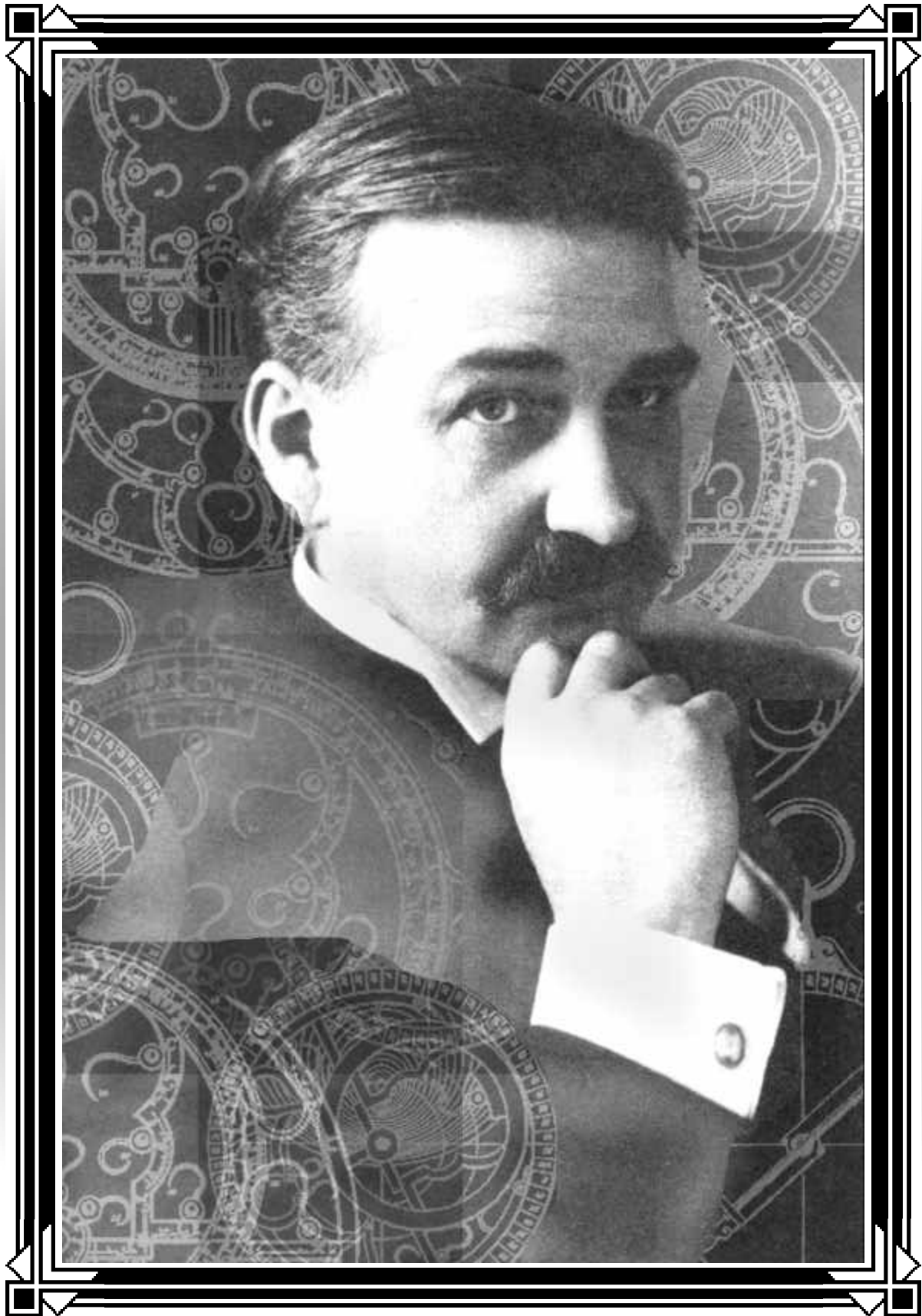


THE WIZARD OF MACATAWA



BY TOM DOYLE

I grew up in a land of Oz. Or at least I spent summers there. One summer, they made me perform in the community theater. "I'm the Mayor of Munchkin City," I said. Adults said I was cute. Not what I wanted to hear. The last night of the show, I kicked my foot through the set. I was not invited to return the next year.

My Oz was Macatawa, the Michigan beach town where Frank Baum had spent his summers. He made fun of it like he made fun of everything else. The town reveled in his mockery. Forty years after the Oz film, Macatawa imported the surviving Munchkin actors to sign autographs. Silly town, bitter little men and women.

I didn't get an autograph; the whole thing embarrassed me. I hated Oz, 'cause Oz didn't scare me. Oz was for good kids, and I was a little shit.

I enjoyed fires. Some nights, I built the bonfire for the other kids on the beach. I would have rather gone to the real bonfire up in the dunes, the one with drinking and making out. They said I wasn't old enough for that one yet, which sucked. So I launched bottle rockets at the real bonfire and ran off into the woods. That was cool.

Maybe I was crazy. I definitely took drugs, though which came first was unclear. Mom made me take them depending on her mood. It was 1979, and I was an early adopter of that later kiddie hit, Ritalin.

At the kid bonfire, on an August night, we just had marshmallows on dirty sticks and some Orange Crush and other pop. Nobody seemed to mind me getting wired on sugar, at least during the summer. All wound up, I got scary to freak out the younger kids—Anna and Sarah from next door, and Joe and Will from up the hill. Not hard to freak—they were pretty frightened of me just being there, staring at them with my wild crazy eyes.

Only kid I didn't scare, most times, was my younger brother Jack. He was too smart for anybody's good, which probably came from being named after President Kennedy. Even next to the fire, he kept a beach blanket wrapped around him to keep warm.

I hit the kids with the usual stuff—coho salmon biting off toes, freshwater sharks, mad killer in the dunes. I got an "ew, that's gross, Tip," but no signs of bedwetting nightmares.

