

PALM TREES



drawing lines in the sand

BY JERRY BECK





The Bacon Altar

I sat in an open boxcar, trying to focus on the cattails cropped up like a garden along the bottom of the rails. Before the artists came along, only the homeless had inhabited the cars in the long-abandoned railway yard. The line of freight and passenger cars sat frozen in time, black silhouettes against the illuminated city skyline. A gentle wind blew the cattails back and forth like a hypnotist's watch. The artists and showgoers had left. The big banner stretched across the top of the cars to advertise the *Little Train that Could..Art Show* had been reduced to fluttering plastic streamers. My eyes blurred, too tired to stay focused. I thought of what Ratman had done. I should have stomped him. Too late now, I thought to myself. I lay back and let the years go by while the sky spread over me like an upside down blanket.

Ratman was left-handed. I had signed up for his "Making Art From Your Head " class my senior year in college. He always looked messed up and wore flannel shirts with collars pointing at weird angles. His long fingernails were caked with black paint. Whiskers sprouted from the sides of his mouth where his razor missed. I figured he had to be a true artist, looking the way he did.

Ratman would invite me over to his house and show me his recent paintings. He talked about the women in class that he had lusted after.

"They gotta make the first move," he said.

Ratman meditated twice a day. Sometimes I'd catch him chanting in his bedroom on the floor in front of his Indian guru's picture. It must have helped him deal with horniness.

One day I found him making art from a dead dog's body. He had pulled it off the highway and had brought it home in a black plastic garbage bag. I was grossed out, but not enough to vomit. I sort of admired Ratman for even picking up the maggoty animal. He wanted to fasten the carcass to a piece of plywood but nothing seemed to work. Finally he poured a gallon of Elmer's Glue on the board and plopped the dog on top of it. It took weeks to dry. The dog fell to the floor when he tried to hang the plaque on the wall. He brought the dog back to the kitchen table and started over, using a clear acrylic spray paint in an attempt to preserve the dog's body. Its hair matted down, parting in places from the force of the spray coming in all directions. The paint dried in crusts and the dog looked even more violated. Ratman gave up and asked me to help him bury it in the backyard.

Next, he tried to attach some raw cow bones to a piece of plywood. Strings of ligaments hung off the blood-stained bones. They smelled real bad. Ratman had told the men at the slaughterhouse that he needed them for his anatomy class. He solved the attachment problem by drilling holes in the bones and banging them in place with five-inch nails. He painted around the bones with gobs of oil paint and glitter. It was something out of a horror movie. He hung the piece on the kitchen wall next to a painting with a smashed duck in its center.

"Got it at a Chinese market," he said. "Wouldn't eat it. I'm a vegetarian."

The smell got worse and the bones turned a bluish purple. Ratman finally asked me to help him bury the work in the backyard next to the dog's grave. For the first time in my life, I was a teacher's pet and it gave me a lift. Soon the neighborhood dogs began howling

and clawing at Ratman's fence. A few neighbors got suspicious and came over to introduce themselves.

"I'm a college art professor," Ratman told them indignantly. They didn't come back, so I suppose he checked out okay.

Ratman started painting portraits of carnival freaks. He was most interested in mutated people—Two-Headed Men, Siamese Twins, Three-Breasted-Women, Lobster-Handed families. He found photographs of freaks in books and stapled them to the wall around his stretched canvases. Then he took an interest in oddities preserved in formaldehyde. I told Ratman that my Dad had some embryonic creatures in jars that he used in his seventh grade biology class. Ratman asked me to get him one. At Christmas break, my Dad gave me a pig embryo. It was about three inches long. A still-attached umbilical cord made it float in the center of the jar like an astronaut in space. I put the jar in a brown paper bag and brought it to Ratman as a gift.

The next time I visited, Ratman had stationed a droopy cardboard refrigerator box on a funky steel pedestal. The box was lined with hair and the jar sat in the middle of the hair.

"Whose hair is that?" I asked.

"Students," he said. "I've been getting it from the college barber shop for weeks. Glued it there to create a womb or tomb or both."

