

## The Equally Strange Reappearance of David Gerrold

by David Gerrold

*When last we heard from Mr. Gerrold (as printed in the Jan. 2007 issue), Mr. G. was very vague about his whereabouts, perhaps with good reason. Many people were concerned, especially those of us who were hoping to get passes to the premiere of the film adaptation of The Martian Child. Fortunately, our worries have been allayed by this missive:*

\* \* \* \*

Dear Gordon,

I got home late last night to find a stack of frantic e-mails from you and a dozen other people. When I finally recharged my cell phone, there were thirty voice messages and at least that number of text messages.

I'm very, very sorry, Gordon. I apologize profusely for worrying you and everybody else. I don't know how I'll ever make amends, but I'll do my best. The only thing I can think to say is that I must have been in a very weird state of mind when I wrote that ... well, whatever it was I wrote. Maybe I should excuse it by saying that when I wrote it I was off my meds, except I'm not on any meds. Well, maybe I should be. Something like Lithium or Prozac or one of those mood-altering substances that would let me walk around with a glassy detached expression of unfocused contentment. Whatever.

So here's what happened.

Nothing.

We went out searching for the legendary green people of the northwest and we found nothing at all. Well, not quite nothing. But mostly nothing.

I told you about my friends Dennis and Jay (not their real names) who put me in touch with some other people, who finally put me in touch with some people willing to go back and take a look at the area with me. Professional greenie-chasers, I guess you could call them. Like those folks who go out looking for Sasquatch and D. B. Cooper's lost loot. So, that's how I found myself headed back south in a rented van with three guys I'd just met, and about whom I was already having my usual paranoid doubts. The driver barely said a word the whole trip, he had a beard, and he wore sunglasses and a knit beanie, and one of those silly utility kilts you see grown men with beards wearing at sf conventions, so the only thing I can really say about him is that he had exceptionally unattractive hairy legs. Other than that, underneath all that, he could have been anyone, even the legendary Emmett Grogan. The other two—well, that's another short novel.

I'll call them Bert and Ernie, not their real names—but still a pretty good indicator of their personalities. Bert is large and bear-shaped, and almost as hairy. (I guess nobody in the northwest does "manscaping." That must be a Bravo channel

phenomenon.) He's fueled mostly by beer and he's appropriately keg-shaped; at first glance you might think this guy is all fat—I made that mistake, but there's a lot of muscle under that bulk. He's also very hirsute (I've always wanted to use that word in a story). His long hair is starting to show gray, and it's parted in the middle; not a good look for him, but I doubt he cares. His beard reaches mid-chest; it's also going gray. In personality, he has an H. L. Mencken sensibility, but without the anti-Semitism. He's an equal opportunity cynic; not bitter, just skeptical of everything, even with proof. Why he believes in the green people of the northwest enough to go on a snipe hunt like this remains an unanswered question, but his determination kept us going for the full five days.

Ernie, on the other hand, is tall and lanky. He didn't look like he had enough meat on his bones to be a decent meal for the buzzards that might end up picking at our corpses; but he remained indefatigable and he carried a backpack nearly half his weight, filled with some of the most remarkable surprises. Ernie is also a wealth of astonishingly esoteric facts, the end result of all those days spent surfing the web. Ask him about porn sometime. He has the evidence to prove that several of those anatomical impossibilities we speculated upon in adolescence aren't really impossible after all. He gave me the URLs where I can see the actual photographs. (I'll send those later in a separate e-mail, after I check them out myself. The one about the ladies with multiple breasts sounds promising. My guess is that it's all done with Photoshop, but who knows anymore?)

Bert and Ernie are a very odd pair. Where Bert is skeptical, Ernie is enthusiastic—overabundantly so; often to the point where if I were a less patient man, I might have been tempted to inflict bodily harm on him. Nobody is that happy all the time. You want to talk about chemical imbalances...? Start with Ernie. On the other hand, I have to admit, I wish I could bring that kind of unfailing, unflappable enthusiasm to life.

Ernie is also an incorrigible punster. I tried not to incorrigible him, but he's a self-starter; more evidence that the shortest distance between two puns is a straight line. Obviously, at some point, he'd been seduced by the dork side of the farce. And in case I hadn't mentioned, Ernie is as black as the space of Hades. And that should give you some idea of what Bert and I had to put up with for the better part of a week. (Someday soon I'm going to lock Ernie into a room with Spider Robinson and Esther Friesner and see which one of them survives. That is, if the universe doesn't implode first. Not with a bang, but a whimper of whipped gods.)

We drove down through Oregon, down into California, to that place I told you about near the Lassen National Forest. I won't be more specific about the location, although it doesn't really matter anymore. You'll see why shortly. We drove the better part of the day and finally arrived in mid-afternoon. Coming in from the north, we didn't see any signs identifying this area as a private hunting club, but I recognized the barbed wire fences; there was nothing like them anywhere else in the area. Driving slowly south, we also found the place where I'd cut the green boy

loose from the barbed wire. The broken wire was still hanging loose. I didn't know if that was a good sign or bad.

