

A fictional look inside the world of the "Rennies"--the artists, entertainers, and offbeat characters who travel the Renaissance festival circuit. During the 1981 season, Gulliver and his troupe of stilt dancers explore a curious, alternate, 16th-century themed universe.

The Road Dog Diary

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The Road Dog Diary

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10-Digit ISBN 1-59113-985-6

13-Digit ISBN 978-1-59113-985-0

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2010

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One.

I might never have hooked up with the Renaissance festivals if it hadn't been for Jack Horner. I'm still not sure whether to thank him or blame him.

It was back in the fall of 1980. Ronald Reagan was running for president. Soon, he would be moving into the White House, kicking off a new era of arch conservatism, getting to work on Star Wars and dismantling the Evil Empire, running the country into deep debt, fighting secret little wars in Central America, trading arms for hostages, stocking the Oval Office with glass jars full of jelly beans.

Not that any of that mattered much to me. I was beginning to lose interest in politics at the time. Instead, I found my thoughts gravitating toward issues of a more personal nature—like survival.

I had been living in Minneapolis with an auburn-haired lady named Cathy with whom I had been trying to create art. We were playing around with theater and masks and sculpture, circus skills like juggling and stilt walking, and cutting-edge concepts like Brechtian distancing and Jungian archetypes. During daylight hours, we worked on whatever show was currently in the works in a small studio in the basement of an inner-city church, which had ceased holding church services some years before but instead offered its space as a theater for experimental groups such as ours.

In the evenings, we got together with our avant-garde friends—dancers, actors, poets, mimes, political activists, anarchists, socialist revolutionaries, pacifists, Maoists, Zen Buddhists, and vegetarians—to drink coffee at Dudley Riggs Coffeehouse or sip tea and eat avocado and sprout sandwiches at the Modern Times Café. We talked about art and politics. We planned collaborations that pushed the frontiers of form and substance. We dressed like proletarians in multi-layered

shades of drab. None of us ever shaved, which for the men resulted in full beards and mustaches, and for the women hairy legs and armpits.

Somewhere in the middle of this Bohemian existence, the whole thing went sour for me. Cathy and I had a falling out over the artistic control of our theater. I was the one that ended up leaving even though I had started the group. Once the artistic relationship faltered, the personal relationship wasn't far behind. Cathy decided that since she could no longer work with me as an artist, there was no way she could justify sleeping with me. Instead, she took up with a New Age composer who specialized in Yoko Ono-style compositions awash in dissonance—bizarre electronic stuff mixed with the real-life noise of traffic, power tools, and the occasional squawks and squeals of barnyard animals.

I became something of an emotional wreck at this time. Cathy's dumping me had a devastating effect on my self-esteem. I begged her to take me back. She said that now that I was acting so weak and needy, I was no longer attractive to her, which, of course, made me feel all the more desperate. Catch 22.

On top of all that, my parents were putting pressure on me to forget about this art thing altogether, get a real job and start making some kind of normal life for myself. Problem was, I never was very good at fitting in with the work-a-day world. No matter how much they tried to steer me toward that conventional middle-class life, I knew it was not for me.

No, I had a different plan for myself: I started drinking and seeing a shrink. The shrink helped me get to the root of my pain; the drinking helped make the pain tolerable. I was barely over 30 and in the prime of a life that was going nowhere. Winter was just around the corner. I tried doing a little painting and sculpture work and even attempted breaking into a couple of other theater companies as an actor and mask maker, but my work was directionless. My situation had become desperate. I was broke, lonely, and lost.

That's when I ran into Jack.

I barely knew him at the time, but "Little Jack Horner" was beginning to make a name for himself around the Twin Cities arts community as a talented if quirky variety artist—part mime, part

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juggler, part magician, all clown. I hooked up with him one evening at a bar in the Uptown area of Lake and Hennepin. Over a beer and a game of Pac-man, Jack told me about a Renaissance festival in Texas that was flying him in to do shows on the weekends. He was pretty proud of the fact that they were flying him back and forth and seemed to consider that some kind of a breakthrough. The more he talked, the more it opened my eyes to a world I hadn't even known existed.

"These Renaissance fairs hire all kinds of street performers, kiddo," Jack said, after I'd clued him in briefly on my current predicament. "Maybe they'd hire you to do some of that dancing on stilts I've seen you doing around town."