"It's your Bacon Altar," I said, no longer shocked by his wacky ideas.

"Only problem is I got a case of lice," Ratman said, smiling as I moved three steps back. I wondered if I should contact the Board of Health.

At this stage in my young artistic career, my only reference point for going to extremes was Van Gogh's ear, but that had been

meant as a loving gift. Who in their right mind would want anything Ratman made? Still, he made me think about the reasons for making art. Ratman seemed focused on issues of life and death, like a doctor in the laboratory or a shaman mixing an herbal medicine. Though his vision was raw and morbid, it gave me reason to step back and reconsider the tasteless and grotesque. What higher purpose could there be than making the boundary line between art and life slip away?

The following year, Ratman's teaching contract was not renewed. He left for New York City. His goal was to make waves in the art world like Warhol and company. I had not known that fame was his ambition when he was in our small college town, but I did not question his motives. I was ambitious, too, although fame made me skeptical. The supermarket tabloids always wrote about famous people getting divorced. Were fame, money and success points of light, or darkness? I wondered, but felt you could not really know about something until you got there and I had not met any famous people.

Ratman wrote back that New York was rougher than he expected. He was still painting freaks, but he had not dated and now meditated four times a day. He obsessed over the phone about a plan that would engage the art world with the importance of his work. Trying to curry favor, he had sent a raccoon tail hat to the Mary Boone gallery. Another day he locked himself to a Soho mailbox and began oil painting on the sidewalk. Nothing worked. He was arrested.

Awhile later, Ratman called in the middle of the night and wailed about being turned down at the Pendleton Gallery. I had just gotten permission to utilize 12 abandoned railroad cars for an art show. I cut him short with an idea.

"Why don't you come down to Florida for our show? Just imagine your carnival freaks in an old boxcar or passenger car. We've got six of both. You could take your pick."

"Boxcar," Ratman said after a long, uneasy silence.

It took us two weeks to clean up the trains—making repairs, constructing walls, running electrical cables, trimming wild weed, painting, sandblasting, carving artist names in the boxcar wood and spray painting names on the passenger cars. One artist made a hundred or so beautiful four color silk-screen posters that we strategically placed around the city. We sent out press releases and invitations. Some artists organized performances that included a "Hobo Night" with writers, poets, performance artists, musicians and even some of the homeless who had been sleeping in the cars. I reserved the highest profile boxcar for Ratman, a green one with "Maine Central, The Pine Tree Line" written in yellow under a yellow pine tree.

The collaborative effort really jelled when the art began to arrive. One artist had invited his 80-year old grandmother who had recently taken up painting watercolors. Grandmother and grandson hung their work side-by-side in a passenger car with the "New York Central" logo on it. Not surprisingly, their pieces looked related in subject and style. Someone made a giant, plastic banner which we strung along the car roofs. Everything was near ready. Only Ratman's car was still empty. He had not shown up a few days early as promised and I was getting panicky. I kept it to myself and swept his boxcar one more time.

Two days before the exhibition opened, Ratman called to say he had some reservations about leaving his paintings unprotected in the trains at night for the show's two weeks.

"I really don't think someone will want to steal your Two-Headed Man," I said.

Ratman wasn't amused.

Where was this leading, I wondered. Surely he would not back out at this late date.

"I'll sleep in the cars then," I volunteered. "Your work will have 24-hour security."

Ratman arrived just hours before the opening. I took him on a tour of the train, introducing him to the other artists who were frantically detailing and fine-tuning their cars.

"Is this going to be amazing or what?" I said.

"I guess so. Where do I put my paintings?" Ratman asked. I tried to answer but he cut me off.

"And when does the press arrive?"

"A reporter will be here in a matter of minutes, so you'd better get your ass moving, and get your freaks up on the wall."

He suddenly perked up. I had to run to keep up with him as we hauled his paintings from a rental truck to the boxcar with the yellow pine tree. As we hung up "Lobster Boy" and the other bizarros, Ratman wondered aloud if the show fit his aesthetic.

"These paintings were made for a museum," he mumbled, shaking his head.