Then we drove on until we reached the field of red boulders at the bottom end of the private hunting preserve. Our driver let us off—it took less than thirty seconds for us to pull our gear out after us—and then he sped off in the van. Without much talk, we cut our way through the barbed wire. Remember, I told you about the sign that said it was a Private Hunting Preserve? Well, the sign was gone now, but the place where it had been was our starting point. It had been posted high on one of the trees, and there was still a faded spot on the bark. So we made that our southern landmark.

We cut our way into the field just where the trees began and vanished into them as quickly as we could. The ground was rocky, but not impassable, and we had to watch our step carefully. I hadn't yet broken in my new hiking boots, but I was wearing three pairs of thick socks and had blister pads taped to my heels, so I wasn't in too much pain.

That first afternoon, we didn't see much—a single jackrabbit, no deer, no bears. And that probably saved Ernie's life, because there are a lot of things you can do with words like deer and bear, most of which he didn't have the chance to. Although he did come close to a near-death experience when he started talking about rabbit transit and rabbit Baptists and finished off by singing, "You're getting to be a rabbit with me." And he hadn't even gotten to the inevitable "hare raid" and "hare apparent" remarks. But it wasn't the puns as much as it was his loud gravelly voice. We really didn't want to attract any attention—or scare anything off either. Finally, I turned to him, walked right up to his face, and whispered intensely, "*Be vewwwy vewwwy quiet.*" I was wearing my ugly face when I did that, the one I use when talking to lawyers, so that seemed to calm him down. For a while.

That first night, the temperature dropped to near-freezing, or maybe below freezing; hard to tell when you're shivering too hard to read the thermometer. We found a hollow, a place where a meter-high shelf aspired toward cliffdom, and parked ourselves under it, out of the wind. We set up our tent in the triangular space under a fallen log, and stretched the camouflage netting over everything. From half a mile away, we were probably invisible. We didn't want to risk a fire, so we ate something called an MRE for dinner. It stands for Meals-Ready-to-Eat. I'm told that soldiers out in the field eat these things. If that's true, then I honestly don't think we pay our soldiers enough. On the other hand, an MRE is a good test of a person's courage. If he can face one of these, he can face anything.

After that, we talked for a while, studied our U.S. Geological Survey maps, and speculated about how the green people of the northwest could survive near-freezing temperatures while they ran around naked.

Bert didn't talk much about his past, but I got the sense he'd been around. He'd worked his way through college playing a giant mouse at *that* park in Southern

California. During his breaks, he read Kerouac and Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti—they fired him for reading Ferlinghetti; he enlisted and went to Nam, where he'd done things that hadn't happened and nobody knew about. Eventually, he chewed off a leg to escape, changed his name and appearance so they couldn't track him down—he didn't say who *they* were, because everybody already knows who *they* are—came back and smoked Panama Red at the Hog Farm with Wavy Gravy. (At the end of the dirt road leading to the Hog Farm, the sign declares, “No left turn unstoned.” Ernie did twenty minutes of variations on that one. Don't ask.) Later, Bert dropped acid with Timothy Leary, and studied the Yaqui Way of Knowledge with Don Juan. He'd been vegan before it had a name, done iridology, numerology, systemology, fasting, body-cleansing, and self-analysis with the Enneagram. He could also read Tarot cards, plot your natal chart, compute your biorhythms in his head, and read your aura. He used his insights into systemic patterns to become one of the hottest day-traders on Wall Street. On the day that someone called him a gecko, he had an acid flashback, bought a hog, and rode directly to the left coast, without passing go.

He was a male model in West Hollywood, with a semi-starring role in the gay-for-pay “Bare Country” video. After that he did “escort” work for a few months, both men and women. He'd chanted at the temple with the Gohonzon Buddhists and on the streets of Hollywood Boulevard with the Hare Krishnas. He'd been deconstructed, he'd been rebirthed, he'd floated in sensory deprivation tanks and listened to hallucinatory committees, he'd been born again. He went to the Synanon games; then he graduated to Esalen and Findhorn. He studied Transactional Analysis, flirted with Scientology, spent three months in a Moonie retreat, done *est* and Lifespring and the Landmark Forum. He became a junior trainer and an enrollment captain, and socked away a lot of money in a very short time. He took a sabbatical, flew sailplanes with Richard Bach, and rebuilt a classic Indian motorcycle with Robert L. Pirsig. Instead of coming back, he took a tramp steamer to the east coast of Africa, worked his way north into India, and snuck into Tibet to study with the lamas in the shadow of the Himalayas. Then he snuck out again. He went to the secret islands off the coast of Sri Lanka where potheaded tourists smoked their brains out all day and fucked little brown midgets pretending to be children all night. After that, he spent six months doing penance, not speaking a word, sweeping floors at the Buddhist monastery on Lantau Island (east of Hong Kong), in the shadow of the giant statue of Buddha, 256 steps up the mountain.

He went to Alaska and lumberjacked his way down the coast, drove trucks across Canadian ice roads to places that still don't have names, then he studied a little bit of engineering, dabbled in photography, taught himself programming, wrote a key piece of a “gooey” operating system at a place he called Xerox Park, bought a Corvette, slept his way up and down the left coast, and somewhere in all that, he even invested in Apple and Microsoft when nobody knew what either of those companies might eventually become—what he made on those investments almost made up for what he lost on Commodore and WordStar. He said he'd worked on three presidential campaigns. Bobby Kennedy, John Anderson, and Ross Perot.