It was a skill for which I'd developed some degree of proficiency during my theater troupe experience.

"Do you really think they'd hire me just to do that?"

"Well, you'd have to take it up with King John. He's the fair's owner. Dresses up like a king and everybody fawns all over him and kisses his feet. Of course, you'd have to get there first. And there's only two weekends left, so it might not be worth your while."

From my point of view, anything was better than languishing in Minneapolis, feeling unattached, unemployed and desperate. I had never been to a Renaissance festival and was a little vague on the concept. I squeezed a few more details out of Jack, basic stuff like the sort of costuming that would be required and some general directions to the festival site in Texas, while Jack amused himself doing magic tricks for the other people sitting at the bar. It was all basic close-up slight of hand, like making a cigarette disappear into his eye socket and then pulling it out of his nose. One huge, well-lit biker thought this was the funniest thing he'd ever seen. That was all the encouragement Jack needed. To the utter amazement of the giant biker, Jack swallowed a lit cigarette, opened his mouth to show the biker the cavity was empty, closed his mouth, and then coughed up the cigarette, still lit, from his throat. The biker roared and slammed his hands, which were as big as porterhouse steaks, on the counter.

When the biker went off to use the restroom, his old lady started making eyes at Jack, who responded by pulling silver dollars out of her ears and various other body parts. The biker staggered back from the

men's room just as Jack was pulling one silver dollar after another from the woman's cleavage. As I watched him approach our end of the bar, I could tell by his changing expression that the biker was no longer amused by my clown friend's clever antics. I leaned my head toward Jack's ear when the biker was no more than a couple of steps away.

"Careful, Jack," I whispered so that only he could hear. Jack looked up, just as he was pulling yet another silver dollar from the lady's cleavage, and saw the look on the biker's face.

"Oops," Jack said, then slid carefully off the back of the bar stool so that he would be on his feet, ready to move if the situation took a turn for the worse.

Even standing, the top of Jack's head barely reached my chin. I am what most people would call average height, about an inch under six feet. The biker towered over me. To be sure, neither Jack nor I looked like any kind of formidable opponent. Jack wore a crumpled white frock-like coat with multiple pockets over a faded, blousy, jester-type shirt with large red and blue checkerboard squares, along with drawstring pants, sandals, and a ball cap turned sideways, beneath which matted clumps of tangled and knotted blond hair stuck out in all directions. I was dressed in my usual proletarian artist-intellectual - attire; faded blue jeans, gray sweater, dark gray floppy wool cap and wire rim glasses. I imagined we looked about as intimidating as a couple of characters from *The Bowery Boys*.

To make matters worse, half the other patrons at the bar that night were bikers. Most of them were as intoxicated as our giant adversary. It wasn't hard to figure out whose side they would be on if a fight broke out. There was little doubt our best strategy in the current situation revolved around the concept of mobility. I maneuvered to a position alongside Jack and away from the legs of bar stools to avoid getting tripped up when the time came to move fast.

A moment later, Jack was holding what appeared to be a piece of crepe paper, which he pulled out from who knows where, at arm's length in front of the biker's face. Suddenly, the paper burst into a flash of bright flame followed by a puff of white smoke, which slowly dissipated, revealing a red rose.

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Jack stretched his hand forward, presenting the rose as a peace offering to the biker who continued to stare stone-faced at Jack for what was no more than a few seconds but seemed interminable.

From some hidden well of self-amusement, a smirk slowly materialized on the biker's face. "Cute," he said. With a shaky hand he took the rose from Jack and handed it to his old lady. "You're one cute magic-making motherfucker," he slurred, turning back toward Jack.

Then things started to happen fast.

The biker pulled back his balled fist in preparation to throw a punch at Jack's head. As the massive fist changed direction and started heading our way like a ten-ton wrecking ball, Jack dropped to the floor and rolled. I stepped back just enough so that the biker's fist barely nipped the end of my nose and instead smacked his old lady, sitting on the bar stool, square on the ear. I saw the woman's eyes roll back into her skull as she collapsed backwards off her stool. Her boyfriend had knocked her out cold. He and a couple of other well-lit bikers behind her tried to break her fall, managing only to get themselves pulled down to the floor as well.