I figured he must have had a tough drive down from New York and took some deep breaths, trying to keep my cool. Ratman kept complaining. Suddenly I had had enough of his yapping.

"Hey, relax huh? Get your car ready and shut the hell up!"

Ratman backed away and hit his head on the entrance sign.

"I'm bleeding! I'm bleeding!" he screamed.

His forehead had a little red mark on it, but there was no blood at all. I turned away and headed back to my car, shaking my head to myself. All the meditation he does and he still has bad karma.

A female reporter arrived. The artists swarmed about her like drones around a Queen bee. Everyone talked about the show as we moved from car to car. Ratman walked over with a towel wrapped around his head. One of the artists asked who the Swami was. Ratman shouldered past us and led the reporter off towards his car, lecturing her on how the trains captured his idea of the traveling freak shows.

"You see," Ratman said as the reporter straightened her skirt after climbing into his car, "my work is designed for the claustrophobic effect created by the boxcar." He went on about each work while the reporter scribbled madly. "You'll notice the only light is these two small, circular windows," he said. "This filtered light augments the effect of my work."

All the other artists stood below listening. The one who had asked about the Swami gave me a perturbed look. "Where did you get this guy?" he said in a voice loud enough to make the reporter turn her head. Ratman raised his voice and she resumed taking notes.

The Little Train That Could..Art Show opened that night with a fevered pitch heard around the city. A thousand people showed up, twice the number we had hoped for. At night, we lit the fireplace I had built with friends. The wind blew smoke into the cars, but no one minded. The clouds added mystery.

One of the artists walked along the train's roof playing an accordion and singing songs while his wife tended their "Gulf, Mobile and Ohio" passenger car with its 40-foot reclining straw man. In the straw man's head, a video monitor played a close-up of her musician-husband talking about his father who had just passed away. With the accordion music drifting deep below my ribs, I watched the musician's wife fine tuning the picture. Another collaborative team created a carnivalesque maze of miniature peep shows and tapestries

made from bagels and bras. Two cars were filled with photography—experimental, color, and black and white. Another car had large, phallic, clay sculptures that shimmered under a blast of blue light. They looked ancient. A friend had gone wild carving his entire car and cluttering it with metal sculptures he had made from objects found around the old railway yard. The caboose on this crazy caravan featured long strings of white light bulbs, running through hundreds of bones and deformed mud figures of children. It was a haunting work reminiscent of an apocalyptic nightmare.

Everyone stayed late, walking through the train again and again. “It’s like being inside a movie,” I said out loud. A young boy and girl cornered me and said it was better than visiting Disney World.

As the last stragglers filed out, I put my arm around Ratman.

“So, you feel better now?” I asked with an exhausted smile.

“Not really,” he said, stepping away. “When’s the newspaper article coming out?”

I was happy when my girlfriend drove Ratman off to the motel room we had rented for him. I wanted to leave with her, but Ratman mentioned I had promised to sleep in the train and watch over his work. My girlfriend said she would come back later with blankets.

The next morning at sunrise, I woke up with a gusty feeling of accomplishment. Many of the artists had arrived early and I took a stroll to buy coffee. The sun was already hot. I was glad the show did not open until noon. It was the first time in over six months that I felt relaxed. Walking away from the train, I thought about how the little and big things in life are interconnected. All the small details that had lead to the *Little Train that Could..Art Show*. All those heightened and mundane conversations between the artists.

That is what I will remember when this is all over, I thought. The friendships. I felt a satisfaction beyond description. Who would have thought these old cars would pull together so many people?

At a rise in the dirt road leading from the railway yard, I turned and looked down on the train. It had rained during the night. Puddles of water reflected against its rusty sides which were twinkly and flowing, as if the train were alive and content with its decay. I thought of all the art inside. Like the train, it had come from a mysterious place, but there it was, together for a moment on rusty tracks, bringing pleasure to hundreds of people.

About 11:00 a.m., a large, white truck rumbled down the dirt road, past cars in the parking lot and pulled up next to the train. A guy in a white uniform jumped out and told someone he was looking for Ratman. I climbed out of my boxcar and walked over.