Later, he charted his passages through life and went drumming with Iron John. After that, he sailed with Greenpeace and while he wouldn't go into the details, he implied he'd had something to do with that Japanese whaler that sank mysteriously off the coast of Alaska. While he was recovering from his injuries, he read slush for two of the major sf magazines, he didn't say which ones; he said there was a lot of money to be made in sf publishing[1], if you knew the right people. But that was before the Internet.

[Footnote 1: Stop laughing, Gordon! That's what he said. —DG]

Oh yeah, and here's the part I found hard to believe. He said that he'd once had dinner at Heinlein's house—the round one in Bonny Doon. Then he hopped on his hog and drove south all night to be an extra in the first *Star Trek* movie that was filming its big crew scene the next day. Yes, he really was in the movie. I checked it out later, he's standing right behind the director's wife—a lot thinner, no beard, short hair, but that's him. But the part about him having dinner with the Heinleins—no. I couldn't imagine Ginny Heinlein ever letting this man over her threshold. It's not true that she met unwelcome guests with a shotgun, but I never doubted that she could have if she'd wanted to.

He didn't say all that in one long speech, I've just compiled the parts that I remember from the whole five days. And I might have mixed up the order, he wasn't specific. Most of his conversations had a disjointed quality, as if he was running multiple tracks of thought at the same time. He once started to tell me that he might have the adult form of ADHD[2], but he got distracted before he finished. But he was very clear about it. He knew everything there was to know about everything he knew—and that included the green people we were looking for.

[Footnote 2: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder]

Apparently, sightings of green people had been recorded here in the northwest as early as the late 1800s, but in those days, they were thought to be Indian spirits. Some of the immigrants from the old world called them druids or nymphs or sprites. They also showed up as elves and occasionally leprechauns. But by the thirties, they were simply called the people of the forest. Sometime in the early fifties, or the late fifties, or the early sixties, hard to say, Bert wasn't clear, about the time the beats and the bohemians and the hippies started filtering north, that's when the idea began that the green people were something else, like a lost tribe, or a commune, or something. But it was mostly speculation.

Then, during the summer of love, there was a story floating around—this was something Bert could speak of authoritatively, he'd heard it while he was at Findhorn—that some people were actually turning green and becoming part of the northwestern forests, but he'd heard it from a friend of a friend of a friend, and he'd assumed the tale was probably apocryphal, at least until he heard it from a zoned-out hippie in the Haight that no, it wasn't something the Cockettes were doing for a show, it was actually happening, there was some really powerful new dope,

Something Green—no, that was the name of it, Something Green—and that if you smoked enough of it, or ate it in brownies, or something like that, maybe you had to shoot it, he was pretty zoned out, you could really turn green, he knew it was true because his girlfriend, or maybe she was his boyfriend, it was getting harder to tell, had turned green and was living in Golden Gate Park now, soaking up rays—

And while Bert still didn't believe it then, it was supposed to be good luck to see a green person—or fuck a green person. It depended on who was telling the story. And apparently, if you had sex with a green person, you could turn green too. And it was supposed to be the greatest high of all time. It was starting to sound like a body-snatcher thing, and that's why when they remade the movie, they set it in San Francisco, except that this was supposed to be a good thing. An organic thing.

There was more. But if you tried to fit all the different pieces together, you couldn't. Most of it sounded pretty bizarre anyway; you had to wonder if there might be some kind of Jungian archetype at work, maybe the collective subconscious of the left coast was creating a new mythology because the people caught up in it had some weird psychological need to believe in *benign otherness*. Or, if that didn't sit right, you could always invest in the inevitable conspiracy theory—that some secret agency that didn't have a name was infecting leftist troublemakers with a chlorophyll virus that mutated them into plants.

But underneath the stories, there was a consistent thread, and as near as I could translate it into English from Bert's semi-coherent chronology, the whole thing had started when somebody, some mad scientist somewhere, had hypothesized that the way out of the Malthusian bear-trap was to give humans the ability to photosynthesize sugars the way plants do. That way, we could stand out in the sunlight, and instead of getting a tan, we'd generate chlorophyllins, and we'd turn green instead of brown; and all those little green chloroplasts, or whatever they were called, would happily turn sunlight into blood-sugar. The green people were the survivors or the descendants or the escaped lab rats of these experiments. Other versions of the tale had the chlorophyll virus coming from secret biological warfare laboratories; sometimes the associated name was Mengele, sometimes it was Jonas Salk. A lot of misinformation had attached to the story, like conversational barnacles. The green mythos was a colossal game of Russian telephone, and if there had ever been a nugget of truth in the telling, it was long since buried under an avalanche of paranoid bullshit.

Oh yeah, one more thing. The Green Party. You know, the political movement called The Green Party? Supposedly, at their core, at the innermost secret center of the whole global network, you'll find a holy nexus of green people functioning as the spiritual leaders, speaking transcendent sunlit truths to those who function as the visible public leaders of the movement. Those who are in on the secret dedicate their entire lives to the movement because they aspire to earn the right to ascend into green godhood. There are private conclaves in secret glades, that kind of thing.

