

## **Emerald City Blues** by Steven R. Boyett

*Emerald City Blues* was previously published in *Midnight Graffiti*, Fall 1988, and reprinted in *Best of Midnight Graffiti*, New American Library, October 1992.

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LIEUTENANT RHINO LOVES HIS F-18. After thousands of hours nestled in its warm and pressurized cockpit, the Hornet is as responsive to the commands of Lieutenant Rhino's brain as his hands. He enjoys the power at his fingertips and beneath his hard-soled boots. He can make the horizon pinwheel with the slightest turn of gloved wrist. A push will fill the wedge of windshield with the monotony of sea or confusion of land. A pull, and the horizon drains in an even line.

A finger on this button, and the load would lighten beneath his wings, to explode somewhere and someone ahead of him.

Lieutenant Rhino smiles, sliding his rubber cup of oxygen mask a half inch up his nose. On his nose is the wart that gives Rhino his nickname; the wart that all the kids made fun of in school; the only wart on his body, and in the most conspicuous place possible; the wart he absolutely refuses to have removed.

His oxygen mask irritates the wart.

Rhino thinks about the payload specialists on bombers. They have time to *plan*, to add some style to their button-pushing. A bombardier—payload specialist—can arc his hand out, add a flourish, extend an index finger, and *push*. Or he can jab like a concert pianist attacking ivory, then wait for the welling of megaton timpani. Or simple and direct, the Air Force Way. Or, better still, simple, direct, and with little finger.

Rhino envies them this time to plan. Fighter-pilot decisions don't allow much planning—in fact, they're hardly conscious decisions at all. Rhino feels he is the perfect man for his job.

He glances right, looking out the Windex-clean window at Kneecap, the 747 with the Presidential Seal.

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There are campfires all over Oz tonight. Gillikins from the north, Quadlings from the south, Munchkins from the east, and Winkies from the west, all flock toward the Emerald City, taking care that their torches, lighted ceremoniously in their home cities, remain burning. They wish to add to the bonfire already blazing in celebration of the imminent return of Dorothy.

The first delegation of Munchkins arrives at the end of the Yellow Brick Road. They are greeted with glee by the revelers, who are becoming a little drunk from the flow of Winkie country wine.

Wine leaves no hangover in Oz.

The Munchkins bow their short little bows and with great pomp add their torches to the bonfire. The Scarecrow thanks them solemnly from his gilded platform, which is located a respectful distance from the flames.

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Lieutenant Rhino snakes a gloved finger beneath the damnable oxygen mask to scratch at the wart. He wonders—not for the first time, certainly—if he can get one of the masks custom built, with a rubber dot of a hump for his nose.

Kneecap plods along in its clumsy-graceful way, like a pregnant guppy swimming upside down. “Kneecap” is for NEACP, which is for National Emergency Airborne Command Post.

Rhino frowns, and his oxygen mask lowers snugly where it belongs. Looking at the bulbous-headed airplane, he has just been struck by the notion that the craft looks remarkably like a winged penis. He squashes the thought and glances ahead of the 747. There flies Tee Dee One, the point plane in the Tasmanian Devil Group, spewing a gray contrail. Tasmanian Devil Group is the hastily assembled escort of F-18s flying in a diamond configuration so perfect it would have given Euclid an erection. In the center of the diamond flies Kneecap, and inside Kneecap sits the President of the ephemerally United States.

In the mid-1970s it had been decreed that, when the balloon finally went up, so would the President—hence Kneecap. Several hours ago the United States’ spy-satellites peeking in at the escalating situation in the Persian Gulf had politely informed those who get informed that the balloon was as up as a Pittsburgh Steeler before the Superbowl; and so, up went Kneecap.

A voice crackles in Lieutenant Rhino’s ear, the voice of Kneecap. “Kneecap to Tasmanian Devils. Deploying antenna. The air drag’ll slow us up a bit, so stay with us. Tee Dee Three will want to climb a hundred feet. Acknowledge.”

Tee Dees One and Two acknowledge. Tee Dee Three adds that he is climbing, since he is flying behind Kneecap and wants no part of the long antenna that is deployed to collect vital information.