"I'm supposed to pick up paintings and bring them to a museum in Wisconsin," he said, his boot toeing a line in the cinders.

I told him he had made a big mistake, that the show was running for two more weeks. He went back into the truck and checked an invoice.

"Nope, got it right," he said, showing me Ratman's signature.

"When did he make the reservation?"

The man flipped over the invoice and read the back. "Month ago," he said.

Some of the artists came walking up the gravel parking lot. Ratman was following along behind them. I ran past them and right into Ratman's face.

"What the hell's going on?"

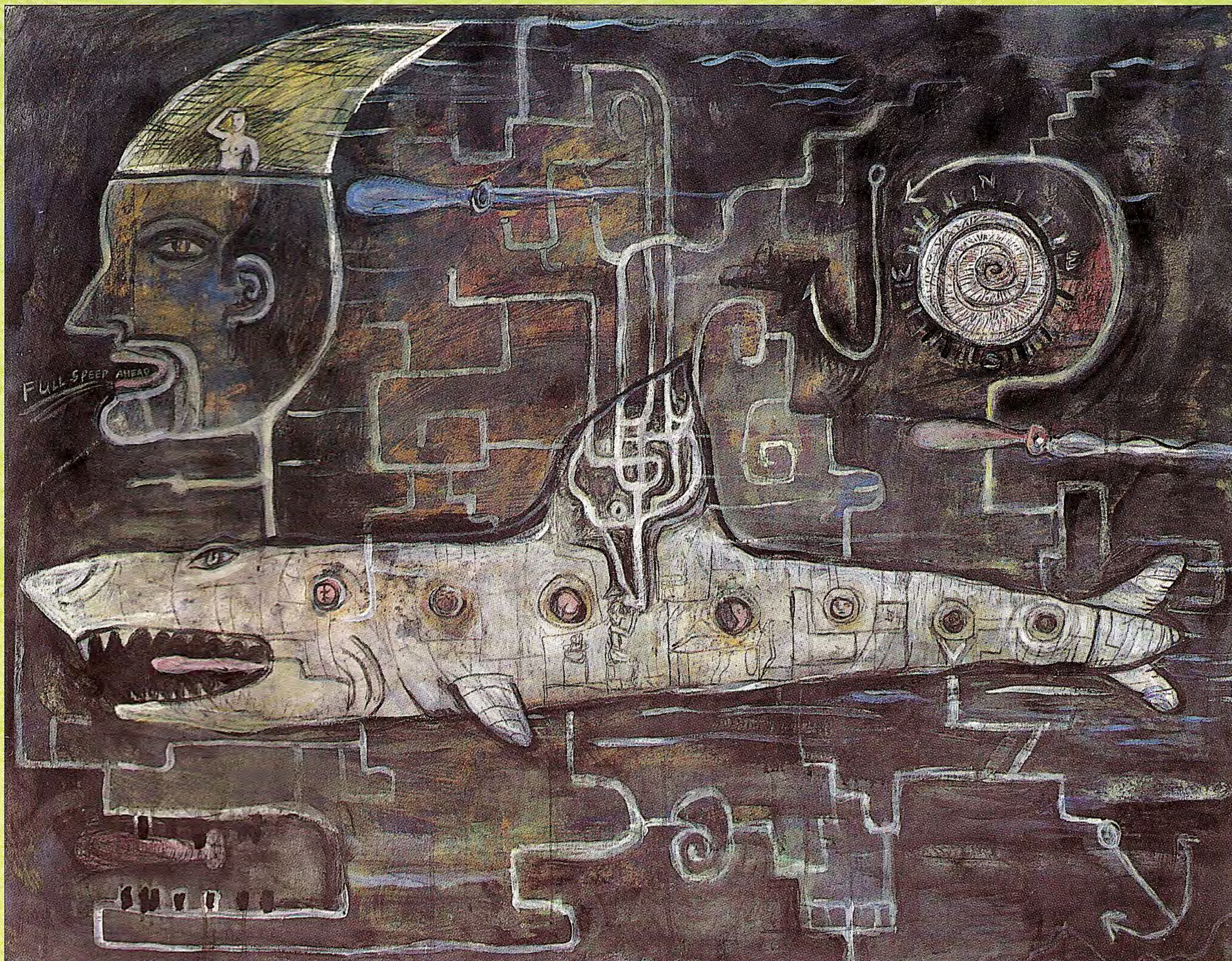
Ratman looked over my shoulder at the truck and walked around me. I kept yelling at him.