That was Bert. And that's most of what he said in five days. But he was

dependable and he was thorough in a brusque, military way. His motivations and opinions might be scattered all over the landscape, but he produced results.

Ernie, on the other hand, was here for the adventure. He didn't really believe in the green people, but maybe he did. Because if they really existed, wouldn't it be cool to turn green and just live in total cosmic harmony with all the other plants in the forest, stretching your leaves up to the sun and soaking in the life-giving warmth and—

Yeah, Ernie just wanted to *be* green. Maybe he thought it would be easier than being black. I dunno. Oh, I should also mention that Ernie had a doctorate in biology, believe it or don't. He'd worked on the genome project and now he was a seed-gatherer for the Genetic Bank—you know, the one that the Benford Foundation set up to preserve the world's genetic diversity. It was a perfect job for him, because he could take off into the hills almost any time he felt like it and someone else would pay for the trip. As long as he brought back seeds.

And me? I'm just this fading science fiction writer wondering where his next Hugo is coming from. (And no, I'm not going to adopt another child just to win another award. One was enough, thanks. It was good advice when Connie Willis first suggested it to me in 1991, but not now. In gratitude, I'm organizing a write-in campaign to elect her the next president of the Science Fiction Writers of America.)

But I knew why I was here. If I could prove to myself that I hadn't hallucinated the whole thing, I'd be happy. I don't mind going senile, I just want to *know* that I'm going senile.

We didn't do a lot of talking that first evening. We were too tired. And cold. So as soon as we could, we settled in for the night. Except for the exquisitely well-placed rocks, the ground was almost soft enough to be comfortable. I slept between Bert and Ernie. Ernie farts and Bert snores, but I was warm, so I didn't complain—although I did wake up with a splitting headache and still exhausted. Who ever said camping was fun? I've had fun, this wasn't it. This wasn't even on the same page as fun. Instead of breakfast, we had energy drinks and granola bars. I will never insult an Egg McMuffin again.

We spent the first three or four hours walking some warmth back into our bones. Mine made noises like tap-dancing pixies every time I moved. The ground was less rocky up here, but it was still uphill, and the elevation was enough that I spent most of the day either moving slowly or simply trying to catch my breath. Bert and Ernie didn't say anything, but we all knew they could have made a lot better time without me.

At some point in the morning, while staring up at the pines—everything smelled of pine, real pine, not the kind of smell you get from those little cardboard trees that hang from the rearview mirror—at some point, I realized I didn't really have to be here. Once I'd shown them where I cut through the wire, I was done. I

could have stayed in the van and driven down to Red Bluff with Emmett Grogan. I think that was when I began having that inevitable internal conversation about commitment, obsession, and damned foolishness. In the cold clear light of morning my head felt cold, clear, and light. And the whole business of little naked boys, green or otherwise, being hunted by guys in cowboy hats and sunglasses, guys who smelled of cigars and sweat, suddenly started to feel ... well, stupid.

And then I started thinking how stupid Bert and Ernie must be to come out here just because I'd said I'd seen a green person—well, that and a bloodstained blanket and a couple of bloody bandages. Either I was awfully convincing, and yeah, I can be awfully convincing, or they were awfully gullible—or worse, they were true believers. And true believers are the worst kind. They're the ones to whom facts are disposable.

Sometime around two or three in the afternoon, we reached the place where the stream forked. We'd come up between the two legs and now stood on the banks of a pond roughly the size of a football field. The water rippled peacefully under the crisp afternoon breeze. A low concrete berm defined the lower part of the pond. The larger of the two streams poured over a sloping dam; a break in the berm fed the smaller. We refilled our canteens here; the water was bitterly cold. It had probably been lying white on the ground somewhere in the highlands for a few months, until it decided to move down here.

We found a small footbridge over the larger stream; on the other side was a hint of a trail. Not a lot of traffic came through here, but enough to have packed the soil. It could have just as easily been an animal highway as a human one, probably the deer and the bears came down to the pond to drink; but the pond was artificial and that had to mean something. If plants need water, then that means green people need it too, right? "Do green people drink water?" Ernie asked. "Or do they just suck moisture from the ground with their toes? Like osmosis?" (Which led him inevitably into a riddle. "The answer is osmosis, what's the question?" "Who led the children of Israel out of Oz?")

I offered my not-so-humble opinion that green people do drink water in its liquid form. I pointed out that I had given the injured green boy a water bottle and once he had figured out how it worked, he had sucked at it thirstily. So obviously, green people do have working mouths. And they're smart enough not to use them for terrible puns.

After a bit of wrangling, we decided to follow the path north—in absolute silence, and with frequent stops to listen for oncoming traffic. Periodically, we'd step off the trail and listen quietly. Where we could, we used our binoculars, or the telephoto lenses on our cameras to examine distant slopes. But so far, we'd seen nothing out of the ordinary, and if we encountered anyone, we would have been just what we pretended to be—three stupid hikers, lost because we were following our trail map upside down.