Some clouds were piling up on the horizon, blocking the moon. "I hear a tornado is coming. It'll tear you up while you sleep."

Jack shook his head. "Tornadoes don't

touch down here right on the lake—they jump over to the dune from the water."

I socked him in the shoulder for that. Usually he wasn't such a dope. But I didn't punch him hard. "OK, loser, you tell us something really scary."

Jack stared at me, quiet. Then he got those spooky, spaced-out eyes, like whenever he thought too hard about things that might happen. And then he whispered, "The world's going to end soon."

Everyone gaped at him. "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard," I said. I wanted to punch him again—it was just so lame. And yet, maybe too close to home.

Then Anna giggled, and I didn't like that, so I asked, "How's it gonna end, Jack? Bombs? Apes?"

"Bombs maybe. Too many people maybe. Maybe God does it, maybe we do."

"Says who?" said Anna.

"Everyone—scientists, psychics, the Bible. This is all going to end in a few years."

"Lots of dead people?" I asked, nodding, encouraging.

"Millions."

"Just lying around?"

"No one to bury 'em."

"People eating people, the luckiest people in the world?"

"Soon. Or maybe something worse."

He looked at me, not scared but very serious. He believed this.

"Cool." I could have guessed why it didn't scare him, but that would have spoiled it. Jack had made me so happy, I wanted to punch something else, and the little creep knew it too. Anna and Sarah were about to cry. Will desperately tried to sound tough. "You don't know what you're talking about."

That was a laugh. "Jack knows everything," I said. And Will couldn't argue with that—he had seen the books Jack was reading that summer. I wanted to milk the end of the world dry. Screams tonight, parents complaining in the morning.

Time for the *coup de grace*. I took out my jackknife, passed it through the fire, lightly cut myself on my left hand, and smeared the blood on both my palms. I felt so real putting on this show. I stood up, arms wide to the stars. "Show me the end of the world!"

Just then, a flash to the north from the lake, like the lighthouse beam, only out of sync with its smooth rotation, and green, very green. "What's that?" I said. But then it was gone.

"Stop it," Will said, "you're just trying to scare us."

No, seriously, I thought I saw something. But they wanted to be like stupid kids in a TV comedy. Jack knew better—my craziness wasn't the seeing-things kind.

We were a team. We would have to check it out.

Face it, Mr. Baum's interest in children was unusual. Today, overzealous child welfare folks would be all over his sorry Victorian butt. Good thing for him it was 1899, because he really was just a big child with a fierce mustache, maybe a skipping stone's throw away from autistic, off in his imaginary worlds armed only with bad jokes and an honest love for kids. He couldn't bear to see kids hurt or scared. Unusual indeed.

August in 1899 meant Regatta Week and Venetian Evening, the highpoint of the summer in Macatawa. Late afternoon, between the already boring boats and the upcoming fireworks, the kids had nothing to do. So, all overdressed innocence, they gathered on the porch of Baum's cottage along with his four sons to hear his stories.

Baum loved an audience. "So, what history of far off lands shall we discuss today?"

A girl piped up immediately: "Tell us the one about Dorothy, please!" Everyone laughed at this, because the girl's name was Dorothy too. Though she wasn't from Kansas and her last name was VanderMay, not Gale, Baum would never mention such inconvenient facts.

So he told them about Dorothy and the cyclone machine, and the beautiful yet wicked, wicked witches, and how the wicked witches hated water because it was life, and they hated all things with the stuff of life in them. Yet the witches were drawn to life, sought to steal its essence and magic, sought to make the world into a slave as changeless and dead as themselves. They hated Oz because life, free and wild, got into everything there—tin men and scarecrows and porcelain and anything that wanted animating. But the children shouldn't worry, because Dorothy had killed the wicked witches, and there was plenty of water here, and witches couldn't cross the hot Shifting Sands between Oz and here (like the hot shifting sands of the beach dunes). Oz was far, far away; our world was safe.

Dorothy VanderMay seemed thought-

ful, and the writer was always interested in the thoughts of children.

"What is it, Dorothy?"

"Uncle Frank, isn't the world going to end soon?"

"World end? And miss seeing you grow up into a lovely young woman? I can say with absolute certainty that no such thing will happen for trillions and trillions of years, which is a very long time indeed."

The girl's father would be angry if he heard this; he, like some others of the Dutch Reformed, had high apocalyptic hopes for the coming years of Our Lord 1900 and 1901. Nothing for it—the children got enough morality and fear in school, they could use a little hope and fun for summer. Baum could too. His Oz story was finished; he was only waiting for the opportune moment to give it to a publisher.

At supertime, Baum nodded at his wife. He could never bear to be the one to say *go*. "All right, children, that's enough," she said. "You want to be ready for the fireworks tonight."

Baum hugged his wife, then went to the study. From a locked drawer, he removed a device that looked like a horizontal sextant with a strange eye-like metal ball at the end of a narrow telescope-like tube. The tube pivoted within a metal circle engraved with symbols—a five-pointed star, a triangle within a triangle, a cross with a hoop, a pair of winged shoes. He turned the Eye to the shoes, towards the land of his dreams.

The device gave off a glowing emerald light, visible through the cracks in the blinds. Lost in his vision, Baum couldn't know that the Eye's light had been seen from far, far away. From across the Shifting Sands, they were coming.

The day after our "end of the world" bonfire, Jack and I went down to the beach early, before Mom would hear that I'd been scaring the neighbors again. August meant a steady wind, ocean-size waves, and an undertow that enjoyed the taste of kids.

"Let's take the dinghy, eh matey?" I said, pirate-like.

"The waves are awful big. Momby won't like it." Momby was what Jack called Mom—a cute baby-mistake version of "mommy" that had gone on for way too long.

"I don't give a fart. And your French-fried-freak friend Cousteau wouldn't give a fart."

I had Jack there. In the dinghy, he

always pretended to be Jacques Cousteau, giving orders with a bad accent. He couldn't let National Geographic down.