"You asshole! Get the press and leave, huh?"

Ratman kept walking.

“You planned the whole thing, you freak of nature!” I screamed. I wanted to spit in his face as I stepped in front of him. The other artists surrounded us, waiting to see what would happen next. Everybody turned towards the rattling sound over by Ratman’s boxcar, as the driver pulled up the sliding back door of his truck. I felt like punching Ratman. I kept screaming. He smirked and stepped around me again and pulled himself into his boxcar. After a few minutes, out came the paintings. First, the “Two-Headed Man,” next, “Lobster Boy,” the Three-Armed Siamese Twins, the “Dog-Faced Girl,” and “Rubber Man.” Twisted bodies kept coming one by one. The last was a painting of the pig-embryo-in-a-jar surrounded by painted human hair. The little astronaut appeared light and moving quickly in Ratman’s hands.





Shark Ego Invades My Subconscious



Miami Dolphins

One bright sunny day I was walking on a beach. In the distance I thought I saw a large woman laying near the water. I hoped she would want some company and as I approached, I tried coming up with a good opening line. As I got closer, I could barely recognize the woman's body. Then a sea gull landed on her and left. When I was about twenty feet away, I saw that it wasn't a woman after all. It was a dead dolphin. I approached cautiously. As I stood over it, I noticed its stomach was torn open and tiny creatures were eating away its innards. But it still had a smile on its face.



Guppies

When I was a little boy, I discovered what I thought was a swimming pool deep in the middle of the forest. It was rectangular in shape, about twenty feet long, four feet deep. It was made of stone. I climbed up and was surprised to find lots of different colored guppies swimming in the muddy water. I wondered how the guppies had got there. There was no sign of civilization in sight, only silent trees. The closest house was a long way off. I decided to catch a fish to bring back to my Dad, proof that the swimming pool magically existed in the forest. Searching around, I found a rusty can and waited for a guppy to surface. When one was near, I quickly tried to scoop it up but instead the guppy got smashed against the wall. Out of its stomach came a bunch of pink eggs that floated down to the bottom. I let go of the wounded fish and she swam down with her eggs. I never told my Dad about the swimming pool in the forest. That night I prayed the eggs would hatch so I would not feel like a complete killer.

Flying Canvases

"Are you going to come down for Thanksgiving?" I asked Rita as she sipped her coffee and read a magazine at the kitchen table. She mumbled something about not having money.

"Maybe I can pay for some of it," I said, trying to compromise.

"I'm not sure I'm ready to be thrown into the lion's den."

"Oh come on," I said, "you'll have a great time. I'll take you to the beach, to Coconut Grove to see art. We could even go see the alligator wrestlers at the Seminole Indian Reservation."

Rita flipped the pages of her magazine, disinterested.

"Tell you what," I said, "I'll take you to see this bearded guy who sells black velvet paintings. Roaring tigers, Jesus and naked women. They're right off the side of the road in a tent connected to his painted hippie van. His whole show hangs off ropes tied to his van and there's this outrageous day-glo sign hovering over the works." I threw up my hands, an umbrella above black velvet.

"One time a gust of wind blew over a bunch of paintings and we had to run out into traffic chasing these flying canvases. One of the smaller ones flew right into a guy's truck window as it was moving." My hands gestured.

"So what do you think?" I asked, hanging off the edge of my chair.

"Does he sell Elvis too?" Rita asked, flipping pages.



The Canoe Trip



Kirby

Kirby came home from the doctor's office with a baby jar filled with repulsive, creeping-looking green stuff.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Vomit in a jar," Kirby said sounding miserable.

"Whose?"