Rhino thumbs his radio transmitter. “Tee Dee Four acknowledges. Do we have an ETA Goldilocks?”

Goldilocks was SAC—Strategic Air Command—headquarters in Omaha, Nebraska; ETA was Estimated Time of Arrival. It was fun to think up names to go with important things.

“We can’t give that on the air, Tee Dee Four,” answers Kneecap smugly. “It shouldn’t be too hard to work out yourself. Keep this channel clear. Kneecap out.”

Well! Rhino toys with the idea of peeling off and shoving a bang or six under Kneecap’s nose, but dismisses it. If he does and is somehow caught after this mess is over, he will be court martialed.

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The Tin Woodman swims the length of his Olympic-sized pool, breast-stroking his hollow body through the Quaker State forty-weight. He emerges, dripping viscously, and bends his legs and flexes his arms to work the oil into his knees and elbows. A bespectacled assistant hands him the evening edition of the *Green Street Journal*; he turns immediately to Commodities.

Hearing himself scrape as he sits on a stone bench, he thinks, *I ought to do something about that. A little foam padding, perhaps.*

He opens his chest and pulls out his heart. Nine twenty-five already. The revelry will go on for another two and a half hours—until Glinda makes everybody go to bed.

Being one of the good guys sure has its drawbacks, he reflects. But it’s probably for the best, since Dorothy arrives tomorrow.

Dorothy....

He looks down and, for the ten thousandth time, curses his incompleteness. “If I only had a hard,” he sighs.

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“Tee Dee One.” The voice of Kneecap crackles to life, calling the F-18 Hornet leading the diamond formation.

“One here.”

“We show activity on long-range. DSB confirms. Speed and signature suggest Soviet cruise missile, type unknown, target Goldilocks probable.” Kneecap gives coordinates and velocities, then adds a command that Lieutenant Rhino yearns to hear directed to him: “Go for it, Tee Dee One.”

The trail farting from Tee Dee One's tail darkens as the F-18 shoots ahead and veers southwest on an intercept course.

*How come I never have any fun?* Lieutenant Rhino whines to himself.

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The Once-Cowardly Lion, King of the Beasts, ignores the big-breasted woman plaiting his calves as he searches through the matted fur of his emaciated arm. He finds a healthy vein and grins carnivorously. He wraps his tail tightly around his elbow and clenches his fist several times, then slips the needle of a hypodermic syringe into the vein and pushes the plunger.

Euphoria courses up his arm and throughout his undernourished body. *Courage*, he thinks.

The woman gives up plaiting his legs and sits on the polished floor giggling to herself.

The Lion folds his paws behind his head and feels himself beginning to float above the couch. He stares contentedly at the emerald ceiling and thinks of the revelers outside the city walls. *Whatta they got that I ain't got?*

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Brightness blossoms in the southwest, where Tee Dee One veered off for his rendezvous with destiny.

The three Tasmanian Devils still escorting Kneecap remain in tight formation until Tee Dee One is sighted, first on radar, then visually. The phrase "visual sighting" is not redundant to a fighter pilot.

The returning fighter jet banks, and Rhino sees that it has expended only two air-to-air missiles. Tee Dee One resumes formation, and the Tasmanian Devils are a diamond once again. He is back in lead position and reporting before the shock-wave reaches them.

*Smug-ass bastard*, thinks Rhino. Still, he thumbs the "transmit" button and joins the others in congratulating Tee Dee One.

Ninety minutes later Kneecap touches down at SAC headquarters. The four escort jets shoot ahead, fifty feet from the tarmac, then peel off in four directions.

Flight crews glide out to Kneecap on maintenance trucks, sticking long hoses into its delicate underparts.

The President and his staff, including an officer carrying a little black bag known as the Football that contains the codes for launching U.S. nuclear forces, hurry down the roll-up stairway and are quickly bundled away in a van that hurries them to another airplane: Looking Glass, commanded by an Air Force general in charge of directing U.S. ICBMs and bombers.

Fifteen minutes later Kneecap is airborne again, heading north. Looking Glass noses into the air soon afterward, gains a respectful height, and turns south, toward Kansas.