Jack pulled at my arm. "NOW!" he cued.

We both ran to the door whereupon Jack turned, pulled a small cloth bag out of his pocket, and pulled the knot out of its drawstring. He turned the bag over, releasing a couple of hundred marbles, which spread out to cover the bar's tile floor. "That ought to slow 'em down for a few seconds," Jack said, pushing me out the door. Just before the door slammed shut behind us came the sound of a man's voice yelling "SHIT!" followed by a crash that sounded of flying bar stools and splintered wood. We both sprinted around the building to the rear parking lot.

"You got a car?" I called out, breathless from running.

"Right here," Jack said as he turned between two rows of cars and stopped at the driver's door of a beat-up van that looked like it might have been white at one time but was now a rusty gray. He fumbled for his keys. Just then, a handful of potbellied bikers came around the corner of the bar. Some were carrying broken bar stool legs as clubs.

"Let's go, man," I urged, while Jack pulled everything but a set of car keys out of a myriad of pockets. Within seconds the asphalt next to Jack's van was littered with clown/magician accessories: decks of cards, colored scarves, short pieces of rope with knots in them, plastic werewolf fangs, roses, a whoopie cushion, clown nose, rubber chicken. I was about to give up and make a run for it when Jack produced a set of keys from within the folds of a latex Richard Nixon mask and hurriedly unlocked the driver's side door. He got in, leaned over to unlock the door on my side, shoved the key into the ignition, and started the van. The pack of pissed-off bikers was no more than 15 feet away, and I had half my body still hanging out the open door when Jack threw the van into gear and slammed the pedal to the metal.

Tires screeched as bikers leaped to get out of the way of the hurtling mass of glass and rusted steel that was Jack's van. I was holding on for dear life and still trying to shut the door as the van exploded out of the alley onto Hennepin Avenue. A sudden left turn resulted in additional squealing from the tires, followed by a half block of fishtailing as Jack fought to regain control of the vehicle. A couple of blocks later we were able to relax.

Jack thanked me for helping him out.

"I didn't do anything," I said as Jack pulled the remains of a joint out of his shirt pocket and lit up. He offered the joint to me but I refused. "Makes me paranoid," I said.

"You stood there with me; that's something."

"This kind of thing happen to you a lot?"

"You mean fights? Naw. I guess I just have a way of drawing attention to myself. I don't do it on purpose. It just happens. Been kind of a problem in my life."

"And what sort of person carries around a bag of marbles in his pocket? What the hell is that all about?"

"Pure coincidence," Jack answered. "I bought them at a garage sale this morning. Hadn't owned a bag of marbles since I was a kid. Thought they might be fun. Lucky thing, huh?"

Jack took another hit from the joint, then extinguished the roach and dropped it into his pocket. I looked around the van for the first time. The interior was a confusion of costumes and props, and makeup

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in little tins, and juggling balls, rings, pins, and torches. One corner held a folded up wheelchair. Other items stood out in the clutter: a unicycle, the torso of a female mannequin, a box of surgical gloves, hockey stick, scuba gear, and a cage inside of which was a live duck. The duck seemed rather agitated from the wild ride it had just experienced and was currently engaged in an incessant fit of squawking to express its displeasure.

"His name's Wally," Jack said. "He goes everywhere I go."

"Okay, I can understand the duck, but why do you carry a wheelchair in your van?"

"To avoid waiting in lines; they're great at amusement parks," Jack said, then broke into a laugh that was, without a doubt, the most distinctive and infectious I'd ever come across. It had a mule-like quality to it—both guttural and nasal at the same time, like a human foghorn breathing deep from the diaphragm. It was also generous, the kind of laugh that let everyone in on the joke. The joke this time had to do with propriety and the conventions of society, the breaking of which, I was beginning to think, Jack had made into his life's mission.

When we pulled to a stop at a red light, Jack said, "You didn't leave a vehicle there, did you?"

"I got a bike out front."

"Harley?"

"Ten-speed."

"I'll take you back. They ought to all be inside by now." Jack drove around the block and doubled back to the bar. He let me out just a few yards before the bar entrance where I had my bike chained to a light post.

"All right then. See you in Texas," Jack called out before rolling the van back onto Hennepin Avenue. I stood there for a moment, wondering about this strange little man and the unexpected turn my life appeared to be taking.

