

THE STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE OF DAVID GERROLD

by David Gerrold

Now that we have a message board online, we've stopped flirting with the notion of adding a letter column to the magazine. So when this long letter arrived, it went in the manuscript pile ... which turns out to be something of a fortuitous mistake after all.

Should the map that accompanied the letter ever be needed, it can be found pinned to the board over the editor's desk, between the Danny Shanahan cartoon and the postcard from Harlan Ellison.

* * * *

Dear Gordon,

I apologize in advance, but this is the only way I can think to tell anyone about this. After that last weird experience, trying to convince people that my kid really was a Martian, I've learned that the only safe way to report stuff like this and have people take it seriously is to present it as fiction.

Right, the irony of that doesn't escape me. The only way to get people to believe the truth is first tell them it's a lie. What is it about human beings anyway—that we only believe the opposite of what we're told? (Remember when people used to tell me, "You're not as big a jerk as I heard"? Except most of the time, they didn't use the word *jerk*. Wow, what a terrific acknowledgment. That's why I love people so much. So, okay, thanks. I got the message. That's when I started announcing at the beginning of every speech, "I am not a nice man. Don't expect it of me." And that's when they started coming up to me afterward to whisper, "You are *too* a nice man." See what I mean? People are always looking for the hidden agenda, the conspiracy, the *real* truth.)

Never mind. I digress. That's why there are editors. (Thank you.) But, here's the timeline, follow this:

End of February, right on schedule, I'm finally coming out of my usual post-Christmas depression. Don't ask. Every year the Capitalist Feeding Frenzy gets worse than the year before—or maybe, every year I get ground down a little more. So here I am, with life piled up at the front door in big uncollected piles and I need a shovel just to get out to the car. So I climb out a window, throw some stuff into the back of the camper and start driving north. I figure I'll find some little cabin somewhere, hide out for a few days, and just sit and type and type and type until I was physically and emotionally exhausted. Maybe I'll even write a story. Some people meditate. I type until it flows and then I type until it stops flowing and I know when I'm done, because I'll have a post-orgasmic smile on my face so peaceful it could make Buddha jealous. Kind of like what you see on the face of a really well-carved chocolate bunny. (Pope Dan says "hi," by the way.)

I turn on the music, the player is set for random, and I get Hubert Laws doing jazz variations on traditional Bach pieces; I don't even remember when I ripped the disc, but it's the perfect sonic wallpaper, it doesn't demand your attention until you're ready to listen, and then once you fall into it you don't want to climb out again, which is just fine for the mood I'm in. While I'm waiting for the grunge of Los Angeles to clear itself out of my head, I follow roads I've never been on before. That means getting off the freeway and taking that forgotten little turnoff that curves suggestively away into the hills. Next thing I know, I'm north of Palmdale, passing through places I didn't believe were still possible in California. Look up Green Valley, for instance.

Eventually, the road unwinds itself out onto Route 395, which should be renamed Desolation Boulevard. Almost no traffic, no towns, and nothing on either side except empty flatlands and the southernmost spine of the Sierras. I follow the road until my blood sugar finally crashes. I pull off the highway onto what would have been a dirt road if anybody had actually driven on it recently, crawl into the back of the camper, roll an old blanket around myself and snore until dawn, when a uniformed officer of the California State Highway Patrol bangs on the door and tells me to stop scaring the cow. Singular. Maybe someday this place will be able to afford a second one.

One half-cup of paint thinner sold from a coffee urn and a BLT later, found in a place called Lone Pine, with no pine trees at all, but still big enough to attract a location company from Desperate Pictures Inc., my blood sugar is rising again, and less than an hour after that, I'm wandering through the frightening emptiness of a place called Manzanar. There's a guard tower, maybe a reconstruction, it looks too new, and a museum, and a dirt road that winds around the places where barracks used to be. I don't know why I'm here, or why it's important to be here, but the whole time, I can feel ghosts whispering in my ear. I just can't hear what they're saying. (And if I could, I wouldn't understand it. It's in Japanese.)

I find where the music player has fallen off the dashboard and under the passenger seat and plug it back in and let it play tracks at random, scrambling Coltrane and Copland, Mozart and Morrison, and more than a few surprises—unremembered tracks from Ray Lynch and Deep Forest and the Penguin Caf Orchestra. Then it finds Terry Riley's "In C," and the battery dies somewhere between the fifth and seventh chord change, leaving me hanging unfinished and unresolved.