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The Wicked Witch of the North cackles gleefully. “Melt my sister, will she?” Her voice is a silken *ssliiding* across a sheen of oil. “Start a housing development on my *other* sister, will she?”

Perched beside her, the King of the Flying Monkeys cocks his capped head. He removes the soggy stump of a Cuba Libre cigar from his mouth and gestures with it. “That housing development,” he says in a distinct Bronx accent, “is the best thing that ever happened to us.”

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Many items were salvaged from the unintentionally mobile home of Dorothy’s aunt Em and Uncle Henry. In a wire magazine rack next to the flush toilet were Aunt Em’s back issues of *Collier’s* and *Vanity Fair*, and a Sears & Roebuck catalog (minus the first thirty pages) advertising such novel items as hunting supplies, washing machines, door locks, and shoe lifts for the short statured. A supplement detailed Sears & Roebuck’s generous credit plan. On a narrow vanity shelf beneath the medicine chest mirror were Coty cosmetics, including a cake of rouge in a cameo box with a cracked, ivory-handled, horsetail brush, a thick glass jar of vanishing cream, and lipsticks in various reds. On the scarred maple dresser in the bedroom were books—among them the 1898 edition of the *Home Medical EncyclopAedia* (with a comprehensive listing of drugs, their effects, and methods of administration), Hobbs’ *Guide to the Stock Exchange*, Smythe’s *Guide to Investments and Agrarian Commodities*, and *The Shooter’s Bible* (with a chapter on home loads). Beneath the books, in the top dresser drawer, were a box of Lucifer matches, a package of Diamond rolling papers, and Union Leader tobacco in the Crimson Couch package. Scattered about were fifty-five cents in change and a rumpled dollar bill (which solved the mystery of the hitherto unknown word “dollar” that occurred with such frequency in the Sears & Roebuck catalog, in the back of Aunt Em’s magazines, and in the Hobbs and Smythe books). There was also a box of Cuba Libre cigars hand-wrapped in Havana, and beneath this were twelve worn-cornered, black-and-white French postcards, most of them thumb-worn at the lower left edge. In the drawer below this were bras, panties, and elastic girdles.

In the utility room was a gasoline-powered generator. In the living room was a cathedral-arched Philco radio. Discovered beneath a loose board in the larger bedroom were two unlabeled glass jugs of illegally distilled grain alcohol, colloquially known as “hooch.”

The house had been picked clean in days.

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The King of the Flying Monkeys waves his fragrant cigar. “Best thing that ever happened,” he repeats.

The Wicked Witch of the North slits her green eyes at the King of the Flying Monkeys. “The best is yet to come,” she grates. She smiles, and the King of the Flying Monkeys finds he must look away.

The Wicked Witch of the North gazes back into her crystal ball.

In it are a river and a rocket.

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Held aloft by its short, stubby wings, the Soviet cruise missile amorously hugs the terrain. It is a submarine-launched missile that has come all the way across the western United States, zooming along a scant hundred feet from the ground. Being launched from a submarine means that it has escaped detection by the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System radars in Alaska, and if the Defense Support Program satellites haven’t detected it by now, there is little that can be done about it if they do.

Traveling across the continent, its terrain contour matching capability, guided by a preprogrammed minicomputer that uses a radar altimeter to match the contour of the ground with on-board maps obtained from spy-satellite photographs, pilots the cruise missile swiftly toward its programmed destination.

With simple-minded determination it follows the twisting path of the Missouri river, avoiding radar detection, until its pea-brain tells it that it is time to turn now. The missile veers southwest, whistling to itself as it carries its 300-kiloton nuclear warhead toward Omaha, Nebraska.

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What would pass for the sound of a DC-10 crash elsewhere is laughter in the castle of the Wicked Witch of the North. Her Tartar-like guards are used to the sound and do not flinch, but the flying monkeys are not, and they cover their enormous ears.

The Wicked Witch of the North turns away from her crystal ball and fixes her evil-eyed gaze on the King of the Flying Monkeys. “Bring me my broom!” she screeches. Her voice is a thousand jagged fingernails dragged across two hundred spotless blackboards.

The awful sound raises the fur of his neck, and the King of the Flying Monkeys turns to obey.