"I don't know, the doctor wouldn't tell me." Kirby jumped flat onto her bed. She lay on her stomach, rolling the jar in her hand. "I'm supposed to put it under my pillow at night before going to sleep."

"Just make sure the top's screwed on tight." I said.

Most of our dates took place in her tiny room with us having sex in her single bed. I'd never dated a woman with Agoraphobia before Kirby. It was quite interesting, even romantic. We spent hours building castles with decks of playing cards, shot rubber bands at TV soap operas, spun George Jones records on her plastic Whamo record player and stayed up late eating popcorn and watching horror films. It was like being stranded with your lover in a hurricane.

"Is it animal or human vomit?" I wondered.

Kirby didn't know that either. We figured the vomit was supposed to enter Kirby's subconscious and somehow make her more comfortable with scary things. I wondered if there were limits on what the quack would do to get Kirby out of the house.

"Well, at least it'll scare the hell out of the tooth fairy," I offered.

Everything in Kirby's wardrobe had a hole, rip or stain on it. She wasn't making a statement about poverty or anything. She just enjoyed dressing comfortably and hated to go shopping. With a diet of Campbell's Chicken Soup and burnt toast, she was skinny, but she had a certain style when it came to fashion. She smeared red lipstick

unevenly and dabbed rouge on her soft round cheeks until they looked like ripe tomatoes. She had innocent dark chocolate eyes. My favorite was her hair that sprang out in every direction, as if she'd she put a finger in an electric socket.

Kirby's Einstein-like hair fit perfectly with the inventive gifts she would send me. Once I got a UPS box that contained a dozen of her pill cases filled with different recipes, stories and funny objects. One held itsy-bitsy dried-out people carved from sweet potatoes. Kirby gave each member of the "French Fry Family" their own personality and medical problem. She wrote out the prescription label in perfect, tiny letters:

If they're bad, threaten to fry them in Wesson Oil or, better yet, send them off to McDonalds training school.

Once I asked her if she could help with a project for my art class. She suggested I invent a carnival with booths, rides and games related to personal issues.

Dearest Jake,

*How about a problem booth with a big sign like this:
FUCKED UP? ME TOO! LETS HAVE A CHAT OVER A NICE
CUP OF TEA.*

No matter how bad the customer's problem is, mine will be worse. I'll say "Ha! That's nothing! What about this.." The booth will be like an office with a sofa for the patient to lie down on. One minute into the consultation, I'll get on the sofa, too. Two minutes into it, and I'll push the person off.

I'll have dumb posters with couples holding hands or kittens in baskets. I'll have kid's balloons with slogans like 'Today Is The First Day of the Rest of Your Life' and change 'First' to 'Worst' All that pseudo

positive crap will have a big red line through it. Of course I'll have a segregated waiting room with signs like 'Neurotic', 'Loony', 'Mildly Retarded' and 'Reading Baudelaire.' I'll hand out M&M Valiums. Hey I'm getting excited! When are you doing this? Can I come over and set up my booth now?

*Love and Kisses,
Kirby*

After six months of being in Kirby's room, I felt I was about to crack up.

"How about a camping trip?"

Kirby sat down on her bed. "We can put a tent up right here," she said, patting the pillows.

I reminded Kirby that it was summer and said we could camp up by a mountain stream and build a little fire to stay warm and eat marshmallows.

"Where?"

"The White Mountains in New Hampshire. A guy at work is lending us a tent,"

"New Hampshire?" Kirby pulled her knees up under her chin and hugged herself. "We could get eaten by bears."

"Your pink sneakers will look great in all that green."

Kirby looked frightened. She pulled the pillows away and picked up the vomit jar. "Flies will nest in my hair." Kirby said, drumming her black nail-polished fingers against the jar.

In Concord, the New Hampshire state capital, I got off the bus and got us a big Kit Kat candy bar. We pulled out ten minutes later and the highway started climbing. Kirby saw mountains in the distance and gripped my hand, seeking non-stop information about wild animals, poison ivy and flash floods.

We got off the bus next to a big wooden sign that advertised a look-out tower at Indian Head.

"New Hampshire's highest tower," I read the sign aloud as I sucked in the gorgeous scenery and fresh air.