The timing is perfect.

I arrive at Mono Lake—a place so quiet and remote that you can hear your own blood rushing through your veins. You can hear the blood rushing through the veins of the person standing next to you.

Mono Lake is a casualty of the relentless thirst of that big megalopolis I just fled. Blame William Mulholland, they named a drive after him. The city diverted the water from the tributaries that feed this high altitude sea, shrinking it to less than a fourth of its former size, creating an ecological nightmare, and revealing a shoreline of tortured and alien-looking mineral deposits. The surface of the water is so still, it's a mirror of the distant mountains, deeply purple and capped with glistening snow; the sky is so blue it aches. The mountains to the west are cold and white and glistening, the sun paints the slopes with a blinding glare. Closer, the rocky minarets of the mineral deposits float like airborne castles on the glassy skin of the lake.

There's nothing here. No animals, no birds, nothing swimming in the water. It's beyond desolate. It's terrifying. The grass is dry and dead. Even the occasional bit of dry scrub looks like a desiccated remnant. There are no ghosts here, Gordon. Everywhere else, you can hear them whispering. But not here. You can't even hear your own ghost.

And then, for one strange and paralyzing moment, I realize that I am dead. This is Hell, my eternity. I never even noticed the moment. I never even felt the impact of the cold dirt of the desert on my face when I fell. It will be weeks or months before my body is found.

When I return, when I recover, I am back behind the wheel of the car and a Nevada State Patrolwoman is asking for my vehicle registration. I fumble through the glove box, I scabble into the console—Auto Club maps and service receipts, an instruction book for a now-useless CB radio (nobody's on the air anywhere anymore, either that or my antenna needs tuning), and a variety of coupons from places as distant as Telluride and Texas. Oh—and the recharger cord for the music player, I thought I'd lost it. Eventually she gives up and goes and runs my plates to see if the camper really belongs to me. She gives me a \$491 ticket for not noticing a speed limit sign that isn't there anymore. I have no intention of paying it, I have enough trouble paying for California—so they'll issue a warrant, big deal, I can stay out of Nevada for the rest of my life; what am I going to miss? The most expensive tourist traps in the world. While she writes, I plug in the music player. The noise in my head is finally getting to me. Maybe the music will drown it out.

She finishes, I sign, she goes, and I crawl through Carson like it's a funeral procession. The sun goes down and I climb up a dark mountain road to a glittering nightmare called Tahoe. I coast down a long long slope of darkened forest and eventually crash in the parking lot of a place called Kyburz. Wherever that is. A half-cup of paint thinner and a BLT later (yeah, it's a motif; deal with it), my blood sugar is high enough that I can now recognize how tired I am. I crawl into the back of the camper and this time my snoring is loud enough to scare away bears. Of which, there might actually be some in this neighborhood. Their problem, not mine.

Sometime on the third day—is it the third day already?—I'm still staying off the Interstates—I find myself heading into Red Bluff. How I got here, I'm not even

sure. But the place is actually big enough to have a Taco Bell. I don't know if I should be grateful or depressed, if this is what passes for civilization on this continent.

Okay, so look—obviously, this trip isn't working. Or maybe I've picked the wrong roads. Maybe the places I've landed are simply the very worst possible locations for exorcising a post-holiday malaise. The realization that I am now old enough to legally retire isn't exactly a cheerful thought either. No wonder I can't get work, I'm already dead in the eyes of the producers. That's another rant. The fetuses-in-suits who run the studios. If I can ever find a worthwhile story in that, I'll sit down at the keyboard and open a vein—one of theirs, not mine. But over here, I still feel like I'm eighteen—only with forty-four years experience.

Anyway, maybe what happened after Red Bluff was just another hallucinatory episode, like that business with the Martian kid—that one looked like the onset of senility too, except it wasn't. The kid really can taste the colors of M&Ms.

But maybe this was real too, in a perpendicular kind of way. Maybe, it was some weird confluence of time and place and dessicated state of mind. Maybe I had become so isolated from myself that I could finally see what wasn't actually in front of me.

