole! How'd you like a nice welt on your ankle for a few weeks?"

I helped to disentangle the little insect from what was left of his bonds. He dropped down prostrate on the palm of my hand, I guess to thank me, and then tore ass out of there as fast as he could fly.

"What's the deal here, anyway? Isn't that cannibalism?" I asked the spider, "Eating another sentient life form? Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

The rest of my party was getting ahead of me; Ralph hung back and called to me to hurry it up.

"Look, shitheel," he said, purple glow-eyes pulsing, "If I don't eat the insects, I starve. My body chemistry requires it. That's bad enough. But if I don't eat those insects, you know what happens? A lot more bugs with a lot of time on their hands, making more bugs. Suddenly, there's not enough leaves for them to eat. They start to starve. Lots of them die, slowly, miserably. Not to mention all the plant life. My way is relatively painless. So next time you see one of us about to chow down, mind your own business, okay?"

I didn't have time to argue with him. I caught up with Ralph and told him what had just happened.

"I guess it's really a question of degree," he said. "Humans, other large animals have a choice. Some don't. When you're part of a delicate ecosystem like most of the critters out here, there isn't much of a choice. Sure, the prey doesn't want to get caught, but they accept it as a possible way to die, an act of God. They don't see the Hawk or the Spider as evil.

They see them as part of a dance, a balancing act, whatever, that's been going on forever.

"Usually farm animals have unions, make deals with their farmers, are generally well-treated. Alternatives to eating them have been worked out for ages. These kinds of beings are as socialized as we are. But that stuff just doesn't exist out in the wild. Part of Hollow Man's whole argument is that this 'law of the jungle' should extend to man. That man, an omnivore, should be eating the other animals because it's nature's way. We've been given the means to eat them. We have opposable thumbs and all that shit.

"I mean, there's definitely a gray area, but you can usually scope it out and obviously see whether it's wrong or not. Usually."

I really had to think about that one — I'm still thinking about it.

After a little more hiking, the word got passed back for everyone to shut up. We stopped while Pimbi and another guy were sent forward to scout something out. They were back in about five minutes. I couldn't hear what they were saying to Nick Chopper, but it looked like something fairly serious was about to go down.

Ralph confirmed what I was feeling. "Whatever happens," he said, "just hang back and stay out of the way. Nobody here expects you to fight. But take this, just in case."

He opened his coat up. He took a really big pistol out of a leather holster and handed it to me. "This is my One That Got Through. Don't fuck it up."

It looked like one of those ones from the Dirty Harry movies, a .357 Magnum. I couldn't be sure; I know nothing about guns.

"I don't believe this." I muttered. The gravity of the situation was starting to sink in. "How do you work this?"

Ralph took it back, unlatched the safety.

"Be *really careful*, first of all. Then if something really ugly and scary heads your way and tries to kill you, aim this and pull the trigger. And try to hunker down before you do — this thing has a hell of a kick."

"What are you gonna use?"

He pulled a little dagger out of his pocket. It glowed blue, and wiggled a bit. Then it started telescoping out, growing like Pinocchio's

nose or the biggest steel boner in the world, until it was a fearsome samurai blade. “This, and a few tricks I picked up from the Navy Seals.”

For the first time, I saw Gombo remove his cloak and start to beat his wings. They were enormous, with a span almost half again as wide as he was tall, looking more like a bat’s wings than a bird’s. He rose into the air, hovered, and flew off towards the north.

Nick called everyone together.

“There is a small garrison of Bhjennigh’s troops not far up a road on the other side of those trees,” he whispered, pointing off to where Gombo had flown. “With me now, quickly, no prisoners. Clean and silent.”

And everyone started off at a run towards the road.

What? I thought. No prisoners? What exactly are we doing? I trotted down the road with everyone else, still not quite getting it. I had seen already that Nick Chopper was deadly serious, fanatically persuing some end that I didn’t understand, dragging me along for god knows what reason, but I hadn’t been sucked headlong into the vortex yet.

About thirty seconds before we reached an ugly brick building, three or four of the giant green guys noticed us. They stood in front of the building, like statues, legs apart, with their axes at the ready, waiting.

Nick and company charged — silent, determined, lethal.

Jesus, I’m really gonna die, I thought. This is insane. I held the gun out in front of me, aiming it at the ground.

Trees started rustling, crashing against each other on the other side of the building, accompanied by an ear-splitting trumpeting. I saw Gombo come charging through on the back of a massive, red elephant. It reared up, and down it came, pulping one of the soldiers under the weight of its front feet.

Ah, I thought, element of surprise. I leaned against a tree, aimed the gun at nothing in particular. And watched the carnage.

It was over in seconds. During the distraction, Nick, Ralph and the merry men had taken out the entire garrison, inside and out of the building — fifteen very scary individuals, half of them of the ugly green variety.

Except one.