“And make sure it’s full this time!” she calls after him. “I don’t want to run out of smoke the way I did before!”

She rubs her long-fingered, black-nailed, green hands and turns back to the lovely prime-time viewing on the crystal ball.  
In it are blackness and stars.

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Orbiting high above the Earth, a Soviet satellite receives a coded radio signal.

The satellite—with a microchip brain even smaller than that of the Soviet cruise missile—sets in motion the short program that has waited years for this moment.

Four small explosive bolts blow away its small metal shell to expose the warhead beneath. A thick, ceramic heat-shield covers its nose; it will be sheared away by friction, and the remainder discarded, during the warhead’s descent.

Gyroscopes spin soundlessly in the vacuum of space. The bulbous-headed body pivots until its single cone of rocket exhaust points away from delicate blue marble of the Earth. The engine flares for seventeen seconds, and the pea-brained missile begins its seventy-two second descent toward Omaha, Nebraska.

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God takes a flash picture right behind Lieutenant Rhino’s F-18.

“What the *fuck* was that?”

“Cut it, Tee Dee Four,” orders the voice of Looking Glass.

*Up yours*, Rhino commands silently.

“That,” says a radio voice, “was Omaha.” Rhino notes the use of the past tense. “Cut it, Tee Dee Three,” orders Looking Glass.

*Tee Dee Three, muses Rhino. Golly gee, Tee Dee Three, see the bee?*

The overpressure wave hits them from behind. The five jets nose up and ride it out nicely. Rhino hangs ten all the way.

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*Why can't they break piñatas, or hold a parade, or anything else in the goddamned world?* the Scarecrow wonders. *But no, they've got to light the biggest damned fire they can make, and I have to preside over it.*

*If the wind changes I'm going to go up like a firework. The king of ahhs.*

The Scarecrow bows to a party of Good Witches-in-Training from the South-southeast. They blush behind thick layers of rouge, duck their heads, and smile shyly with reddened lips. With charming sophomorphism they recite spells to light the brands they contribute to the bonfire's blaze. Straightening, the Scarecrow fixes his painted eyes on the white-taffeta-gowned butt of one of the Good Witches.

One of the prudish Munchkins catches him staring at the Good Witch's butt. The Scarecrow stares him down until he turns away, red-faced and muttering apologies.

*Short little fuck.*

He looks back at the white-clad derriere. One gloved hand strays unconsciously to the zipper of his overalls and fingers the stuffing beneath.

*Maybe I shouldn't have asked for brains.*

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By Lieutenant Rhino's reckoning—as dead a reckoning as ever there was—they have just crossed over into Kansas airspace.

What are they doing down there? he wonders, looking out at vast stretches of farmland. Hiding?

Shooting each other to get into air-raid shelters, probably. There's a missile silo for every cow, 'round here.

What would they think if they knew we were up here?

Be pissed off, he decides. Hell, they paid for this. Their money went to build Kneecap and Looking Glass. Somebody picked beans for weeks to pay for the radiation-shielded fuselage. Someone else, some skinny redneck riding a tractor from



sunup to sundown, got hemorrhoids plowing from January to the middle of March to contribute to the long-range radar, the teletype printers, the mile-long reel-out antenna.

*Hey, down there!* he sends telepathically, waving. *Thanks! You guys paid for my F-18!*

He tips his wings in salute.

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The Wicked Witch of the North takes to the air on her broom, which leaves a much blacker trail than even the most flatulent of the F-18s. She doesn't need to understand overpressure waves and aftershocks, dynamic pressure and "dirty" bursts and gamma radiation, to know that she will be safer in the air. She doubts even her castle will survive the coming onslaught, and her castle is about as tough a castle as a contractor can build.

Besides, she'll need to be in the air to open the Rainbow Bridge.

She orders all her Flying Monkeys to take off with her, and they flap around her, shrieking delightedly. It's been a while since the old hag let them cut some air.

She checks her skywriting smoke level. The dipstick shows full. Not that she doesn't trust the King of the Flying Monkeys, but you never know. Good help is pretty hard to find in Oz these days.

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"AWACS shows a bogey," announces the electronically dehumanized voice of Looking Glass.

"Numbers?" Tee Dee One demands quickly.