See, look, it's like this. If I'm wrong, then this is just another crazy story from someone having a bad air day, a story that will be forgotten just as soon as next month's issues hit the stands. But maybe something is happening, and if that's the case, then I have to say it someplace where there's a chance of it getting seen by the right people and where it can't be so easily erased from history by the wrong. You know what I mean. Obviously, I'm not going to list that other stuff here, right?

Okay, so if I had been thinking straight, I'd have hopped onto I-5 and been in Seattle in time for High Tea. But I'd come this far without once having ridden the Interstates and to tell the truth, it was kinda fun seeing places that still had some character and personality left; roadside stands selling strawberries picked fresh that morning, a store with a boardwalk selling live bait, a 120-year old restaurant that still serves from the original recipes, stuff like that. I even found a gas station in a time-warp, where an attendant filled the tank for me and wiped the windshield. Well, it would have been a time-warp, except for the twenty-first century prices. If I'd have stayed on the Eisenhower Memorial Autobahn, I'd have seen the back ends of a lot of eighteen wheelers, and a couple hundred identical off ramps. Over here on the left coast, every off ramp is the same as every other one, the same three gas stations, the same three fast food chains.

But instead, just a couple blocks short of the on ramp, there was an almost unnoticeable intersection, a narrow road on the right that stretched away north, at least I thought it was north, after a while it turned northeast, but it couldn't have looked more inviting than if it had been paved with yellow bricks. It looked like an

escape route. And yes, it was the Taco Bell sign directly ahead that convinced me to turn. When you start thinking Taco Bell is civilization, it's time to rethink the concept.

For the first hour or so, it was just me and Camille Saint-Sans, the third symphony, the one with the runaway organ in the fourth movement—they used it in that movie about the talking pig, but thank dog those are not the pictures I see in my head when I listen to this music. I let the car laze along at a convenient forty or fifty mph, as the road wound its way through the last few ranches close to town, then on into the higher lands, which had an abandoned and desolate quality. There was no other traffic on the road—nothing—no one ahead or behind me, and no oncoming traffic either. I think I saw maybe one other pickup truck on the road, coming the other way; the driver looked at me as he passed, a mean-looking narrow-eyed stare. I began to realize there weren't any signs of life in these lands; no horses or cows or sheep, only a few crows at first, and then even they seemed unwilling to follow this track. Even though the sun was still high in the sky, the day had taken on a colorless cast.

The air was cold and dry. The sky was cloudless. There was no wind. Everything seemed to have stopped except the quiet murmur of my wheels against the asphalt.

Sometime back, the music had faded. I was so lost in myself that I hadn't even heard its absence. The silence had swaddled me, comforting at first, then a smothering blanket. I came through a series of curves, around the sharpest one, and directly ahead I saw a sloping field strewn with red blocky boulders so closely tumbled together, I doubted that any person or animal could have crossed that land. The stones could have been painted with blood. But before I could register even that fact, as the car came into the turn and I noticed the stand of woods beyond the field, I saw the sign.

I don't know if it's true for all people, but I automatically read every written word in front of me, and this was the first sign I'd seen since leaving Red Bluff.

No Trespassing

Private Hunting Club

Members Only

I'd heard about private hunting clubs, I had mixed emotions about hunting anyway, but not because I'd wet the seat in the movie theater when Bambi's mother abruptly became venison; but more because I'd read "The Most Dangerous Game" at a young and impressionable age. I knew there were people who depended on hunting for their winter sustenance, but I doubted this was their domain. No, the very existence of the sign announced that this land was someone's personal pleasure

dome. Sans dome.

These thoughts, and others, tumbled in my head, as I headed up toward the foothills. The well-maintained wire fences on both sides of the road told me I was still driving through a place where stray bullets were a genuine possibility. That I was now seeing enough trees in one place that I could start to use the word forest didn't comfort me. It meant I would be even less likely to see any hunters in time enough to stop. I wasn't sure if I should slow down or speed up, I let the car choose its own speed.

The woods looked barren, mostly gray and dark, with an ominous sense of blood-red brooding, the soil and rocks were uncommonly colored. Anywhere else, the dry grass would have been waist-high and yellow. Here it was washed out and colorless. I've always loved wilderness, but this place felt unpleasant, and I couldn't wait to get past it.