The trail wandered away from the stream that fed the pond, and then occasionally wandered back toward it. Higher up, the path began to look more purposeful, but we still saw no evidence that anyone had passed this way recently.

Our second night, we found what looked like it might have been a hunter's blind. It was a wooden deck, raised half a meter off the ground and surrounded by foliage. It overlooked a wide meadow; the stream had widened here and a small shallow pond had formed. Another convenient watering hole. Probably a seasonal phenomenon. By the end of summer, it would be a dusty patch of hardened earth marked by the impatient scrapings of deer hooves.

Inside the blind, we had what would have passed for comfort, if any of us actually remembered what comfort was. My feet were cold, my legs were cold, my knees were cold and noisy; and my bladder hurt, even though I'd been trying to pee all day—or maybe *because* I'd been trying to pee all day. My nose was running, my head still ached, and despite all the menthol drops I'd been sucking on, I had a terrible cough and my throat was starting to hurt. Bert boiled some water and shredded some tree bark into it and gave it to me to drink. God knows what it was, but it wasn't tea. For some reason, Ernie started to construct an elaborate pun about finding a bar soon for his deep throat, but Bert reached over and stuck a fork through his trachea and that kept him occupied for a while, at least until the bleeding stopped. To my dying day, I promise, I will not want to know the rest. And if somehow someone accidentally inflicts it on me anyway, I promise I will not pass it on.

Once again, I slept between the two of them—I was beginning to figure it out, they weren't doing me any favors; they didn't like each other all that much and neither of them wanted to be next to the other. I tossed and turned for a while, then drifted into a truly horrible dream where one of my readers was following me around, taking care of my every little need, and giving me adoring puppy-dog looks. It was hideous. I woke up shaking—and grateful that so far in my career I have managed to avoid real fame. (And no, *Star Trek* doesn't count. That's borrowed glory, not something I created myself.)

In the morning, I was feeling marginally better. Marginally is a euphemism for “not at all.” But at least I knew I was alive, because I was experiencing pain. Trust me, Descartes had it wrong. What he meant to say was, “I hurt, therefore I am.”

So we sat for a while and watched the meadow. I think a large part of that decision was that inside the blind it was still warm from our combined body heat. Outside, it would be cold and the cold would start biting our noses and ears very quickly. We sat quietly, sipping cold energy drinks and gnawing at cold-hardened granola bars, and pondered the biology of green people. This is when I found out that Ernie had a doctorate in ecological biosystems.

See, a human being running around naked in the high forests would die of exposure, three days max, probably a lot sooner. Depends on the weather. That's

because humans are mammals, warm-blooded, and our bodies maintain a stable body temperature by something called homeostasis, and we have to burn lots of food to maintain our 98.6. Cold-blooded creatures, on the other hand, they get warmer or colder with their surroundings. That's why crocodiles have to lie out in the sun every morning, to warm themselves up enough to move. But the green people, if they've turned part plant, then obviously they're not completely mammalian anymore. Something about the chloroplasts (or whatever it is they've got) is either supplying enough energy to maintain homeostasis—not really likely, plants have a much slower metabolic rate than animals—or it's turning these people into some kind of cold-blooded creatures.

Ernie explained (I'm leaving out the puns, you're welcome) that the problem with cold weather is that when temperatures drop to freezing, the water in plant cells turns to ice. The ice fractures the cell structures. When the ice melts, the result is mush. Have you ever tried celery that's been frozen and thawed? No? Try it. While some plants actually depend on frost to help strip off last year's dead outer layers, most of the smaller plants beat winter by dying and leaving their seeds or roots or bulbs safe in the (relative) warmth of the earth. Trees, of course, well—they're trees. They shed their dead leaves and wait patiently for the snow to melt and water their roots. But that wouldn't work for greenies. Being mobile takes work, a greenie has to burn a lot of energy. So a greenie's metabolism would need to maintain some basic level of homeostasis to keep his body temperature above freezing, right?

Ernie wasn't given to speculation, that's my job. The most I could get out of him was a grudging admittance that if people really are turning green and running around naked in the forests, then the process has to involve a lot more than a little chlorophyll under the skin. We both agreed that green people would probably need to find sunny places every morning, to warm up like crocodiles. The meadow we were watching, for instance, would be a great place for that—but by half past ten, it was fairly obvious that no green people were going to come here, and we were going to have to resume our search for them.

Today, the hills were steeper, and unfortunately, we were on the downside of the steep, so our progress was a lot slower. It was like carrying your grandmother uphill the whole way. And maybe her Mah Jongg club as well. The longer the day went on, the more weight she gained. She's just *gotta* stop noshing on those latkes with sour cream and applesauce.

About noon, I assumed it was noon, the sun was high overhead, we arrived at another field, this one fairly well exposed. The day had warmed up enough that the three of us just stopped and stood out in the sun, trying to soak up some warmth. And while we did that, I began to get a sense of what it might be like to be green. It was like standing in a hot shower, just letting the water cascade down, simultaneously enervating and energizing. It was very easy for me to dream of a hot shower—I was already starting to stink, and Bert and Ernie had passed that point before we'd even gotten out of the van.

