

# Heavenly Gates

By Alex Wagner

He had expected something a bit more...pearly. Not to say that he wasn't pleased with his present environment. Far from it. He found his surroundings to be quite soothing: the clouds overhead were thick and languid, painting the sky a gentle hue of gray and shrouding the earth with a cool, invigorating fog. The wind was strong, but not harsh, causing the omnipresent shin-high grass to bend lazily in its sporadic wake. The grass brushed against his legs as he walked, baptizing them with fresh dew - it must've been early. The low temperature and prevalent moisture placed the time at about 7:00, give or take a half-hour. Breathing in the clean morning air, he reflected on how monumentally pissed off his mother would be if she could see what he was wearing in this weather. Admittedly, cargo shorts and a T-shirt were wildly inappropriate for the present temperature, but he hadn't exactly been given a chance to dress accordingly. If he'd had more time and had known he were going to end up here, he probably would've grabbed some pants. Which brought him back to his current query: where the hell was he?

He chuckled as he realized the irony of this question, as it was entirely possible that he was actually in hell: but that was unlikely. If *this* were what the sulfuric pit of eternal damnation and suffering looked like, he probably would've sinned more. However, if he weren't in hell, then that left only heaven, and he was fairly certain he wasn't there, either. He was no devout Christian, but even he knew what heaven looked like, or what it was *supposed* to look like. He had imagined something magnificent: a cloud city, choirs of angels, and - most importantly - a set of massive pearly gates opening into a shining light that set the skies ablaze. In comparison to this fantasy, the rusty old fence - made of splintery wooden posts and barbed wire - that he was currently walking beside seemed to him like some kind of divine middle finger. And the only brilliant lights that he remembered seeing were those headlights, which he had only glanced for a split second - a split second too late.

The fence didn't seem to open up into anything at all, let alone Elysium. Peering over the shoulder-high posts, he saw nothing but more grass stretching far into the horizon. To cross over was pointless. To leave, even more so. Which left but one direction: parallel. He had probably been walking along the fence for fifteen minutes now and had seen approximately nothing. No landmarks, no people, no extra pants: just grass and what was apparently the longest fence in the history of fences. He began to consider turning around and trying his luck in the other direction when he noticed something perched on one of the posts up ahead. He squinted, trying to make out the peculiar shape as it came closer. It wasn't very large or noticeable: in fact, he probably wouldn't have noticed it at all if he hadn't been looking at these things for the past uninterrupted quarter of an hour. This post looked about the same as all of the others except for a slight irregularity at the very top. Something was resting on it and hanging down off the side. Finally reaching the post of question, he was startled to find that it was wearing a baseball cap.

The hat was nothing special: a children's sized navy-blue ball cap with the words "MACKINAC ISLAND" embroidered on the front in faded, white thread that was coming undone in several places. It was worn out and weathered, sporting mysterious splotches and stains of every color and size. However, despite its appearance, he felt like there was something significant about this hat. Looking at it reminded him of warm summer days from his youth, when he would go hunting for crawfish with his father in the stream not far from his house. He remembered the sun on his neck, the mossy stones rolling under his feet, the tiny silver minnows darting through his fingers and glistening in the waning daylight. A cold breeze yanked him back into the afterlife, which seemed a lot colder than it did a few minutes ago. Glancing farther down the fence, he saw what looked like another hat about twenty poles away.

He started off towards it, accelerating to a steady jog despite the wet grass whipping against his shins. Sliding to a halt, he immediately recognized the tiny snow cap resting on the pole in front of him. It was from his elementary school days, back when he was obsessed with *The Amazing Spiderman*. It was a faded scarlet hat with blue highlights, and it was designed so it could roll down over his face and take the form of the iconic superhero's mask. This feature was probably added so that children could pretend to be superheroes and play with their friends in the snow. He had seen a more practical use for it: shielding his nose and cheeks from the harsh Michigan winters he had endured in his youth. Memories of long walks through heavy snow came flooding back and sent a shiver down his spine. Compared to a February in Detroit, this place felt like a tropical paradise. Breaking free of his reminiscent daze, he noticed that he could clearly make out the shapes of even more hats further down the fence. Hesitantly, he took one last look at the snow cap that had weathered so many winters with him. Then he started off again.

He remembered all of them. Each hat brought back something special, something forgotten: a road trip to South Carolina, an old girlfriend with strawberry blonde hair and dazzling blue eyes, a car ride with his friends who were dead set on getting nowhere in particular, and getting there *fast*. Not all of the memories were pleasant: among the hats were the dunce cap he had been forced to wear more than once during his elementary school career, the skullcap he used when sneaking out of his house at night, and the ten-gallon cowboy hat from that "western" phase he went through. The good, the bad, and the god-awful cowboy hats alike were lined up like soldiers, waiting for him to rediscover them.

He began to notice that they were arranged in chronological order: first came his old high school football helmet, which was followed by his graduation cap, which was nipping on the

heels of a construction helmet, and so on. They were also becoming more frequent. Soon enough, there was a hat on every post without fail, and each one had a story to tell. He didn't want to hear some of them: he deliberately ignored the Army-green Garrison cap, speeding past it without a glance. Others he was eager to see: he must've stood by a pair of Mickey Mouse ears for half an hour. His son Christopher had an identical pair resting on the dresser in his room. He liked to think that Chris sometimes stopped beside it and reminisced the way he was right now. God, how long had it been since he had last seen his son? At least three years: he came over for holidays when he could, but he was busy and all.

As he moved on, he realized that he never got the chance to say goodbye to Chris. Or anybody, for that matter. Looking back at the many hats he had worn over the years, he couldn't help but feel a twinge of melancholia for the life he was leaving behind. The snow, the streams, even the dunce cap: they all helped turn him into the man he was today. Was he ready to leave all that behind? He stood for a long time, looking back on his life and all of the memories he made during it. Then, with a heavy sigh, he said goodbye. To Chris. To his father. To his life. Turning away, he saw one last hat waiting for him: a brilliant golden halo floating above the next post over, which preceded a simple picket-fence gate. A smile spread across his face. He had expected something pearlier...but it was good enough.