As I came up a long shallow slope, I saw an incongruous flash of color directly ahead—a sparkle of blue and turquoise. At first I thought it was a T-shirt caught on the wire, then maybe a scarecrow or a dummy—I took my foot off the pedal to let the car coast—and then I was standing on the brakes, screeching to a frightening stop. It was a boy, barely a teenager, slender, almost petite. He was caught between the wires of the fence, frantically struggling to free himself. At the sound of the brakes, he raised his face to mine, he was painted in green and blue camouflage to match his skintight costume. He looked like—he had a surreal quality, like an animated painting. For an instant, I wasn't sure what I was seeing. But I could tell he was injured and in pain and frightened—

I got out of the car, leaving the driver-side door hanging open, ran to the back of the camper and grabbed my red backpack—my emergency kit. Everything from Tums to toilet paper. Batteries, Band-Aids, water bottle, wet-wipes, aspirin, gauze, tape, Neosporin ointment, scissors, knife, plastic tableware, poncho, even a soft navy-blue blanket. I talked patiently and quietly to the boy as if he were a frightened animal. “It's all right, I'm a friend. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm here to help you. Don't be afraid. I'll get you free from there. Do you have a name?”

He was making sounds in his throat that weren't words—at least, not words that I could identify. Liquid, hissing sounds. His hair was greenish, which suggested that his natural color was blond, but it was blue and dark beneath the green, so what did I know? His eyes were wide and almost Asian-looking. His skin had a kind of oily sheen, maybe it was the camouflage paint, but the closer I looked the less it looked like paint. Most face-painting isn't that detailed or as exquisite. It couldn't have been a tattoo—tats don't come in colors that clean and bright or with shading that subtle. He looked a little shiny, almost as if he were scaled like a fish; but he also looked as if he had soft downy fur as well; but overall, I had the weird sensation that he was as much a part of the plant world as the animal kingdom. He moved with a slow, silent grace—a bit like a dancer, but a bit like a willow waving in the wind.

I touched his shoulder. It startled me. He wasn't wearing a skin-tight shirt after all. This was his naked skin. He was naked all over, he was blue-green all over. Not blue-green like a corpse, but blue-green like a tropical plant. His feet were small; his toes were elongated and they looked webbed; I didn't have time to examine. He didn't seem to have any genitals, or maybe they were tucked within his genital slit, I couldn't tell; but he was definitely male in appearance and attitude. His bare skin was cool to the touch; not cold, but cool—as if he had spent most of the day naked in this high bright timberland. The air was crisp, but the sun was surprisingly warm; if he had been out in the sun for a while—

It didn't matter. He shivered at my touch, but he didn't draw back. I could see how he was tangled in the barbed-wire fence and how his skin was scratched and cut deeply in several places. On a hunch, I went pawing through the jetsam at the bottom of the backpack. I was in the habit of tossing loose tools into the pack rather than let them rattle around the camper shell, and I had been wiring in some new speakers a few months back, and I hadn't been able to find my wire-cutters anywhere in the house the next time I needed them, so I had been assuming since then that they were probably still in the camper—and yes, finally, my hand closed around the grip and I pulled the cutters free with a soft whispered, “Yes!”

The wire was stiff and thick, and these cutters were way too small for the job. I had to use both hands, and I don't have the strength in my arms and hands that I used to, but there's that strength that comes from adrenaline and fear, and somehow I finally snapped through the top wire and it *spanged* free and away, and then, I don't remember exactly how I did it, but I came up under the boy and lifted him off the wire, ending up with him half over my shoulder, I almost stumbled backward, but I came down on one knee, still holding him, cradling him, talking to him, while he made frightened noises in my arms, trembling and terrified, but too weak to run. I wrapped him in the blue blanket, it was a darker shade of blue and the color seemed to comfort him. He looked at me with sea-green eyes, so wide and questioning, I had the sense of both intimacy and alienness at the same time.

I had a brief moment to study his face. His ears—weren't ears, they were more like flower-cups uncurling, like the way fresh spears of grass unfurl; they pointed upward and gave his face an elfin quality. His nose was sharp and straight, with flaring nostrils, like a wild animal's. His mouth, wide and wild; his lips were dark and thin. For a moment, I had a flash of bright green teeth, maybe a little too sharp. I brushed his light blue-green hair off his darker blue-green forehead, a parental caress, and whispered again to him, “It's all right now, you're safe. You're going to be all right. I promise.”