So we took the orange plastic boat, the "Calypso from Hell." I rowed us out toward the big red lighthouse and the channel, near where I'd seen the green glow. We weren't supposed to go that far away and out. Dad used to say after cocktails that it was a liability problem. But Dad had gone away to the distant kingdom of financial support.

I pulled hard toward the breaker line. Jack looked at the big waves and turned paler. "We're going to capsize."

"You can swim. Hang on, Jacques!" Kabam! We crashed through, totally soaked but still upright. "You OK, captain?"

Jack saw we were past the breaker line and said, "Aye aye."

The water felt good and cool in the wind, the sun dried my skin and it was a great day to be a pirate. Jack took off his wet baseball cap, and his damp, bald head shone as it dried. Still surprised me, seeing no hair on him. The dinghy pitched and rolled a little, and Jack got nervous again. "We won't find anything in these waves."

"So no one will notice us looking." Maybe the little creep was right, but nothing good waited back on shore. "You want to row for a bit?"

"Sure." Jack took the oars, and I guided the boat to where I thought the glow had been. His rowing wasn't worth spit, but I didn't say so. Jack had been to the doctor a lot that summer. He didn't seem to mind much—gave him even more time to read. Mom always fussed about him, but other than no hair, he looked fine to me—I thought some exercise would do him good.

"Ramming speed!" I shouted to encourage him. So he pulled harder, and we closed in on the green glow spot. Abruptly, the dinghy plopped down from a wave and stopped rolling. The lake was as flat and clear as a pond. "Weird," I said, meaning absolutely sweet.

Jack pointed behind me. "No, that's weird."

I looked. A few feet back in our wake, the waves and wind were still going full force. We were in the calm eye of something. "So, what is it, genius?"

"Um, might be like the calm eye of something."

"Never mind." This wasn't in his science books. Most spooky stuff was just messing with your mind, and I didn't let

my mind be messed with. But, like Jack's scary daydreams or my knife routine last night, there was something real on the spooky edges that I could never quite catch. Maybe I could catch it here.

We peered over the edge of the dinghy. We could see clear to the bottom, little more than rippled sand. Then, a glint of metal. "Dive, dive," cried Jack in Cousteau.

I dove, kicking for the glint. I reached—ouch, my cut of the night before broke open on the sharp metal. I grabbed for the rest of it buried under the sand and pulled it up. I shot up out of the water as dramatically as possible, flopped my arms on the side of the dinghy, and plopped the metal thing onto its floor. "Salvage. Treasure. One for all."

I hauled myself in while Jack frowned at the treasure. "No way. It's yours."

"OK." Not like him at all to decline a piece of the action. "But your opinion, Captain?"

"Hmm." He held the treasure between his fingers like a dead fish. "Looks like a thingy for a ship, to find its location."

"Here. Give it." I rubbed off some tarnish and crusted sand. Underneath the crap, it shined, strangely not rusted, but still real old-fashioned looking. The central piece was a tube with a ball stuck on it.

"Valuable?" I asked.

Jack nodded, but his eyes were far away. "You might be happier if you put it back right now."

"Can't do that, Captain."

"I know. So keep it. Mom would throw it away, or lose it, and that would be worse." Hmm, this also wasn't like Jack or Jacques, but I didn't complain.

I rowed back. In a few strokes, like passing through a curtain, we were in the rough water again. We moved easier; the waves wanted to push us in. We hauled the dinghy up onto the beach and flipped it over, and I hid the treasure under it.

Mom was lying on the beach, sun worshipping as always. I could have gotten by, but the other kids made a racket when I came up, so Mom woke and intercepted me on the cottage porch. I got holy hell for the stories last night and taking the dinghy too far down. She didn't bother Jack, which wasn't fair, but I didn't mind, because Jack hadn't told on me and he went along with what I said even when Mom said otherwise, and that was what mattered.

And Mom asked The Question again.

What did she ask? I would rather have

punched you than told you. Everyone seemed to think it was so goddamn important.

Mom asked why I couldn't act like a nice girl, like Anna or Sarah. And I said I had no intention of acting like a girl, nice or otherwise.

There, now you know. Satisfied? Fine, now shut up about it.

After dark, Mom went to the neighbors' to drink cocktails and sing along to Neil Diamond songs. I grabbed the treasure from under the dinghy and ran it up to the third floor of the cottage, the attic out of which they had carved our wood-paneled bedrooms. Behind my bed, the workers had left a loose square of panel that opened into a crawl space, the last bit of unaltered hundred-year-old attic.

The crawl space hid my arsenal of evil. I had all the forbiddens of childhood there—M80s, cigarettes, bottle rockets, porn, a fifth of Wild Turkey 101, some weed. Not that I had active interest in the porn or the weed, but they were big nos, so I had to have them too.

I had never told anyone directly about my arsenal, but just the hint of it was power. I felt bigger just knowing I had it. I restrained my use; my assault on the real bonfire a rare indulgence. The arsenal gave me authority over the great kid questions (only one way to tell if four M80s were the same as a stick of dynamite). The arsenal was my substitute for church, my altar to vices and mysteries to come, my surrogate for the spookiness I could not reach. Even hidden behind the panel, the porn disturbed me with its promise of the future.

No matter what happened, what kind of trouble I got into, no one had ever checked the crawl space. So I stashed the strange thing there, just behind my arsenal and backpack. I would leave it there until I could figure out what to do with it—joke or money or both.

That night, full moonlight fell on my bed. The crawl space panel seemed to glow around its edges, but no one could see it but me.

In 1899, they came after dark. They were not acting deliberately sinister; that's when the party started, and they have never been able to resist a good party or great beauty or any of the stuff of life.

And on Venetian Evening, *fin de siècle*, all was beauty and life—the sunset on the lake, the countless stars, the summer

evening dresses. Bright Japanese lanterns reflected on the mirror-like bay from everywhere—from the buildings, from the Yacht Club and hotels, from the boats. Bands played from ferries, bonfires blazed on the high dunes, launches displayed colored lights. Fireworks rocketed overhead. A night where dreams met reality. Their night.