Looking Glass gives Tee Dee One some numbers. The numbers tell him that the bogey is 'way up high and dropping fast.

*Glory hog*, thinks Lieutenant Rhino.

"Tee Dee Four," says Tee Dee One.

Rhino jumps. "Four here."

"Go for it, Tee Dee Four. Short and sweet."

Rhino grins. He guns his engines, rises smartly, and shoots ahead of the

Tasmanian Devil formation, pulling back hard on the stick. His contrail darkens behind him.

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“Beep-beep,” says the F-18’s radar.

Rhino glances at it. A tight-packed group of phosphorescent green-white tactical numbers creeps toward a bullseye on the screen. Rhino relies on his computers; the bogey is too fast to visually sight—by the time he saw it, it would be long gone.

It looks like there’s one whopper of a storm about forty miles to the south. A tornado, maybe. Clouds cover the land like puffy gray fungus.

“Beep-beep,” repeats the radar.

“I *know* it’s there!” Rhino snaps.

Fifteen seconds later his targeting computer has a radar lock and tells him he can fire. Rhino’s F-18 carries a special missile, an ASAT—Anti Satellite—with the barest smidgen of a nuclear tip to wipe out enemy satellites. But this bogey has managed to sneak right by everybody until almost too late to do anything about it, and Rhino is not sure that his ASAT could maneuver, target-lock, and detonate in time to take care of the satellite-launched missile. If it is an airburst warhead, it will go off at approximately two thousand feet. But since the bomb that shifted Omaha into the past tense was an air burst, this one will probably be a ground-pounder intended to further pulverize Strategic Air Command headquarters and get whoever may have cheated by hiding in underground shelters.

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The pea-brain of the descending missile, however, is just smart enough to know that it should try to get out of the way if it detects someone trying to stop it. Since it is moving so fast, it can’t maneuver so well, but since it is moving so fast, even the slightest move will make it harder to intercept.

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Rhino frowns at the shifting number group on his tactical display. The missile must have seen him coming, because it is running away.

Rhino runs after it.

In what seems like no time they are over the fungus of the storm. The storm is capped by a huge rainbow, and Rhino thinks of McDonalds.

The rainbow draws closer as the Soviet missile speeds down and the F-18 speeds up and across the sky. Lieutenant Rhino's tactical radar is beeping bloody murder now.

*Oh, what the hell,* thinks Rhino. "Bang," he says out loud. "Bang-bang."

The F-18's Voice-Activated Weapons Launcher System hears the words. It asks itself if they are the right words. It asks itself if Rhino is allowed to say them.

Yes, it answers itself. And yes.

Satisfied, it throws out a heat-seeking missile. This missile has a "conventional" warhead, meaning that it is not nuclear, but uses the kind of explosive traditional bombers recommend most.

The voice-activated, heat-seeking missile misses, however, and for the strangest of reasons: the satellite-launched Soviet missile dives over the rainbow and disappears.

Targetless, the heat-seeking missile speeds under the rainbow. Lieutenant Rhino and his F-18 sail over it.

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*"There she is!"* Somebody points upward. The Scarecrow looks at the indicated patch of night sky and sees nothing unusual. But he keeps his gaze fixed unblinkingly and, sure enough, one of the stars is moving. It seems to be coming closer, growing brighter as it does.

"Dorothy!" shouts one of the Good-Witches-in-Training from the South-southeast. The one with the nice butt.

"Dorothy isn't due till tomorrow," says the Scarecrow. But the cry has been taken up: "Dorothy!" shout the Munchkins. "Dorothy!" shout the Good Witches. "Dorothy!" shout the Gillikins, Quadlings, and Winkies.

"Might be the Wicked Witch of the North," mutters the Scarecrow, wishing he weren't so damned smart.

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Something's very wrong.

It hits Rhino as his F-18 sails over the rainbow without a ripple: you can't get close to a rainbow. They're a phenomenon of refracted sunlight, and must keep

pace ahead of you because the angle of refraction must remain constant to the observer in order for the rainbow to be visible at all!

And besides, he remembers, rainbows are circular when viewed from the air.