I don't know if he understood. Maybe he did. Maybe it was my imagination, maybe his trembling eased, maybe it didn't. Maybe he was too tired to fight anymore, and maybe he was relaxed enough in my arms to let me lift him away. Still cradling him, I carried him back to the camper. I laid him out on one of the beds,

then hesitated. This boy was frightened of something sinister—frightened enough to try climbing naked through a barbed-wire fence. Both of the beds could be lifted up, revealing coffin-sized storage bins beneath. I opened the empty one and tucked the boy into it, wrapping him as warmly as possible. His wounds were seeping dark purple blood, but they weren't spurting, and for some reason, I had such a clear and present sense of danger, I knew it was important that we get out of there as quickly as possible. I reassured him again that everything would be all right, then closed the lid as gently as possible.

I grabbed the red backpack where I'd dropped it and scrambled back into the driver's seat, put the pickup in gear and eased the car forward. For a moment, I wanted to stand on the gas pedal, but that was probably a bad idea. Don't do anything suspicious-looking. Keep driving at the same casual speed. Forty to fifty miles per hour. Up through the foothills, up toward the dark stands of evergreens dotting the lower slopes of whatever range this was. Lassen? I'd lost my bearings.

A few minutes later, I came to a turnout—one of those inevitable Vista Point overlooks, where you could stand at the edge of the cliff and take pictures of whatever the locals considered a spectacular view. Sometimes it actually was spectacular, but most of the time it was just a lot of distance. I went to the back of the camper and opened the bed again, the boy was still trembling. His eyes flashed wildly, but he let me sit him up and I gave him a water bottle to suck on—one of those sport bottles that has a grown-up nipple; squeeze the bottle and it gushes into your mouth. The boy didn't know what to make of it until I squirted a little fresh water, then he sucked thirstily. His expression softened, he closed his eyes and let me examine his back and sides and even the scrapes across his belly. His wounds weren't as bad as I had feared, but he was streaked with dirt and mud and purple blood. He looked more green than blue now; maybe because he was warming up.

I opened the backpack and pulled out the gauze and tape and scissors and some wet-wipes. I cleaned his cuts as carefully as I could—that must have hurt, he flinched and whimpered a few times, but he didn't resist—I pressed gauze and tape over the worst, and pressed a few Band-Aids over the rest. But even with the water and the attention and all my fumbling attempts at comfort, I was still certain he needed to see a doctor. Or maybe the police. His back had been peppered with buckshot, down his right side, his right ass-cheek, and his upper thigh.

Only now did it occur to me to wonder what he was. Not who—*what*? The who in this equation was the who he was running from.

Okay, look. I'd heard the stories about the green people of the northern forests. Who hasn't? But I never gave them any credibility. As far as I was concerned, the green people were just another convenient new mythology made up to fill the gap when Sasquatch and the Loch Ness monster and alien crop circles were all revealed as hoaxes. Apparently, the whole thing started when some treasure hunter, searching for D. B. Cooper's fabulous lost loot, came back instead with

blurry cell phone pictures of something that could have been a green man, but just as easily could have been a moss-covered tree stump in a gray rainstorm. Not the most convincing evidence. Thanks a lot, Motorola. How come none of these specimens of cryptozoology ever show up in front of someone who has an eight megapixel Nikon?

And then I had this quick flash of what was going to happen when I—a so-called famous science fiction writer—showed up with a real live green person? It was bad enough when I dared to suggest that my son was a Martian. What was this going to do to my reputation? Well, at least, maybe they'd finally forget the goddamn tribbles. Screw it. This green boy was real and he was hurt and whatever else might be so in the universe, right now, this minute, his pain was intolerable to me.

I wrapped him in the blanket again; this time he didn't seem as frightened when I laid him down in the bin under the bed. I tossed the backpack in with him, down by his feet; there was more than enough room. Then I closed the lid. I thought for a moment, then dumped a bunch of stuff on top of both beds and the floor of the camper shell; dirty laundry, empty soft drink cups, a discarded box of half-eaten KFC, my freshly peeled-off socks from last night. I made it look as if I'd slept in there, unwashed, for a week—which wasn't too far from the truth, although I still had four days to go.