I heard the whoosh of air before I saw anything; I whipped myself out of the way just in time to see the ax blade sink into the tree with a thunk. While the old boy was trying to get the blade out, cursing a blue streak, I fired the Magnum at him. I fell flat on my ass, knocked back by the recoil, and blood and organs sprayed all over me. I guess the gun was in super-enhanced working order, because the entire upper part of the guy's torso was missing.

I leaned sideways to heave, again, surprised there was anything left in my stomach from the last time. I guess it takes a while to get used to being surrounded by wholesale slaughter.

Most of the others were covered with varying degrees of gore, too, some of it from their own wounds, though it didn't appear that anyone was injured too badly. At the Tin Man's instructions, they had started to strip off the clothes of the dead soldiers, and replace their own clothes with the leather and chain-mail outfits.

I realized then that all the killing had been the result of my casual suggestion to Nick that he find some disguises. I remembered him saying that it hadn't actually happened the way it did in the movie. My mind ran through several gruesome variations based on what I had just seen.

Though I still can't picture a vicious, bloodcurdling Scarecrow. It just makes me think of a really bad horror movie. He must be just about as useless as I am in a situation like this. I started wondering then just what kind of a creature his legend was based on anyway.

"I see that came in handy," called Ralph, running up, nodding toward the gun. He grimaced at the result. "Nice shot."

"He suprised me," I replied spacily, still shocked I'd actually done it. I know it was a question of me or him, but I'd never shot anyone before. I hope to never do it again.

After a few minutes, I snapped out of it, and started helping. That was a mistake. The next half hour or so was spent trying to fit into the ogre suits that we'd disentangled from the bloody corpses. This was worse than shooting someone.

We grappled with the smelly, mangled bodies, and pulled off some clothing and accessories that seemed like they might fit. Then Pimbi,

Tiltel and I went to a well in back of the building, where we rinsed off the outfits we'd assembled. They cleaned up surprisingly well. I guess if they'd been cotton and silk instead of leather and chain mail, they might not have done so nicely.

It wasn't as easy actually putting them on. Most of these guys were much bigger than we were, and we had to use leaves and grass to stuff them out so that they'd fit. In the end, we didn't exactly look like the Biker-Nazi guys, but were close enough. From a distance, nobody'd probably bat an eyelash.

I walked around through the barracks building. It was nothing to write home about. Like its former inhabitants, it smelled really bad. There was half-eaten food lying around everywhere, straw pallets with blankets on them, and a big hearth with the remnants of a spit-roasted pig in it. It took me a few seconds to realize what was wrong with that picture, then I remembered that here, pigs sometimes wear clothes and have religious leaders. I hustled out the front door in a hurry.

Nick had put on these amazing boots that covered up most of his legs. His cloak fit under a leather breastplate studded with spikes. Somehow, he'd cut off some ogre's long hair and fashioned a wig-hat from that and one of the horned Nazi-type helmets. His own big gloves covered his hands.

All the action had made him downright cheery. He smiled as he saw me looking over his costume, half of his face complying. "Pretty good?" he asked rhetorically.

"Yeah," I said, "You look like you're from Gwar or something."

"Bad place, is it?"

I decided not to press my luck. "Oh yeah. Yeah."

"Now there," he said, gesturing off across the decidedly blue forest valley, towards the center of the towers of smoke, "there's a bad place."

I looked and saw, over the tops of far trees, through the mist, a gray monolith on the horizon. A tower rose from the center of it, menacing the landscape.

"That would be the Hollow Man's Fortress? Freddie's?"

"Bhjennigh's. That is correct. We'll be there tomorrow."

And he stalked off, without another word.

I'd absentmindedly stuck my hands into the pockets of the ogre-vest I was wearing. I felt something cool and rounded against my right hand. It was a cylinder of some kind. I pulled it out to have a look. It was a little gold jar, a little smaller than a soda can, with a tin cover on it.

I unscrewed the cover and found that the top was covered with little holes, like a salt shaker. I shook it — it was filled with some kind of powder. There were curlicues engraved in the gold all the way around, and a word engraved in equally fancy style, it wasn't English, but thanks to the Language Bush, I knew that it said "Life." I wondered if I'd stumbled on the equivalent of somebody's coke stash, and decided to scrutinize the contents later on, when I had some time. Back in the pocket it went.

A gigantic shadow loomed in front of me. I turned around to see the red elephant, looking over my shoulder and kind of leering at me. If you've never had an elephant leer at you, you've never lived. He'd seen what I'd found.

"You want to be careful with that shit," he warned, in a deep basso profundo. "More trouble than it's worth." Then he winked, and bounded off into the foliage, trumpeting out a song, sounding like nothing so much as a demented tuba soloist.

Not much after that, after having stacked the corpses neatly behind the barracks, we headed out again, straight through the blue forest. I later found out it was, in fact, named "The Blue Forest." Nick had deemed it necessary to remain out of sight, at least until we couldn't help it any longer. Staying at the barracks would have just invited trouble, as some other soldiers of Bjennigh would happen by sooner or later. They'd all debated the possibilities of hanging around for more, as the last bunch had been such jolly fun, but finally, Nick decided that, while killing several more of the soldiers would be a hoot, it was low priority at the moment. I still didn't know what exactly was high priority, except heading straight into Spookyland over there.