I hopped on the bike and headed north on Hennepin. In my head, I kept mulling over the events of the night. About the time I crossed 28th Street, I started to laugh. I realized I hadn't laughed in a long time. It felt good. I kept on laughing the rest of the way home.

Five.

By the time I got off the plane, found my way to the baggage claim, gathered up my suitcase, stilts and army tent, and lugged it all out to the pick-up area in front of the terminal it was pushing midnight. On the flight I had been working up a plan as to how I was going to get from the Houston airport to the Texas Renaissance Festival in time to get hired on for the weekend. Now that it was time to put the plan into action, I was having serious doubts about its likelihood of success. At best I figured I had nine hours to get to my destination. Problem was, I wasn't quite sure where that was.

Jack had told me the festival was outside the city limits near some small town whose name I couldn't remember. Wherever it was, it would require taking a bus, at least that was my thinking at the time. So the first move would be to get to a bus station. I couldn't afford a cab so I hopped on a downtown shuttle figuring that would be a cheap way to get close to an all-night bus station. At first the shuttle driver wasn't going to let me stash my stilts on the floor along the center aisle; he was worried about other passengers tripping over them. I asked the half-dozen others that were on board whether they had a problem with it. When they all said they didn't, the driver relented and let me board. I was becoming determined to make it to this Renaissance fair; I wasn't about to let the scruples of an airport shuttle driver stop me.

The shuttle dropped me off at a downtown hotel that, I had learned en route, was five blocks from a Trailways bus station. I threw the strap of the duffel bag containing my heavy army tent over my head and across my left shoulder, and balanced my stilts on my right shoulder stabilizing the forward portion of the long ungainly bundle with my right hand the way one would carry a pair of skis. With my left hand I picked up the heavy leather suitcase. Had I known I was going

to be carrying all this stuff, I'm sure I would have found a way to leave some of it behind.

Loaded down the way I was, a slow waddle was the best I could manage, stopping about every half block to rest. I thought about leaning the stilts against a building and coming back for them, but I didn't want to leave anything unattended for even a moment. If someone ran off with my stilts, thinking maybe it was skis or something else, I would be out of my only chance for making a little money, and the whole trip would have been for nothing.

Downtown Houston at 1 A.M. cultivated the usual inner city night life: drunks, pimps, prostitutes, flabby businessmen and professional types in suits looking to get laid or blown before returning to their hotel rooms, vagrants, homeless people. No doubt, a few junkies and coke heads thrown in for good measure. As I plodded down the street with my odd and cumbersome assortment of gear, I could feel that all eyes were on me. *This is a switch*, I thought; *they're all looking at me like I'm the weirdo*.

Eventually I made it to the bus station. I carried my gear inside and set it down in front of the ticket counter. I asked the male attendant if there was a bus going anywhere near the Texas Renaissance Festival that could get me there before morning. After comparing notes with a couple of other Trailways employees and checking maps, he said he could have me in Conroe by 3:30 A.M.

"How far is Conroe from the fair?" I asked.

" 'Bout fifteen, twenty moll, give or take," he replied in a thick Texas twang.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't see how I'm going to get from there to the fair at that time of the morning."

"Well, they got an all naahht truck stop right there on the Interstate 'bout a quarter moll from where the bus drops off. You could hang out there in the restaurant till the sun come up, then try to hitch a rod. That's 'bout the best ah can do."

I didn't have a better plan so I bought the ticket. I had five dollars left in my travel stash, enough for breakfast in Conroe and that was about it. If I didn't make it to the fair and line up a way to make some money over the weekend, I was going to be in big trouble.

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I stood in the unlit lot of a closed service station that doubled as a bus stop in Conroe, Texas. The bus had dropped me there in the wee hours of the morning, and then taken off. The station was on a freeway service road. About a half mile up I could see the lights of a truck stop. It was definitely a little farther than I'd been told, and uphill from where I stood. Nevertheless, I whispered a heartfelt "thank you" to the gods of the road for having sent my way a Trailways ticket agent who didn't have his head up his ass. I loaded up and began the deliberate, labored trek up the hill to the truck stop like an over-burdened Grand Canyon pack mule on the homeward leg.