Easing the pickup back onto the road, I rolled north again, still cruising at a comfortably low speed, like a lost tourist enjoying the scenery anyway. The highway, such as it was, began winding upward through a series of switchbacks; the wire fences fell behind, and there were tall trees on either side of the road now, but some darker sense told me that I still hadn't left the domain of danger for myself and my passenger—probably it was the fact that I hadn't seen any turnoffs in miles. There was only one way in or out of this tract of land.

As I drove, both my stomach and my thoughts were in uproar; and yet, at the same time, I had a clarity of vision that startled me—as if I were the writer of my own life, staring down at the screen, my fingers poised above the keyboard, considering what actions my protagonist would choose. In that moment, I think I finally understood the nature of heroism. You don't do heroic stuff because you want to, or because you have to, or even because it's the right thing to do. You do it because you do it—that's all. Because not doing it never even occurs to you.

Without thinking, I turned on the music-player. That would be the normal thing to do. And whatever else, I wanted to look as mundane as possible, just in case of whatever. I don't remember what was playing.

The whatever turned out to be a couple of Hummers parked across the road, almost but not quite blocking the access to what passed for a highway in this wilderness. I came left around a curve, up through a corridor of day-darkening

pinetrees, left around another curve, leading out to a cleared area, and there they were. Three of them stood in my way, and one more sat behind the wheel, talking to someone on the radio. They weren't exactly wearing uniforms, but their clothes suggested some official capacity. Cowboy hats and dark glasses. They moved like combat veterans. And two of them had rifles slung over their shoulders. High-powered rifles. I'm not a gun expert, I couldn't tell you what kind. But they had the kind of telescopic sights you see on sniper rifles in the spy thrillers.

One of them held up his hand, and I rolled to a stop. He came up to the driver side window and leaned down to look at me. His eyes were hidden behind his sunglasses and his face was shaded by his cowboy hat. He had ruddy skin, a little too ruddy perhaps, a bristly salt-and-pepper mustache, and he stank of sweat and cigar smoke. I was already fumbling for my driver's license, but he made no move to ask for it.

"You want to turn that off. That music."

One button, one touch. The speakers fell silent.

"Turn off your engine too."

I did so. The day was suddenly incredibly quiet.

"You're not from around here." It wasn't a question.

I decided to play stupid. Very stupid. I have a natural talent for that. I said, "I'm just driving north—working my way toward Seattle."

"Whyn't you take the Interstate?"

"This old bucket? It's not safe. It only goes fifty downhill with a tailwind." That wasn't exactly true. Under the hood, the pickup was in excellent running condition, but keeping it dented and decrepit on the outside was a good way to be invisible to a lot of people.

I decided to push the issue. "Did I do something wrong, officer?"

He ignored both the question and the assumption. "You seen anything strange or unusual back there?"

I shook my head. "No one. No hitchhikers, nothing. Not even a deer. No, wait. I did see one deer, I think. Sniffing the fence. About two miles back." The deer wasn't a lie. "What should I have seen?"

He ignored this question too. "Can you open the back for me?" He stepped out of the way so I could open the car door. As I climbed down, I noticed that the

two of them with rifles had casually walked back and positioned themselves to cover me ... and the back of the truck. One of them had already unslung his weapon, but he wasn't pointing it at anything yet. Even so—this was a genuine “oh, shit!” moment. Even worse than the guy who might or might not have had a gun in his jacket pocket when he demanded my wallet in a rickety rickety rocketing New York City subway car—not the last night I ever stayed out past two in that city, but the last time I took the subway at that hour. After that, it was cabs. Even if I couldn't afford it.

I opened the back of the camper, and started to climb in—I made as if I was going to sit on the opposite bed, but his hand on my arm pulled me back. The stink of his sweat was overpowering, so I took a big step back.

He stuck his head into the camper shell, peered around, shook his head at the mess, gave me a glance that was both dispassionate and disparaging at the same time. He climbed in and lifted the cover on the right bunk. Underneath the thin mattress, the wooden frame was divided into three horizontal drawers. He pulled one of them open, I didn't remember what I'd tossed in there, I didn't even remember the last time I'd opened one of those drawers—and then I flushed with embarrassment. My buddy Miles is the accountant for an adult film company. We'd driven to Vegas in January. I went to the CES, he went to the Adult Entertainment Expo, whatever it was called. He came back with a box of flyers and magazines and sample discs. He'd paged through it, then handed it to me, I dumped it in the drawer with a mental note to throw it out someplace where I wouldn't be publicly embarrassed, and then I'd forgotten it. Oops.