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Ahead of Rhino, the Soviet missile is even more confused. Nothing matches the contour signatures contained in its pea brain. The altimeter shows a drastic reduction in height.

Desperate, it switches to infrared tracking and discovers a heat source only a few miles below. It makes a minor course correction and sighs an electronic sigh of relief and fulfillment.

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Rhino sees stars through his wedge of windshield. But it can't be night yet! Something is really fucked here.

He follows the missile down through puffy, moonlit clouds that he knows should be puffy gray fungus. He breaks through them just in time to glimpse a brilliant flash ahead of the plummeting nose of his F-18.

Rhino jinks left, kicks in the afterburners, and pulls up, feeling blood drain from his head. His vision dims even though his flight suit tries to fight the G-forces by squeezing his body like a concerned mother.

Just before the flash he glimpsed something he is not about to believe. There is no way he can believe it, no way it can exist, even though his mother read him to sleep describing it when he was a little boy; even though it is exactly what he pictured but never bothered to credit with any importance, any weight, any relevance, to his life, his dreams, his heart's desire.

But inside he knows that he really did see it before he'd begun to pull up from the dive, and he knows that, somehow, he's not in Kansas anymore.

Aftershocks buffet his F-18.

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And the Emerald City, the slender spires and fragile domes and jeweled gates; the capital of Oz and host to her miracles; the green flint that sparked the imagination of generations; the Emerald City, where the impossible is as ordinary as a Sunday paper beside a china plate of steaming scrambled eggs; the brilliant, delicate, and eternal Emerald City of Oz, shatters under an explosion beyond the mind's

containing—fifty times more powerful than that which destroyed Hiroshima, an explosion equal to the simultaneous detonation of one million tons of TNT. But before those pieces of emerald, shaped by small hands and large thoughts, can fall a measurable distance, they are melted to slag by a flash of consuming, voracious heat—ten million degrees Fahrenheit, heat that fuses sand into glass, heat like the surface of the sun.

Seeing the flash, the Tin Woodman extends a metal arm to grab his famous axe and defend his beloved city, but his arm shimmers, glows, and melts in a fraction of a second. Within his melting chest his heart bursts into flame, as if unable to contain its rage.

The Once-Cowardly Lion, hearing a jungle bellow from somewhere outside his chambers deep within the Emerald City, draws a proud breastful of air to respond to the challenge, but no amount of courage could withstand the onslaught that devours him as unthinkingly as a whale devours a plankton cell.

And the Scarecrow, ruler of the Emerald City and wisest creature in all of Oz; whose greatest fear and enemy is fire, sees all the flames of creation born before his painted eyes, and has only time enough to rail against the brain that could conceive a device that obliterates minds on a wholesale level, before he ignites and bursts and becomes ash and less than ash, not even a flicker in the terrible conflagration that is his city, not even a tenth of a second's worth of fuel to feed the clenched fist of consumed matter that towers above the heart of the land of Oz.

Yellow bricks burn. Poppy fields vaporize. Round houses explode. The bodies of Munchkins catch fire by themselves. Good Witches run screaming, white taffeta blazing; are smashed by a compressed wall of air moving faster than the speed of sound—the overpressure wave—are picked up and hurled like so many clots of dirt; are flensed by debris, are slammed into walls and trees or tumbled like broken dolls upon the ground, twisted and bleeding, powerless to help themselves or their burned and blackened and blinded and bleeding countrymen. Everyone is a child again, pleading for help, calling to make it stop, make it go away, but their cries are subsumed by the howl of the wind.

Firestorms feed on the kindling of smashed houses. Those Munchkins, Gillikins, Winkies, and Quadlings who have managed to hide in cellars are asphyxiated by the voracious greed of fire sucking away the air.

The roiling fist swells above the heart of Oz. It unclenches, and leaves not one life untouched by its fingers.

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Flying far away—gloating, unaware that the malevolent life within her body ebbs as those billions of body cells destroyed by an onslaught of neutrons and

gamma rays encourage the death of surrounding cells—the Wicked Witch of the North straddles her broom and writes triumphantly in the sky.

She has not even completed the first word before she is shot down by a jet fighter.