They were not snobs when it came to parties. In province or metropolis, they were most comfortable, less noticeable, where everything shone. But they could have done without all the water.

They alone wore masks, Carnival style, to this Venetian event. Their perfection, hidden by artifice, awaited its unmasking—that was their history and future. The name “Venetian Evening” seemed their omen, an assurance there would be no new magic for this new land.

Masked, they were not noticed by that childlike mind that thought, despite all he had seen in the Eye, that all ugliness was evil and all prettiness good. He was too busy dancing with his wife. He loved to dance, and he loved his wife even more desperately than he needed her.

The strangers loved to dance as well. They danced beautifully, in perfect order, tracking the man who had been tracking them these many months.

As the party wound down, the Baums stopped dancing and walked back toward their cottage. The strangers were waiting. Frank smiled at them. So lovely, like people on stage. He would have given them willingly anything they asked for, because they must be good. Anything, except perhaps the Eye.

Suspecting resistance on that very point, the strangers grabbed Mrs. Baum and etherized her unconscious (natural means, contemporary technology were their bywords here). They held Mr. Baum, but left him conscious. Already contaminated by the Oculus, he did not need to be shielded, and they might need his assistance.

“Who are you?” he asked. His theatrical bravado fooled no one.

“Shh!” said their leader, a striking woman with eyes like a sunset. “No more spying, Mr. Baum. Take us to your home. We have questions for you.”

“Oz? You're from Oz?”

Whap! The woman slapped him. “You'll refrain from speaking that name ever again, Frank.” She ripped off her mask, and Baum's weak heart nearly stopped in recognition. “We're not here about our world. We're here about your future.”

In 1979, I spotted them right off. They came at midday, to show off their forms, because their brightness spited the sun, because it would explain the tans they already had, because they liked to watch others get cancer. They weren't like the regular crawlers: pimply-faced local kids and fat old-fart trespassers on our beach. These people should've been at a beach they made songs about, frolicking with the famous and rich—rich, not like Dad, but as beyond Dad as Dad was beyond a janitor. They jogged up and down, God-like bronzed bodies with charming, cunning eyes.

I had dreamed about people like this, happy and perfect. I always knew, from fairy tales and TV, that they existed somewhere. What I knew then, on our porch with my Orange Crush, was that these smugly perfect people were everything I despised.

Some of the perfect people stopped to talk with the neighbor kids, and the little shits stared at them with big round eyes and blabbed away. Others struck up conversation with reclining Mom. I pounced down the porch steps to the beach, to get the jump on them, to fracture any alliances.

I cut Mom off mid-sentence, probably some lie about Dad or about us. The perfect people smiled at me, imitating the same jerky smile I got from a lot of adults before they knew better—ooh, isn't she cute and innocent? But these people smiled a lot to show their teeth—perfect, bright white, probably sharp. They wore shoes on the warm sand. It was hot, but they did not sweat, did not drink. Their hands felt dry when I shook them, their mouths looked dry when they spoke. Their pants had no zippers.

Mom smiled too, different but just as fake. “This is my daughter,” she said.

“Do you have any other children? A son, perhaps?”

“Yes, he's ...” She stopped, annoyed. “Go back up to the porch dear. We're talking.”

The perfect people protested, “Please, not on our account.” So I strolled back to the porch. If they wanted me around, I'd better keep my distance.

Back with my Orange Crush, I planned how to cause them trouble. This could get serious. It might involve their cars, if I could find them.

The screen door slammed me out of my schemes. Jack saw me, the look in my eyes. “Please, Tip. Don't mess with them.”

“Why the hell not?” I said between clenched teeth, like Clint Eastwood. And

ever so coolly, I went inside, the screen door wap-wapping again behind me, like I had nothing to hide. I was going for the arsenal.

Jack followed me up the stairs, out of breath. "There's something wrong. About them."

"Yeah, so? That's why I have to mess with them."

"They don't look ..." He shook his head. "Not from here. Like something out of a story. A bad one."

"So am I, Jack," as if I knew what I was saying.

"I know, sis."

I should have punched him for the "sis", but I didn't. He seemed so serious. And I had reached the arsenal.

I opened the panel to the crawl space. It had been a crappy summer in a crappy year in a short crappy life. God only knew where they were going to stick me come fall, but I suspected it would be someplace with troubled girls who whined about abuse and food and where I wouldn't be able to do anything, not even kill myself. And I'd be away from Jack.

So, not just bottle rockets at these beautiful creeps. Time to blow the whole load. I got out the M80s. All of them.

Jack clutched my arm, trying to pull me away from the arsenal. "Damn it, Tip, think for once!"

I gripped his wrist with my free hand and twisted it off me. Hard.

Jack was crying. "Go ahead then. Die. It's no picnic."

Not good. "OK, dork. What would they do in a story then?"

He got the scary nobody's home look. "What's different today?"

"I don't know. The weather's nice, second day in a row. Oh. You mean the thingy." Maybe I really was mental—I had already forgotten about my treasure, which unlike most of the stuff I forgot was not boring. "They're here for it, aren't they?"

Jack nodded. So I looked for it. Where the hell was it? Not behind the arsenal and backpack anymore. But faint scuttling noise came from the dark far end of the crawl space.

"Sounds like a raccoon," I said.

"Raccoons have rabies," Jack noted.

"Then I won't bite him."

"I'll stay here."

"Good thinking."

I had never explored the whole claustrophobic length—no telling what was back in there. "Jack, flashlight." He hand-

ed me his personal night-light/club like it was a surgeon's scalpel.

I crawled carefully over my arsenal. A bunch of dusty Dutch Reformed tracts blocked my way. I moved them over and shined the light down to the end of the crawl space.

A metallic blur. "Wha—?" I flinched back, thumping my head on a beam. It had scuttled away, trying to avoid the light.

"What is it?" Jack asked from outside.