I was now known in this guy's eyes as the embarrassed owner of *Sluts and Slobs*, *Granny Takes a Tinkle*, and *Gay Boys in Bondage*. “You some kinda faggot?” he asked.

“Um, not recently, I don't think—” I couldn't believe what was falling out of my mouth. Celibacy by popular demand is not exactly something you brag about.

And then my cell phone rang.

I answered it.

It was the kid. “Hello, Daddy!” Other people might think it bizarre that a twenty-two-year-old young man would still call me “Daddy,” but that was his way of being playful.

“Hi, sweetheart!” I responded.

“Where are you?”

“Um, I'm not sure. I'd have to look at the map. I think I'm in Lassen National

Forest. Or close to it, maybe. Somewhere north of Red Bluff, I think. I can't talk now. I'm with a couple of rangers or highway patrolmen or—something.”

“Are you getting a ticket—?”

“Nah. We're just talking about stuff, nothing important. I think I took a wrong turn. They're giving me directions now. Listen, I'll call you back in a little while, okay?” I turned to the men and gave them a weak smile. That might have saved my life. Not the smile, the conversation.

The man who stank of cigars and sweat said, “That your boy friend?” He didn't wait for my answer, he turned to his partners. “I think we got us a sissy here.” I stood paralyzed. If he'd said something like, “He sure got a purty mouth,” I probably would have fainted in fear. But instead, he simply dismissed me. “Let him go. He ain't nothin'—nothin' at all.”

With obvious disdain, he threw the magazines back into the camper, as if I was something dirty and he was obviously sorry he'd gotten this close. “What's in Seattle?” he asked. “The AIDS clinic?”

“Um—” I didn't answer. Yes, no, whatever. Anything I might say would be dangerous. I just stood there dumbly. Like I said, I'm pretty good at playing stupid.

“Right. Okay, here's what you're going to do. You're going to get back into your piece-of-shit pickup, you're going to get onto that highway up there, you're going to turn left, and you're going to get your ass out of here. And you are never going to drive on this road again, right? Nod your head. This isn't television.”

I nodded my head. I closed the camper door. I got back behind the steering wheel. He pushed my door shut with deliberate force. I fumbled my seat belt on, felt it click. I started my engine. I put the pickup in gear. The fellow in the second Hummer eased it backward to give me more than enough room to pass. I guess he didn't want sissy-cooties on his shiny black war machine. I rolled cautiously forward, up onto the highway, and turned left toward the west. It wasn't the direction I wanted to go, but it was the direction I was going to go.

Now I was on a highway that had turnouts and turnoffs again, even the occasional road sign. It was ten miles before my heartbeat returned to normal and maybe another ten miles before I started to feel that maybe it might be safe to find a place to pull over and check on my passenger. Finally, I pulled up in front of an abandoned something—maybe it had been a gas station or a bait shop or a place that sold beef jerky; today it was just an old wooden shell of brown boards turning black.

I went to the back of the camper. The door was swinging open. I lifted the lid of the left bunk. The boy was gone. The blanket was still there, and so were some of

the purple-bloodstained bandages. And a half-finished bottle of water. He must have jumped out somewhere. I hadn't felt a thing up front. Aww, jeez. That poor kid.

Or maybe not. Maybe he was safer in the wilderness than anywhere else. His wounds hadn't looked life-threatening, just really uncomfortable. But if I'd brought him to the attention of the public authorities, he probably would never have had a chance to get back home, wherever that was. This way, at least he was free again. Maybe. Probably.

I closed the bunk and sat down on the opposite one and just shook for a while. Then I opened a plastic trash bag and cleaned up the mess in the back of the camper as well as I could. Picked up the used food containers, picked up the dirty laundry, folded what needed to be folded, stacked what could be stacked, even emptied the drawers of their pornographic cargo, the various motel and gas station receipts, everything that had my name and address on it. I'd find a safe anonymous place to dump this trash, some Dumpster™ (Yes, really—™!) behind the Wal-Mart or something like that. I popped open another plastic bag and gathered up all the evidence of the green boy; the bloodstained blanket, the bandages, the water bottle. Maybe there was some DNA or something I could use to prove what had happened. Or maybe I should just throw that stuff away too and be completely done with it. Except, I hate mysteries. I hate not knowing.