Kirby went over to a nearby bench, sat down and started crying. Her thin legs and different-colored socks looked great in the outdoors. The panic attack took me by surprise. I put the Kit Kat back into my pocket thinking it might make her sicker. I tried to console her and even said we could stay in a hotel instead.

Kirby bit her lip. "Go jump in a lake, Jake. We're going to sleep in a tent."

She bent over and tied the purple laces on her sneakers, then stood erect and walked up the road. Not at her normal slug speed. I had to trot to keep up with her. My backpack was a little heavy with all the weekend camping trip essentials: three pairs of pants each, four tee-shirts, two sweaters, two towels, two sleeping bags, a can opener, a flashlight, a three-person tent, five pairs of underwear, a Swiss Army Knife, a box of kitchen matches, a package of twenty paper plates, toothbrushes, lighter fluid, two cans of tuna, a bag of nuts, four small boxes of cereal, band aids, aspirin, a box of crayons, and a pad of paper. Kirby carried a small bag containing cookies and sandwiches she'd made at home, a Dylan Thomas paperback, a pen, lipstick, some bills in envelopes and her jar of vomit which had now become our pet.

At the campsite, I carefully unpacked and looked at the tent, hoping to put it up like an experienced camper. Kirby paid no attention. She went down to the river, twirling a lock of hair in her finger.

"What's this big animal track on the ground?" she yelled up the hill to me.

I had the tent half up. I walked down and put one knee on the ground like an expert trapper brushing dirt from around the track.

"It's your sneaker print!"

Kirby put her hand over her mouth and giggled.

That night, we got naked in the tent and laughed at the frustrated mosquitoes trying to get through the screen. Kirby threatened them with the Swiss Army knife. We told each other Halloween stories.

"I dressed up once like Jimi Hendrix," Kirby said, pulling the little scissors out of the knife. "With sashes everywhere and all the black make-up I could find and an awesome cardboard guitar painted with my Mom's nail polish." A mosquito buzzed along the roof of the tent and Kirby snapped at it with the little scissors. "My neighbors gave me this shitty bag of apples so I lit the guitar on fire and left it on their doorstep."

We pulled out the pad of paper and crayons and drew pictures of each other. "Long Dong Silver," she said, laughing, shining the flashlight on her artwork.

"The wilderness can cure anything if you give it a chance," I said.

The moon rose above the river and we sang Beatle songs to keep the animals away.

In the morning, we swam in the rapids, ate the boxes of cereal without milk and walked down the dirt road to a place called "Clark's Bears." Inside was a bear pen about a hundred feet wide. Off to the side was a little pond with beavers nibbling on carrots. A fifty foot pole inside the bear pen was topped by a platform with a little brown bear sitting on it. A coffee can was attached to a wire that ran up to the platform. The bear scratched at a spot on its chest with its claws.

"It's like a circus tent without the canvas," I said.

Kirby walked over from the beaver pond. "Guess what?" she asked.

I put fifty cents in a dispenser. Crushed peanuts fell into the little paper bag I had positioned below the scoop. "What?" I asked.

"I've decided to take the job at Scooters."

I knew she had a critic friend who worked at the rock club and had offered Kirby a job last winter.

"Hey, it's summer. They don't need a coat check girl now."

"It's not that. I'm going to work the door and take phone reservations."

I pictured a hoard of hip young bass players swooning around Kirby. Hormones move fast in those rock clubs. I poured peanuts from the little bag into the coffee can on the wire. There was a film of water in the coffee can and the crushed peanuts got pasty and the smell made me nauseous. Kirby excitedly pointed at some ducks flying over the little beaver pond. She'd made some progress. I didn't want Kirby to move too fast.

"That's a mile from your room," I said, turning away.

The bear pulled at the wire and the coffee can slowly inched up towards the platform.

"I can walk," Kirby said, laughing and pointing towards the coffee can.

The can moved slowly up the wire, the bear slowly tugging at the wire, arm over arm.

"It might be okay to get out of the house," I said. "I just don't want you to abuse the privilege."