When I reached the truck stop, I leaned the stilts and the duffel bag with the tent against the outer wall figuring I could find a seat where I could keep an eye on them. As I was doing so, a young black truck driver came out the door. He stopped in his tracks and stared at me as I was situating my oddball, heavy load like I was some kind of alien from outer space.

"What you got?" he asked with a puzzled look on his face.

Before I knew it, I was telling him not only the specific nature of my load, but the entire hard-luck story of my journey. I was so punch drunk from the stress and the lack of sleep that words just came flowing out of my mouth like mental diarrhea. I knew I was acting and sounding like an idiot but I couldn't stop. After a few minutes the driver said "You weird" and walked away. I decided I'd better get some food and coffee into my system. I picked up my suitcase and went inside.

I killed a few hours eating scrambled eggs and sipping coffee. The eggs came with white toast (the waitress said they didn't have wheat and gave me a funny look when I asked) and a small bowl of grits, which I had never eaten in my entire life. "You're not in Kansas anymore," I said to myself. I wasn't in Minnesota either, best try the grits. I wasn't sure how to dress them up, but they looked like the Cream of Wheat cereal my mother had fed us as kids, so I figured milk and sugar was the way to go. Then I saw a truck driver a couple of stools over melting pats of butter on his hot grits followed by a layer of salt and pepper. I decided that must be the standard method of preparation and was about to do the same when I saw another driver dressing his grits up with ketchup.

Now I was totally confused. When I spied yet another driver across the way mixing his grits with his eggs and topping the whole mess off with Louisiana hot sauce, I gave up. Evidently, there was no correct way to prepare grits. Sticking with the thing I was familiar with I tried the milk and sugar, than quickly decided I'd made a mistake. I made a mental note to try the butter, salt and pepper method next time.

I looked at my bill and recounted what was left of my travel stash and realized I would be down to my last dollar after paying for the breakfast. I meant to hang on to that dollar until I made some more. I had never in my life been entirely penniless; I didn't want to start now. The waitress would have to forgive me for not leaving a tip.

At the first light of dawn, I paid my bill and walked outside to gather up my belongings. During breakfast, a couple of drivers had given me directions to the Texas Renaissance Festival. I knew I had to backtrack on the Interstate a ways, then take the exit for the road that led toward a town called Magnolia. I still didn't know what time the fair opened but I imagined I had only a couple of hours left. I doubted I would get a job unless I got there a reasonable period of time before opening. I hauled my heavy load down to the entrance ramp of the Interstate and stuck out my thumb.

Fifteen or twenty minutes later, a cowboy in a straw hat stopped his pickup truck and gave me a ride to the exit I wanted. After another short wait I scored a ride to Magnolia. Now I was only a few miles from the fair. I was beginning to think I just might make it. It was nearly 8 A.M. One more ride and I would be there.

Within minutes, a white van driven by a man who turned out to be a wood craftsman with a booth at the fair picked me up. I had made it. It had taken a station wagon, a delivery truck, an airplane, a shuttle bus, a Trailways bus, a couple of pickups, a van and my thumb but I had made it. For the first time since my car's engine died, I was without anxiety. I allowed myself to relax and immediately felt totally exhausted. It was all I could do to tell the wood craftsman the story of my journey. I guess he felt sorry for me because he offered me the back storage room of his booth to stash my gear while I was getting my bearings at the fair. I got the feeling that he didn't see anything strange at all about lugging a pair of stilts, a suitcase, and an army tent halfway

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across the country to a Renaissance festival where there may or may not be a job waiting. In fact, he seemed to regard it as perfectly normal, unlike practically every other human being I had come across since leaving Minnesota. I was getting my first lesson in Renaissance camaraderie.

It's kind of funny, and fitting too, I suppose, that my first glimpse of a Renaissance festival should come from behind the scenes. The wood craftsman, Glenn was his name, took a left from the main road up a dirt road marked with a sign that read "Participant Entrance." The road followed along behind a curving row of old world appearing buildings that I found out later to be craft booths. Short sections of wood fence between the booths were intended, I gathered, to keep the paying customers on the front, more respectable side. *Smart move*, I figured. If the public ever had an opportunity to look at what I was looking at, they would all be thinking the Renaissance festival was kind of a dump.