I'm not going to say where I ended up. Maybe it was Seattle. But it could just as easily have been Medford or Portland or Tacoma or Bellingham or Vancouver. Or someplace else I haven't mentioned. I'm only going to say that it was after dark when I finally pulled up in front of Dennis and Jay's house. (Not their real names.) They told me afterward that they'd never seen me in such a disheveled and discombobulated condition. Fortunately, Jay has the fabled recipe for cancer-curing chicken soup, and Dennis is an active practitioner of the Sturgeon school of Buddhism, he listens without judgment, so by the end of the next day, they had a pretty good idea of the landscape of mental states I'd driven through, and if not the actual facts of the incidents that had occurred, at least a fairly accurate account of the discoordinated way I'd experienced them.

Okay, I have to gloss over some stuff now. I know this is bad storytelling, but this isn't exactly a story, and I have to protect the other people involved. I don't know if Dennis and Jay believed me about the green boy, but they knew people who knew people who might believe. Dennis got on the phone and after a while, some other people came over and looked at the bloodstained blanket and bandages, and that was enough to get them curious, if not convinced, so we talked for a while; they told me that sightings of the green people weren't uncommon in the northwest. Like I said, it's part of the local mythology. But just the same, there aren't a lot of people who take it serious enough to actually go looking for the greenies. But could they take one of the bloodstained Band-Aids over to the university anyway? I said yes and then, what with one thing and another, a couple of days later, I was taken to meet some more people, maybe scientists, maybe just ex-hippies, I wasn't sure,

nobody was saying a lot—but after a couple days more, this is what was decided. Four of us are going back to that private hunting reserve. One brooding driver, two of them, and me. I don't know why I said yes, or maybe I do. Maybe it's because I just have to know for sure.

We're going to outfit ourselves for a week of backpacking, we're going to rent a car and drive south for a day, I'm pretty sure I can find that road again, we're going to drive down to that field with the rocky red boulders and we're going to stop the car. Three of us are going to get out. We're going to cut our way into the fence and we're going to start hiking north toward the place where the stream forks. We're taking three digital cameras and an HDTV camcorder, one of the new small Sony ones. We'll have a GPS and a radio-transceiver and a U.S. Geological Survey map. We'll have enough food and water for five days. We'll have a prearranged pickup point at the top end of the territory. Our driver will meet us there. We'll be wearing mountain-camo and we'll stay as invisible as possible.

If there are green people in those woods, we'll find them and we'll photograph them. If there are hunters there, we'll photograph them too.

Yes, what we are doing is risky and dangerous. Maybe I'm leaping to conclusions—but what do writers do? We practice every day for the Olympic Conclusion Jump. We connect dots everywhere—even the dots on the neighbor's Dalmatian. We create paranoid fantasies. We plot revenge. We imagine villains. We create plots of all kinds. And the only difference between a writer and a real psychotic is that the psychotic doesn't get paid for his madness.

So, yeah, why should anyone be surprised when the madness occasionally bleeds over into a writer's daily life. It's supposed to be contagious. All writing is an attempt to infect the reader with the author's delusions. Maybe this and maybe that and maybe not, who knows?

Maybe the kind of person who stinks of sweat and cigars and presumes the authority to stop other people's cars and burrow through their belongings and judge them by what he finds is also the kind of person who hunts down green children in the woods. Maybe he and his companions are even the kind of people who would execute anyone who finds out the truth. Maybe there are secrets there. And maybe there aren't. There's only one way to be sure. And maybe I really do have a smidgen of courage after all.

So, that's the point, Gordon. If there's nothing there, then this is just another paranoid fantasy, and you can pay me for it and publish it at your convenience, and then later on, we'll all have a good laugh at my expense at the next banquet or convention. People can talk about how David's writing is a good substitute for institutionalization; it's work-therapy from the outpatient clinic and thank goodness he's found a productive outlet to sublimate his wilder fantasies. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

But on the other hand, if I'm not at the banquet, and if you haven't heard from me in a while, and if I'm not answering my e-mail or picking up my phone, and if nobody knows where I am—well, I've enclosed a map with this manuscript. Tell the people searching for my body to start at the red X and hike north toward the place where the stream forks.

(signed) Your Pal,

David Gerrold