"The thing from the lake," I whispered, heart pounding more than I wanted to admit. "It's like a metal spider."

"How many legs does it have?"

Three on the side I could see. "Six."

"Then it's not a spider, it's an insect."

Goddamnit. I was glad I had hurt him earlier so I didn't have to smack him now.

The eye on the end of the tube was staring at me. This seemed like an adult situation, so I tried talking nice to it. "Here eye-buggy thing. Come here. That's right. Be a good thing."

It didn't budge. So I tried things my way.

"Look, you little turd. Every goddamn freak in the universe is outside on the beach looking for you for god knows what, and I just know you're going to get me in trouble, and Jack too. But don't worry, they aren't going to find you, because if I have to crawl down after you I'm going beat you with this flashlight until your own bug mother wouldn't recognize your pieces." I pointed my cut hand at it. "You got me?"

My hand was throbbing. Jack yelled from the entrance, "Tip, don't ..." But the thing blinked first and lowered its eye-stalk.

"Just letting it know who's boss. We're fine in here, aren't we?"

The thing scuttled towards me, eye still down like a dog caught in the act.

From two floors down, voices on the porch. The screen door wapped, and wapped, and wapped again.

Jack must have gone to a window. "They're here. What are you going to do?"

Whatever this thing was, it had magic and a tube to look through. I tapped my flashlight against the Eye's metal body. "You're going to show me what's going on. Right?"

The Eye just stared up at me. Jack stuck his head in the crawl space and whispered. "You've got to be more specific."

"OK, I need to know: what are these people going to do to us?"

The Eye nodded on its stalk. The body of the thing made a buzzing sound like wings as it rotated to a new setting. I touched it with my finger. It went still, like it was dead. I gazed into the tube.

It's the year 2000. A woman types on a computer, and that's the date on the screen. Man, she must be some kind of genius to be using a computer. It's way, way beyond Dad's Trash-80. This future looks pretty dull otherwise—no moon blasting out of orbit, no flying cars.

Then, I see a different future. I know it's different, because it's shown like a split-screen movie, in parallel with the woman typing. A gray dust covers dead trees and fields; a cold, hazy red sun sets over cities that are burned-out shells. I don't see any living people. Just like Jack said. Cool.

Or maybe not. I see other futures, one after the other, different versions of Jack's scary story, like some educational film. I get bored. "Which is it?" I ask.

As if it has only been waiting for my request, all the other futures blip out, like a TV being turned off. Then, a small dot expands into the future of the perfect people. Their dream. And Jack's thing worse than world's end.

And I am afraid.

I want to close my eyes and not see the millions of faces, dead eyed, grinning mindlessly. Not that I should worry. I won't be there. I don't see Jack or me anywhere. But that's when I realize, some things are so goddamned horrible that it doesn't matter if it's you or somebody else. Everyone always told me not to be so angry; finally, I know what anger is for. Some things gotta go.

We don't have much time. "How does this happen? Show me now."

The thing whirls in my hands, pinching them a bit. I don't care. I keep looking. And that's when I see Baum's story.

They searched Baum's study and found his Oz manuscript. Their leader, the woman who had slapped him, casually thumbed through it in seconds. "Someone has been snooping on us. Very wicked, Frank."

"I was just ... I had no idea it was ..."

"Real? Oh yes. Now we both know there's only one way you could have seen this. The Oculus, Frank. Now."

Even faced with pain and death for him and his family, Baum hesitated. But not for long. He brought out the Eye from its case.

The woman reached for it but did not touch it. The Eye crouched in fear, its legs dug into Baum's hand. "How did you obtain this?"

Baum puffed up. "I am the royal historian of ... that place."

She wagged a perfect finger in his face. "Frankness, Frank."

Baum deflated. "I, um, borrowed it from the Chicago Theosophical Society. I've meant to return it, but there's so much to write."

"And by now, you know from whom this came, before?"

Baum shuddered. He didn't like to think about who had worn this Eye and the uses to which she had put it, before she had lost it and everything else, before the Smith and Tinker of that other world had cunningly mounted it, changing it to life's tool. Through her Eye, the wicked ruler of the West—sunsets and death—had seen her own doom.

"Little man, I am her successor. You," she pointed at a male companion, "take the Oculus, and look at the future."

The man did not hesitate. He gingerly took the Oculus from Baum's hand; its legs scuttled without purchase. He put his eye to the tube. Instantly, without a sound, the man disappeared. The Eye clanged to the ground, then scurried up Baum's leg.

The woman smiled. "Thought so. Using it here is like standing too close to a revolving door. Well, royal historian, this is a fortunate evening for you. You are going to observe some history in advance for us."

"History?"

"You've never looked at the future?"

"Once. I saw peace and prosperity brought about by labor and machines."

"You would. We want you to look harder. But first, a simple test, to make sure the Oculus is working. Where is the Oculus in the future?"

Baum took the Eye in his hands again and set it to the future. He saw a succession of images—himself and these people, then the lake, then water, then sand, and sand, and sand.

"It's on the lake bottom."

"Keep looking."

After an eternity, the world glowed green. Then water and hands, then a cottage—he knew the place—then a short-haired child looking through the Oculus, watching him watching.

He nearly fainted, with his weak heart. "A boy's got it. About eighty years from now. It's in a cottage down the beach."

"Loser," I hissed. I felt strange, like someone had walked over my grave in a funhouse mirror room.

"Who's a loser?" Jack asked.

"Frank Baum."

"The *Wizard of Oz* guy? You can see him?"

"Yeah. He just sold us out."

"Jack, get down here!" As usual, Mom had sold us out too. But she had only asked for Jack.

"Baum said a boy had this thingy. They think it's you."

I saw Jack consider a back window and knew he wasn't thinking suicide. Although we were three stories above the ground on the front side of the cottage, the cottage was set into a hill and next to large trees, so I knew from experience that escaping through the back window was not so difficult.