Litter of every size, shape, and description—piles of old rotting lumber, broken and faded signs, torn scraps of tarpaper and other remnants of construction, bolts of weathered burlap lying half buried in mud, torn plastic garbage bags spewing beer cans and paper trash, rusted auto parts including engines and transmissions—cluttered the spaces behind and between the buildings, all the buildings looking unfinished with sheets of clear plastic stapled over holes in walls, shingle-less roofs covered only with tarpaper. Nearly every building exhibited unpainted plywood or particle board. Here and there loose trim boards hung precariously by a single nail. Everywhere weeds grew up except where car or pedestrian traffic had beaten them down.

All in all, it had the look of a depression era shanty town. However, once I made the connection to my theater experience, and remembered the way we always piled the leftover debris of production behind the scenes just out of sight of the audience, it didn't seem so bad. It was still show business stagecraft. This was just a bigger stage.

I unloaded my gear in Glenn's back room, then headed out the front of the booth for the fair office in the direction Glenn had pointed me. I took a few steps into the fair site, then turned and looked at the same row of booths from the front side. It was a complete

transformation. Buildings that had the appearance of shacks from behind were now magnificent castles and princely palaces decked out with flags and banners, beautifully painted signs, and ornately scrolled gingerbread trim. Many of the shops were painted in variations of rich earth tones, while others sported brighter colors. The overall result was magical. This was a fantasy land to be sure, a place where dreams came true.

I wasn't much of an expert on Renaissance period architecture, but I could tell in an instant that historical accuracy was a minor consideration due to the montage of styles and architectural ideas. In one row of booths you might find a medieval castle next to a Bruegel-esque stone cottage next to a Victorian manor next to a Byzantine mosque topped with onion-head towers. I was beginning to feel a lot less concerned about the authenticity of my makeshift costume.

I crossed the site and exited on a service road to another backstage area where I found an older mobile home that had been converted to offices. A sign near the door said "Texas Renaissance Festival, Office." Uniformed security guards wearing sidearms, sunglasses, and gray felt cowboy hats were stationed out front surrounded by a mixed and ever-changing crowd of costumed Renaissance villagers. It was a scene that reeked of contradiction and anachronistic irony. I pressed my way between the bodies of dukes, beggars, fishwives and courtly ladies until finally making it to the door and knocked. A buxom lass in peasant attire answered and asked what it was that I wanted.

"Is John Broussard here?" I asked. I had learned his last name from Glenn on the ride from Magnolia.

"King John?" she replied.

"Yeah, I guess. The owner of the fair."

"Yeah, he's here. Come on in." She led me through a room full of people talking on telephones and shuffling papers and grabbing stacks of fair programs, to a back room that I assumed to be Broussard's office. On the way she whispered to me, "Everybody around here always calls him King John." Her tone suggested it might be wise if I did the same.

"Sorry, I'm new here," I whispered back.

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We entered the back room office where a gangly middle-aged man with dark wavy gray-streaked hair and well-trimmed salt-and-pepper beard framing a drawn-out jowl stood dressed only in a pair of white tights. Several attendants carried in elegant costume pieces for His Majesty like acolytes bringing vestments to a priest.

He takes this king thing seriously, I thought. “Excuse me,” I said trying to get his attention. “King John?”

He turned his head slowly in my direction, looked at me with weary, half-closed but still intimidating eyes, and spoke in a low voice that sounded like it had been hand-rubbed with coarse sandpaper.

“Who are you?”

“I’m an entertainer. I was wondering whether I might be able to get a job.”

“What do you do?”

“I walk and dance on stilts.”

“I’ll give you twenty-five bucks a day.”

“I’ll take it.” At that point Broussard switched his attention back to the people dressing him. Our conversation was over. Evidently, our king was a man of few words, at least as far as business was concerned. I walked back to the front door with the buxom girl who had let me in. She congratulated me on landing a performing job with only two weekends left to the fair since that sort of thing usually wasn’t done. She told me I could pick up my pay right there at the office come end of the day Sunday. I thanked her and left to find Glenn’s booth and start getting into costume. My Renaissance festival performing career was about to get underway.

A fictional look inside the world of the "Rennies"--the artists, entertainers, and offbeat characters who travel the Renaissance festival circuit. During the 1981 season, Gulliver and his troupe of stilt dancers explore a curious, alternate, 16th-century themed universe.

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