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The next morning a house landed in the middle of a smoking, thousand-foot-wide crater, and Dorothy Gale stepped right from her snaggle-toothed front porch and onto a vast plain of fused emerald and glass. She cradled Toto in one arm and her ungainly lunch pail in the other. Her ruby-slippered feet clacked across a solid sea of green until she stopped before a wall—a lone wall of emerald brick, the only wall standing for a dozen miles.

A hot wind blew among the ruins. Black flakes settled like filthy snow upon Dorothy's gingham-clad shoulders. A lengthening white contrail stretched across the murky sky.

*But this can't be Oz,* thought Dorothy. *This just can't be.*

And so she walked away from the plain of emerald, letting Toto pick his own way through piles of rubble the height of buildings—the rubble of townships and Yellow Brick Roads and talking trees and tall cornfields and horses of a different color—a little girl with braided pigtails wandering the perpetually twilit corpse of a city she dreamed about every night at her aunt and uncle's farm in Kansas. For mile after mile she saw not one living creature, not one standing building. In a few hours she stumbled upon life: a wasteland of leveled houses writhing with groping, burned figures in charred uniforms of red, yellow, blue, or green. Knowing nothing of fallout, blinded by nuclear flash, deafened by detonation, the people of Oz staggered in private blackness and agony through the soft and deadly rain, calling out to ears that could not hear.

Dorothy cupped her hand to the river that fed Lake Quad and drank radioactive water. Fish floated belly-up. Dorothy looked up from her small, wet palm and saw shadows on a stone wall in the remains of a Munchkin village, but there were no figures to cast them. She recognized the Mayor of Munchkinland from his curled-brim hat and spike goatee. The shadow held a scroll in one hand and gestured to the crowd with the other, burned forever onto the stone.

She chased away rats that fed on the festering corpses of Munchkins, two sources of the plague to come, and walked on.

In one day Dorothy saw more burn victims than there are burn-unit beds in the United States, Canada, and Europe. The burned and the unburned alike were afflicted with radiation sickness: vomiting, diarrhea, anemia, hair loss, skin cancers,

and infections. There was not one hospital in all of Oz.

The land was growing cold because the airborne debris blocked the sunlight. In a few months the fifteen thousand survivors of Oz—which once boasted a population one hundred thousand strong—will face the first true winter of their lives. Farmers will watch withering crops that signify the doom of their families. In the land of the Winkies, opposite the easterly wind, surviving cows and goats will give forth radioactive milk; the last normal infants born in Oz will suck at the breasts of mothers eating radioactive food and breathing radioactive air. Only half of the fifteen thousand will see the next summer.

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Dorothy will not live to see this grim winter. Massive radiation poisoning sleeting through her body disrupted its cells beyond repair, forcing her metabolism to work itself to exhaustion, until it simply gives up. Within days of her arrival she is dead, slumped against a pile of rubble beside a puddle of her own vomit, lunch pail in hand, a widow's shawl of radioactive ash around her shoulders, small bodies huddled beside her, still forever.

Toto, too.

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*I've got to get back, Lieutenant Rhino thinks frantically. I've got to tell them they can't do this, not this.*

Rhino has logged more than a thousand hours in fighter jets. His F-18 fits his body like a tailored suit, and he knows its every tic and tremor. He does not need to look at the gauge to know that he is nearly out of fuel.

But I've got at least an hour left, he thinks. I've got to find it, got to check my course tracker and tactical radar and inertial navigator and trust my dead reckoning to get me back to that rainbow, to get me over that rainbow and back *home*. To tell them, to make them stop. If he could tell them what they'd done, if they could only see what he had seen, surely they'd understand.

He shuts his eyes and remembers what he saw just before pulling his F-18 up and out.

It was tall. God, it was so tall and slender....

*Got to get back and get on the radio. If I do one thing, God, one useful thing in my entire life, let me find that rainbow, let me make it back before I run out of fuel. You gave me the speed and the skill and the talent to fly like a bluebird, God. Now let me use that skill to find my way back and tell them what I've seen,*

*what we've done.*

—slender, like the fingers of a lady. And it sparkled like the ocean in the moonlight....

*Thirty minutes. I can find it in thirty minutes, God.*

—and the color, so bright, even in the darkness before the flash, and so green.