"No, you go downstairs. They don't want you; they want the thingy. I'm going to look at Baum again—maybe he can tell me something. If not ..." I gestured toward the window.

"I'm scared."

"Same here. Now go, before they come up here. You'll be fine."

I looked into the device. "Show me Baum again."

Eighty years before, Baum was still peering into the future, reciting facts. "1916. United States negotiates settlement of the Great European War."

"Try again," the woman said. For a moment, the room darkened; a green aura marred the woman's faultless skin. As if answering, the Eye glowed brighter.

"1917. United States enters the World War."

"That's it. A World War by then should do. We'll nudge things that way." She touched Baum's cheek. "Yes, yes, we have great hopes for that future, for the ambitions formed in those trenches. But we need to be precise with our leverage, with where and when we travel from here. What else do you see?"

He saw some of the boys to whom he had told stories. They were, or would be, soldiers. They were, or would be, dead. It had broken, or would break, his heart.

And more death and worse death to follow. Somehow, his seeing these horrors would help these people make them real.

Then Baum saw me looking at him again, and he felt that I was dizzy, and I felt that he might really faint this time.

"Stop it," we both yelled. And everyone stopped, like in freeze tag, except Baum, who mumbled something and disappeared, leaving the Eye in midair.

Shit. "Where's Baum?" If it could move him, it could move me. "Get me to Baum—"

—In a flash, I'm standing on a sand dune. It could be in Macatawa, except there's no lake I can see. No trees or cottages either. Just endless sand dunes. The sand is hot. Not good. But I feel strong here, like twice my size. That's damned good.

Baum stands in front of me, smiling like a simp. "What is your name, little boy?"

I figure I have one shot to save the world. I walk up to him, smiling. Then, I punch him straight in the balls.

I should kill him while he gasps for breath on the sand, but he's so pathetic. So I set him straight. "I'm a girl, you jerk." God, I hate to have to say it. "Which is the only thing that has saved me so far from those jerks you ratted us out to. You fake piece of shit."

"Girl?" he gasps. My jeans, my words, my attitude make him cockeyed. "Must be an enchantment. I could ..."

This is going nowhere. "Look. I'm a future kid. They've got my brother, Jack, and they'll be coming up for the Eye and me soon, so hurry up and tell me how to kill them."

"Oh, no, we have time." He gets up on his knees. "Time's frozen while we're here. Though we shouldn't stay long."

That explains the freeze tag. "Where's here?"

"I believe these are the Shifting Sands between the worlds. They protect Oz from the outside, and each world from the other, and the past from the future."

"Then how did those perfect jerks get here?"

That stops Mister Science. "I'm afraid that's my fault. The Eye is a bridge between the worlds. My use of it gave them a beacon to follow."

"Nice going."

"I wanted to bring magic to America. American magic."

"They're pretty American all right. So, how do we kill them?"

"I don't think we can. Best we can do, I think, is to put the Eye out of their reach."

It won't stop them, but they'll have one less tool to use against us."

"I found it in the lake."

"Yes. They don't like water much."

"Then we've both got to dump the thing in the lake. It's what you've already done. Let's go."

In a flash, I was back in the crawl space. Shit. I put as many fireworks as I could into my knapsack. They were coming up the stairs, their honey-dripping voices in Jack's ear. "An antique. Sentimental value. Looks like a sextant. Do you know what that is?" Shit, no time to get out the window.

Unless I made some time. The smoke bomb is a sissy weapon, but I needed cover and distraction. So, three smoke bombs, lit one, two, three.

"Can you climb down?" The Eye nodded. I tossed it toward the tree, and it landed on the nearest branch. I jumped for the same branch. It sagged dangerously, like it might break, but that just meant I was closer to the sandy, poison ivy-infested hill. I swung and landed with a thump.

The Eye scurried down after me, then leapt into my hands. I heard Mom yelling upstairs, screaming "fire" and my name, probably hoping I was in flames.

I walked around the cottage and toward the beach. I tried to act cool, hoping no one would notice me, that the freaks inside didn't have a way to let the freaks outside know what was going on. No such luck.

The perfect people stopped jogging, frolicking, sunning. With one mind, they closed in. I lit a bottle rocket and stuck it in the sand at a low angle. It exploded right on a guy's bare chest, but he just glowed green for a moment and kept walking toward me. The neighbor kids ran for cover. I threw an M80 at a woman's face. Boom! She looked like a cartoon—sooty face, burnt hair—but she kept walking toward me, smiling. "Fireworks are dangerous," she said. They blocked my way to the lake.

I looked at the Eye. "Do you know what a Frisbee is?" I asked. It nodded. "Do it."

The Eye shaped itself as aerodynamically as it could. "Hide until they're dead," I said. I threw it up and toward the lake. The perfect people reached and jumped but couldn't get a hand on it. It splashed into the water.

"Stay in there, and keep quiet," I shouted. Then I smiled at the perfect crowd. "Now, what the fuck are you looking at?"

"Where were you?" Baum was back, but they had noticed his absence.

"What do you mean?" he stammered.

"We can see a time break, no matter how infinitesimal."

Baum waved them off. "Wait. Just a moment, something's happening."

Baum saw what happened next in the future. He saw the Eye go into the lake, then what happened on the porch. "Oh no." He bent over and threw up on the woman's shoes.

The woman growled down at him. "Where were you, and what did you see, you little piece of excrement?"

Baum looked up, vomit still dripping from his mouth. "Nuts," he said, and he dove through the shutters and onto the porch. Then he jumped the railing, ran to the lake and threw the Eye in. "And stay there," he yelled. His heart had never felt so good.

He rolled up his sleeves and strode back to his cottage. "You'd best leave my wife and boys out of this, you filthy witches," he shouted. "This is between you and me." And then he said some words that he had learned in the Dakotas.

I walked slowly back to our porch. The perfect people on the beach snarled at me. I snarled back, daring them to lay a finger on me. I was enjoying myself—as crazy as this was, my life made a kind of sense. One thing I couldn't figure though: not one of them laid a hand on me, even though I could tell they wanted to. What held them back?