But standing out there in that field, basking in the warmth of the blazing star, soaking in its life-giving energy—I could have done that forever. And if that was what it was to be green, only much more intensely, I could see why people would seek it out.

And then, abruptly, it was time to move on. I asked a dumb question about the energy levels in the average mammal and Ernie used that as a starting point for a circuitous lecture about ADHD being the natural state for survival in the wild and that most higher-level mammals exhibited all the symptoms of hyperactive behavior. This led, inevitably—inevitably for Ernie, that is—to his elaborate account of Tearalong (The Dotted Lion), and how to identify sexual identity confusion in cats. Apparently they couldn't get this particular lion to come out of the wardrobe. Finally, they just opened a store buying and selling wardrobes, and called it Narnia Business. (I'll show you on the map where we buried Ernie. Maybe we should have killed him first, but we were in a hurry.)

The rest of the day was spent hiking upward, always upward—and finally, I had the smarts to ask why we hadn't started at the north end and journeyed south. Bert shrugged. “Do the opposite of the obvious.” As if that little bit of left-coast-Zen was answer enough. But by this time, I didn't have the strength to argue. I just concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. Ernie, who had experienced only a mild case of death, didn't even bother to go for the easy pun, so apparently my two companions were also getting tired and frustrated.

Late afternoon, however, we finally found *something*. Well, a promise of something. We came to an old dirt road; at some point in the past, a bulldozer had cut a single lane through the trees. There were tire tracks here, but not recent ones, so after all three of us had stated the obvious, that a road has to lead somewhere, as well as the not-so-obvious, that it would be a lot easier to follow the road than hike up another damned rocky hill, we decided to follow it. As before, we stopped frequently to listen for vehicles, but the only thing we heard was our own labored breathing, and occasionally the pounding of the blood between my ears.

I'm not sure how far we followed the road, it could have been two or three miles, maybe more, I honestly don't know how deep into the forest that hunting preserve extended, but after a couple of hours, the dirt road led us to some kind of camp. As soon as we spotted the first outlying buildings in the distance, we backed away. We didn't know if there were people there or not. So, we hiked back a ways, then climbed up a hill—always up, never down; remember that the next time you're invited hiking—to a point where we could look down on the whole installation.

Ernie's first observation was that it looked like a marijuana farm. We saw three long drying sheds and a good-sized cabin nearby that could have functioned as both a cookhouse and a bunkhouse. We didn't see any smoke coming from the chimney. Next to the cabin was a covered area for parking vehicles, but no vehicles were present, except an old VW van parked nearby, but it had a broken window and two flat tires, and it looked like it hadn't been washed since the first flower children had

parked it here. Whatever color it might have started out as would only be determined at this point by either an archaeologist or a metallurgist.

“You’d better hope it’s not a pot plantation,” Bert said. “Not unless you know how to outrun a shotgun. Pot causes paranoia—especially in people growing it.”

“It looks abandoned to me,” I said.

“Don’t make assumptions.”

I had to assume Bert knew what he was talking about. I’d seen the scar tissue on his neck and left arm. You don’t get slash marks like that falling down stairs.

We studied the camp through binoculars. Then we took telephoto pictures. Then we slid a ways back down the hill and looked at the pictures on Ernie’s video player. Then we whispered back and forth for a while. Is this a pot farm or not? If it is, where were the growing fields? Well, maybe those buildings that we thought were drying sheds are actually full of sun lamps and hydroponics tanks? Look at all the wires going to that outbuilding, and the fuel tank next to it—doesn’t that suggest a generator?

If it was a pot farm, then that would explain the barbed wire and the signs saying that this was a private hunting club. What a great way to keep out the curious—including the Lassen County Sheriff. And it would also explain the armed men I’d met on my previous trip through this terrain. Except—it didn’t explain the green boy, unless I’d been smoking some of that pot and hadn’t noticed. No, I think I would have noticed that. I’m pretty sure I haven’t touched the stuff since ... I dunno, when was the last ELO concert in Anaheim? (Yes, that’s the story you heard. It was six months before I found out that my so-called “friends” had actually redressed me in that outfit *after* I’d passed out on the couch. I was really disappointed to discover that—it brought to a screeching halt a whole personal mythos of exciting sexual fantasies and imagined playmates.)

But if it wasn’t a pot farm, what else could it be? It sure didn’t look like any hunting camp Bert had ever seen. Ernie had never been hunting and neither had I; so our opinions on the matter were unformed. Finally, unable to come to any kind of rational conclusion, we decided to hunker down on the hill and watch the camp for signs of life and if we didn’t see anybody by tomorrow afternoon, we’d walk in on the road, pretending we were three lost and stupid campers; which wouldn’t take all that much pretending, the facts being self-evident.

The only flaw in that plan was the possibility that we might be too close to a shed full of giant green pods, and that while we were sleeping our bodies would be replaced and we would wake up soulless and without emotion. Ernie said that in his case it was too late, he was already an iPod-person. Bert and I exchanged a glance. “Ernie’s getting tired. That doesn’t even justify violence.” I considered a remark about Ernie losing his ah-finney-tee for wordplay, but decided the reference was just

too obscure for this audience. Time after time, some puns work; some don't.