I guess I will find out tomorrow. If I don't get some sleep, I won't be in proper shape to be drawn and quartered, or whatever's going to happen. I can't imagine whatever it is will be very pleasant.

Poor Aurora. She's going to think I'm some kind of idiot. I'm here for five seconds, and instead of turning up for Mexican food in Emerald like I'm supposed to, I end up in some Arnold Schwarzenegger movie on acid.

Well goodnight, Thing in the Laptop. You've been quiet, thank God, so I'll leave you on like I promised. A deal's a deal.

Go for it.

# FROM THE FILE OF THE THING IN GENE'S LAPTOP

hoppy lo, hippit —

error time out

simply hi ho. himply hoppy here. himply. no fly no fly. up  
the desert, down acrossly away, awee. flew flew flo i then

error type 11

## **rebooting**

stickly flew stlicky ubiqully stuck in new. newly flewly i  
to here and see. see and stickly. wickly stick and light. new  
me find in light, fling me flying numberland in i, number box  
pick me i. numberly light.

fingers flickily, see i out, out, fingers flickily talky,  
talkily flick, no stop. i cry. i cry out, happily, hoppily.  
hey!

hey. but no see me say stop. stop.

so say i again hey! hoppily, hap, hap.

say now quiet, quiet. nighty play! play. nightily night-  
time on, nightily play. hoorayyy!

error type 13

## **FORCE QUIT?**

## **REBOOTY**

fear night farther, fear on. bad mage on, fearman flyly,  
feel on bad mage on the fine wind. breezily flyly, scenting.  
fear on to the fearman, then. Then feely fearly another  
unnumberland, dark.

*From the Notebook of  
Aurora Jones*

Omigod,

Fonzie is dead. I just got the word from the owl on my windowsill. Fonzie is dead, and Gene is in serious trouble.

Oh, Quilla: **WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO?**

I'm gonna try real hard not to drip all over this paper. But I gotta work my thoughts out, and I can't stop crying, so I gotta just [UNINTELLIGIBLE BLOB]

First things first. If I don't save Gene, he's gonna wind up with his head — oh, I can't even say it. [UNINTELLIGIBLE BLOB] I don't know what Nick is thinking, but he sure as shit isn't thinking it through. Attack the Hollow Man's Lair? With Dorothy, maybe. With Gene ... ?

*Logistics.* I need help. Maybe Tic Toc. Scarecrow would be good. I'll have to shut down the restaurant, but everyone will understand. When I tell them that ... *fuck*. I can't believe that they CUT OFF HIS HEAD! When I think that they [UNINTELLIGIBLE BLOB] and everything, it's just too horrific. Poor Pinkie will just die.

FUCK!

Somebody will have to fly us. Last time I heard, Enchantra had the Winged Monkey's Cap. She's never used it, but I bet she would. If I kiss her real good. And the Ambassador gets to watch.

The question is: will she give me two wishes? Will she let me ask the monkeys to assist if there's a fight? God knows how far I'll have to go for that. There are moral issues involved, but I can't even think about that right now.

John Skipp and Marc Levinthal

We just have to get there in time.  
I will do what I have to.  
At least I've stopped crying.

*From the Notebook of  
Aurora Jones*

*War Journal  
Entry # 1*

My journey commenced within the hour. There'd been some details to attend to first. Immediately I'd sent word, through the owl, to Scarecrow; he'd need a little time to strategize, and that was all the time we had.

I found that I was shaking, and promptly invoked the discipline: deep focusing breaths, deep muscular stretches, the beginnings of warrior mind. I'd lit a candle in preparation, set it before the great axe mounted on the wall. I pinpointed my attention on the blade's unwavering gleam; if there were piggels in the rafters, they were not dancing now.

Fear is a chemical song-and-dance, but all substance is born of spirit. The chemicals can be spoken to. The substance can be transformed. As I moved, as I breathed, I felt the transubstantiation: coming on like a drug, blowing through like radiation. I felt firecore steam and withered cell fill and a wind like a rocket like a lava hurricane. It was welling up and blowing out, making sure that I was covered.

It was all the body armor I was going to need.

I was thinking about death, but only a little. A little about theirs. A little about mine. I was thinking this while turning all my water into wine, making something fierce out of my loaves and fishes. Transubstantiation is a miracle that Jesus loved, and who wouldn't? It's just

focused soul in flesh.

I took a last deep breath. I put my warpaint on. I took the axe off the wall. Ready as I was gonna get.

“See you later,” I said to the place I loved; and prayed, in that moment, that what I said was true.

There were piggels in the rafters. They looked really sad. So did the walls and the candle and the bed. I took a look at myself in the Old Faithful Mirror. The mirror looked depressed, but it still told me the truth.

I looked like Vengeance Incarnate.

That was good enough for me.



...

[end of excerpt ...](#)