The younger kids were pointing, "Tip's in trouble, Tip's in trouble." But when I got to the porch, the kids were gone, back to their cottages or down the beach. Or maybe I was gone—maybe the perfect people wanted some private time.

Mom fixed Bloody Marys for a batch of perfects, three women and one man, like nothing had happened, no smoke bombs, no scene on the beach, nothing. She had always tried to ignore me, and now she had fully succeeded. Her eyes—truly scary, because I was nowhere in them.

Up close to the perfects again, I could tell. These were the same people I'd seen in the Eye, eighty years ago. If anything, they looked younger, their day and hour closer.

They held Jack's hands tightly. His pain hurt me; his anger reflected mine. I had challenged them, so they went after him?

"Tippi, these are—oh, I'm so silly, what are your names again?"

They introduced themselves: Mr. Noam King, Ms. Jen Ginger, Ms. Vicky East and Ms. Vicky West. Real cute. Time to cut the bullshit. "Ms. West, aren't you supposed to be dead?"

That didn't faze her. "The office continues after the particular incarnation's retirement."

I didn't ask if that meant "successor," like she had told Baum. Instead, "Why are you still here?"

"Now, Tippi," Mom said, but no one listened.

Ms. West bent to speak to me, nose to nose. "What you threw in the lake—it's my sign of office. We want it back."

I felt something like memory, the right way to say it. "I will not serve you."

"Pride. That's good. But inappropriate now."

Mom, still without a clue: "Oh, just ignore her when she's like this, and she'll calm down."

Splat! Ms. West whacked the back of Mom's head. It squashed in like a pumpkin, and she was down dead. Ms. West smiled. "Not as if you cared for her. Not as if she knew anything."

I was stunned. Jack wailed, "Momby, Momby, Momby."

Ms. West covered her ears. "Mr. King, the boy, if you please."

With one arm, Mr. King seized Jack. He straightened out his finger, and his fingernail grew, extending like a knife, which he held to Jack's throat. Jack stopped wailing.

Ms. West pointed. "Him, you care about. Go to the lake, and retrieve the Oculus. Now."

I looked at Jack, and then I knew. Why they wouldn't kill Baum or me, why they could kill Mom and threaten Jack. I couldn't cry now. I spoke over my feelings like I was onstage again, the Mayor of Munchkin City.

"Go ahead. He doesn't have a future anyway."

Jack stared at me, open mouthed at my betrayal. Whatever he said next, whatever he did, I deserved it.

But the little creep just grinned at me. "You know!"

Now I cried a bit. "Yeah, I guess I do. They do too, I guess."

"Yep." The little creep was relieved. Must have been hard, keeping it secret that he knew he was going to die. Why the adults thought they could hide it from him, I don't know—he'd been reading anatomy texts since kindergarten.

Ms. West had backed away from me and my tears. For the first time, she looked truly teed. Good. “Understand,” she hissed, “resist us, and you will only have a little more time, a few decades at most. Understand, join us, and you will be like us. Perfect.”

I just laughed. “I’d rather be dead than be like you.” And for once, I really meant it, all the way.

I wiped my tears, and the perfect people flinched. Another idea. I spat at Ms. West. The goober hit her right on the cheek and sizzled like an egg. But she didn’t melt, she just wiped it off and cackled. “Understand, deary, that water and your precious bodily fluids only piss us off. Understand, my pretty, there are many ways to die—some of them much more unpleasant than others.” Mr. King moved his nail from Jack’s throat and pointed at Jack’s eye.

But both Jack and I shook our heads. What these witches didn’t understand was what modern medicine had in store for Jack. I’d seen it in the movies—no fantasyland’s idea of torture could compare. Still, I couldn’t bear this. I had to have a way to stop them.

Maybe I did—the one name they didn’t want to hear might have the power. I yelled to the lake. “Oz, if you can hear me—”

Ms. West smacked me across the face. “Never, ever, say that name again. Kill the boy.”

And they killed Jack.

Mr. King drew his nail across Jack’s throat and sliced off his head. The blood sprayed out—worse than any animal. The spray sizzled when it hit their skin. And Jack just fell to the porch in two pieces, and soon the blood stopped spraying ’cause the little guy didn’t have much to start with, and his chest wasn’t moving, and he was dead.

“Now, how much pain can we give this one without disturbing the timeline? Let us begin.”

I fell to the ground as if beaten. But I’d never give in to them. My cut hand ached, and I felt what to do.

Jack’s pooling blood prophesied my own magic, coming soon, but I needed that magic now. With pure rage, I mashed my face and hands into his blood and smeared it in quick motions over my arms and legs. I stared up at them with my eyes truly crazy now. “Touch me now, fuckers.” Then I raised a bloody, throbbing palm to the sun. “Motherfucking Oz, come. Now.”

A bright gash ripped open the blue sky,

rainbows refracting on its edges. The perfect ones raised voices and arms against it, but they were too late. The Gump was already here.

Of course, I didn’t know then it was a Gump. What I saw looked like a flying bed beating the air with rotating palm fronds like a helicopter. The pilot seemed to be wearing a mask with a face painted on it, straw sticking out from his neck. Three beings quickly lowered themselves from the Gump with bed-sheet ropes. One was a woman, broad-shouldered in overalls, wearing tight pigtails and chewing on tobacco, carrying an old shotgun that would scare any elephant. The others were both robots, one tin-colored carrying an axe that was too big for just trees, the other copper-colored with a ray gun and a bomb-like ticking sound.

I’ve never seen people move as fast as the perfect ones, dashing off the porch to the beach, rushing to gather with their fellows and get out of Dodge.

The big woman saluted me. “Dorothy Gale, special ops. Got a Wicked infestation I see.” She pointed at the pilot and twirled her finger in the air. He gave her a floppy thumbs up and pressed a button on the head/dashboard. A small, whirling funnel took shape on the shore.