Eventually, we crawled back to the top of the hill and resumed our surveillance—this struck me as possibly a good opening scene for an adventure novel, a squad of commandos looks down into a valley and sees some kind of strange alien infestation, but I couldn't figure out where to go with it from there. We bedded down on the ridge and maintained watch on and off all night. If there was anyone in the camp below, Bert's snoring should have aroused them, but the camp remained dark and silent. By morning, we were certain that the place was deserted, but we waited anyway.

Early afternoon, we scrambled back down to the road, made ourselves look like three disheveled campers who'd slept in our clothes, and plodded dutifully into the deserted camp. We started with the main building. It had been pretty well stripped. Some bunks and benches remained, a couple of chairs and two heavy wooden tables. Otherwise, the place was bare. Even the light fixtures were gone. We did find an old box of baking soda on one of the shelves. And near the door there were some tiny bits of paper, the kind of detritus you might find after someone had shredded a lot of documents. Whatever or whoever had happened here, they'd moved on and they hadn't left any evidence behind.

The same was true of the drying sheds—if that's what they were. There were some posts in one of the sheds, indicating where dividing walls might have been, if the sheds had been divided into stalls, and there were wires running the length of the ceiling. Two light fixtures remained in that same shed, and one of them still had a burned-out sun lamp in it. So they could have been drying sheds, or a hydroponics farm, but it could just as easily have been a winter resort for greenies; so that didn't prove anything one way or the other.

There was no smell of pot here, and you would think that if this had really been a pot farm that the place would reek of it. Instead, there was a strange thick cloying pineapple-apricot stink, only kind of slithery and lizard-like too. If you can imagine that. It wasn't orchids. That much I was sure of. Orchids don't smell. There were webby footprints in a couple of the empty stalls, and there were some clumps of ivy or kudzu or something at one end of one of the buildings. At the back, in a clearing we hadn't been able to see from the crest of the hill, there was a corral, fenced by more barbed wire. The sun blazed down into the corral and if I were a greenie, I bet I could spend a happy afternoon just blooming there.

The rest of our search was equally fruitless. The generator building was empty—as if the generator had been hastily removed and trucked out. We unscrewed the feed into the big fuel tank, but even though it still smelled of gasoline, when we banged on it, it resonated like the Tin Man's empty chest. We circled the camp, but didn't find anything else. The area had been fairly well policed, and except for that rotting pineapple smell, a casual observer would assume this had been a pot farm—and you could probably explain the pineapple stench as the unwelcome residue of some industrial strength cleansing detergent.

So that was pretty much it. We came, we saw, we saw nothing. We came away with blisters. We hiked back along the dirt road until it reached the main highway, and called for pickup. We didn't have to wait long. Our van driver had been sleeping in a rest stop near Red Bluff during the night; during the day, he parked about twenty miles south of our drop-off point and listened to his scanner and read Terry Pratchett novels. "I like Pratchett," he said. "His stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end." He gave me a dirty look when he said this; I deliberately chose not to respond. Until my dramatic license is revoked, I'll write any damn thing you pay me for.

Back north, in that town or city I'm not going to name, I stood in the hot shower and made orgasmic noises until the water finally turned cold; I thought about shaving, decided not to, and finally, luxuriously, put on soft clean clothes—don't let anyone kid you, clean underwear is a sacred right—and then hobbled downstairs to toss the rest of my stuff into the back of my camper. It was time to head home.

There's just one more thing to tell. The guy I called Bert was leaning against the camper shell, stuffing an unlit pipe with something that smelled fruity and vaguely familiar.

"So?" he asked. "You done?"

I shrugged. "Why do you care?"

He shrugged right back. "I don't really."

This whole thing was one big shrug. "I'm tired. I'm going home. There's nothing else to do, is there?"

He didn't answer. He just continued packing his pipe.

"Look, I saw a green boy on that road. I know it. Maybe I should have taken pictures, but I was rattled, I wasn't thinking clearly. But I saw what I saw."

"Yep," said Bert. "You saw what you saw. Just like UFOs and Sasquatch and Elvis. Nobody ever gets a good picture. It's the photo-resistant morphogenic field that cryptozoological phenomena generate around themselves."

"So if you don't believe me, why'd you go on this wild goose chase?"

"I didn't say I don't believe you."

"But—?"

"But nothing." He continued stuffing his pipe.

I stopped what I was doing, pointlessly rearranging things in the camper shell. "Is there a point to all this?"

"No. Not really."

I rolled my eyes. I'm good at rolling my eyes. Especially when I'm trying to hide how pissed I am. "I'm going home. I'm going to put on a Sibelius symphony. Maybe I'll put on a whole bunch of Sibelius symphonies. And maybe some Ralph Vaughn Williams too. And maybe I'll look at pornographic pictures of redheads and eat a box of Godiva chocolate. But I think I'm through with green people for a while."

"That's probably a good idea." He straightened up, pushing himself off the camper. He looked at me very seriously. This was the punch line. "You want some free advice?" he said. "Worth exactly what you're payin' for it?"

"I'm listening."

"If there are people out there who can buy a tract of land that big and hide what they're doing that well for that long, they can probably do just about anything else they want. You might want to keep that in mind."

"Yeah, I already had that thought. But thanks anyway." I tossed the last duffel into the back, the one with all the dirty clothes.

"People with big secrets—people get hurt. That's not good." Bert finally finished packing his pipe and struck a match with his thumbnail. He sucked gently, the flame bent to the tobacco, and sweet smoke curled upward. "You want to be careful."

I slammed the camper shut and faced him. "Just one thing—"

"Yeah?"

"Who are you. I mean, who are you *really*?"

"Me?" He smiled. The first smile I'd ever seen on his grizzled face. "I'm just like everybody else in your life. I'm exactly what you want to see. You figure it out."

"I *am* figuring it out. Here's what I'm figuring. What if somebody took me out in the woods and showed me exactly what they wanted me to see. What if the best way to keep a secret this big is to control the search for it?"

He blinked. "Isn't that a little paranoid?"

"Probably. But paranoia is a necessary skill, especially when you're surrounded by editors, agents, and lawyers. Now answer the question."

"Okay," he said, surprising me with his candor. And suddenly, all the bristle of the last five days was gone and he looked like a real scientist. "Try it this way. What if your facts are accurate, but your interpretation is confused?"

"That's a polite way of saying it. What *are* you saying?"

"You saw a sign that said private hunting club. You saw barbed wire. You

saw a boy caught in a fence. You saw men with guns. You made an assumption—it fit the facts you had, but what if your assumption was wrong?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“You said it yourself. What if the hunting club signs were a way to keep folks away from the pot farm. Only, if there’s no pot farm, and no hunting club, then what’s left—and why would you need the signs?”

I thought about the sheds, the stalls, everything else—especially the installations for overhead lamps. Sun lamps. Of course—it made sense. Sort of. Oh. “It’s a sanctuary, isn’t it? The boy wasn’t running away. He was lost. And cold. And scared. And the men I met, the ones with guns, they were really there to protect the greenies from people like me, weren’t they?”

“Yeah, that’s a different interpretation. How well does it fit the facts?”

My mind raced through the implications. “That’s why they had to clear it out so completely. A hunting camp—no big deal. But a sanctuary, they can’t risk people asking questions. The publicity would kill them. The media would go bugfuck. It’d be a bigger circus than—I dunno—but it’d be big.”

“And who would get hurt the worst?”

“Oh. Yeah, I see.”

“Yeah, you do.”

We stood there a moment, just looking at each other, just studying each other.

“So, this is like—a Greenpeace thing, right?”

He shook his head. “It might be.”

“You don’t know?”

“Honestly? No, I don’t.” He sucked at his pipe. “Yeah, I used to know some people. But I haven’t talked to anyone in a long time. I’m not even sure where I could start looking. But whatever was there, somebody tipped them off, that’s for sure. They had to know their security was breached, that’s why they cleared out.”

“Well, there’s not a lot of people who could have told them. Just Dennis and Jay, and you and Ernie, and whoever you told—?”

He raised an eyebrow. I’ve always been jealous of people who can do that. I can’t. “You e-mailed a story to *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, didn’t you?” He lowered his eyebrow.

“Oh, come on! Gordon Van Gelder as a member of The International Green People Conspiracy—? I know there’s that stuff with his father, but still it’s easier to

believe that you had dinner with Heinlein, and I don't believe that at all."

He didn't answer immediately. Finally, he said, "Look. Remember I said you could make a lot of money in sf publishing, if you knew the right people? There used to be a—call it an office—that helped fund some of the major sf magazines. They paid the editors an extra consulting fee. There was a list and a phone number. If anybody sent in any stories on any of those topics on the list, they were supposed to phone in the info on the story. I think it started in 1944, with that Cleve Cartmill story about the atom bomb. Remember *Astounding Science Fiction*— John W. Campbell editor? Something of a loose cannon? Maybe it was easier to buy him out and let him feel secretly important. Maybe. I don't know for sure."

"Okay, y'know, Bert—you had me at the Sanctuary part. I really would like to believe that somewhere in northern California, or Oregon, or Idaho, or somewhere else in the northwest woods, maybe there's a secret place, or even a lot of secret places, where green people can safely stretch their palms up to the sky and soak in the warmth of the sun. That would be something I could believe in. But this? My editor?! Sorry. I can believe six impossible things before breakfast, but not that one."

"Okay, have it your way." He took a last deep puff off his pipe, then turned and walked away from me. He climbed into his late-model Jeep, started the engine, put it in gear, and let it roll away down the hill, leaving me with a camper full of dirty clothes and unanswered questions ... and the faint smell of pineapple and apricot smoke in the air.

So, that's it, Gordon. Somebody knows what's really going on. Maybe it's Bert and Ernie. Maybe it's you. It sure as hell isn't me. Whoever wanted to muddy the issue did a really good job. I'm tired as hell. I give up. I'm going back to writing about things I do know—how we have to build Lunar colonies so we can escape the giant alien man-eating worms from outer space. I'll send you another one of those stories soon.

(signed) Your Pal,

David Gerrold