Ms. Gale bent down, her face right in mine. “What did you do with the Wicked Bitch’s Eye?”

I pointed to the lake.

“Hah! Outstanding. Good to be rid of it. Damn, she was a hard one to kill.”

Huh? “Not just a water bucket?”

“What do you think?” She cocked the gun, grinning like, well, me on real bad day. “Fluid was administered through some well-placed holes.”

I looked down at where Jack and Mom lay. Couldn’t get sick yet. “Got any magic on you?”

Ms. Gale stopped grinning. “Tin, get some life powder on these civilians.”

The axe robot sprinkled something on Jack. The robot wept loudly. “Shaddup!” Ms. Gale ordered. “Giving you AIs hearts was the dumbest thing Oz ever did.”

“AIs?”

“Tin Man and Tik-Tok. All sufficiently advanced magic is indistinguishable from technology. Hey, you’d better look away, kid. It’s like sausages and Munchkin politics—you don’t want to know. Look at the beach action instead.”

A mini-cyclone chased the perfect people up and down the beach. It would catch one, and he or she would disappear in a

blur. The ray gun robot helped herd them toward the funnel. Ms. Gale sighed. “Cyclone generator—a magnificent machine. One hundred percent pure chaos.”

Behind me, Jack came to. “Oh no, not again.” He ran away upstairs, sobbing. I followed a step, then went back to Ms. Gale. “Couldn’t you take him with you?”

“Sorry, kid—in any world, his time is short.” She looked me over, blood-smeared toes to bloodstained face. “You, on the other hand, might be real Oz material.”

I was more angry than flattered. “Why would I want to go to a boring place like Oz?”

“Boring? Hah. Kid, Oz is America’s magical twin—and like America, it’s a lot of things, but boring isn’t one of them. Just when you think you know it, you discover another kingdom and another adventure. And plenty to scare you—you’ve seen some of it.”

“But Baum, the movie ...”

“Frank’s just a wimp. We need a few good witches, and you’re already better than most. What do you say, kid?”

I looked up toward Jack’s bedroom. “Nah, thanks, but I’ve got to stay here.”

“Suit yourself. Oz knows, plenty to do on this side of the Sands.”

“The future I saw?”

“Soulless zombies, no magic, no childhood, you dead—that one?”

“Yeah.”

On the beach, Ms. West was sprinting away from the cyclone, shouting, “You can’t stop us. The future is ours.” Then the funnel caught her. Blip. Gone with the wind.

“Don’t believe everything you hear.” Ms. Gale whistled, and the Gump was hovering overhead. “That the last of them? Good. Wait! What about her?” She pointed at Mom. “Can’t have the bourgeois adult oppressors asking too many questions.”

Axe robot powdered Mom with more emotional restraint than with Jack, then climbed back into the Gump with the rest of the Oz force. I turned from Mom’s regeneration to watch the Gump depart. As they flew away, they sang. “We are the hollow men, we are the stuffed men, marching together, headpiece filled with straw, kick ass!”

Mom came to. “Too many Bloodies.” I ran upstairs to hold on to Jack for dear life.

It’s the year 2000, and I’m at my computer, but I’m still no genius. That was Jack,

and he's not here anymore. The perfect people seem to have more worshippers than ever, but it's not their future yet, which is better than things might have been.

I have a daughter, Jacqueline. She doesn't seem to mind being a girl at all—guess these days, in my house, there's little reason to mind. Mostly, Jackie's just a kid—a little hyper, but that's OK with me. My little pumpkin head. She's read all the Oz books—she's not perfect, after all.

The Eye is still in the lake somewhere. Sometimes I'm tempted, but I really don't need it anymore. I saw the rest of Baum's story the way Jack would—part books, part magic. And, despite my punching him, Baum had left a gift for me, and for Jack.

When Baum returned to his cottage, it was empty. A wind had blown through the open shutters. His wife and boys were upstairs sleeping in bed. His Oz manuscript, however, was gone. Had they gotten what they wanted?

No one ever mentioned Baum's shouting of that evening. It had been a wild night, and, after all, he was a writer.

The rest of August, 1899, Baum thoroughly rewrote his Oz story. He didn't want the Wickeds bothering him anymore, so he made changes, obscuring the truth to appease them. The evil witches would be ugly, the good witches pretty—he found that easier to write anyway.

He gave his new story to his publisher that fall, and the next year saw the publication of *The Wizard of Oz*. Well, he had gotten that much from the Eye anyway.

He avoided writing more about Oz, again to appease the Wickeds. But Oz was all anyone wanted from him, and like any good showman, he had to please his audience. So, without the Eye to guide him, he wrote a sequel, *The Marvelous Land of Oz*. The idea came from that summer of '99. It would not be about a nice little girl like Dorothy.

Unlike Baum, I kept my mouth completely shut about Oz—I didn't want worse than Ritalin. In the fall, we went back to Lansing. They just sent me to Catholic school, which wasn't such a bad thing in the late '70s. From his faraway kingdom of financial support, Dad issued his decree—he wouldn't pay for any fancy institution, and anything else would be too embarrassing. Besides, Jack was getting sicker and

didn't want me to go anywhere. His opinion counted now.

Mom complained that she was exhausted all the time, though no doctor was able to find anything wrong with her. So I took care of Jack a lot between his hospital stints and treatments.

I spent all my free time with him, which reduced the trouble I got into a whole lot. I forgot about my hair, so it grew out a little bit. Jack was tired a lot too, so I read to him. I got good at it. I think it was then that I realized who the woman at the year 2000 computer was going to be.

That Christmas, my godmother (Catholics have the non-fairy kind) gave me a first edition of *The Land of Oz*. I read Jack the story in the hospital. It's about a little boy named Tip and his friend Jack and their witch of a guardian Mombi. And near the end, everyone is searching for the princess who disappeared around the same time Tip first showed up.

Jack laughed and coughed. "Uh oh. I don't think you're going to like the end of this story."

As always, the little creep was right. ●