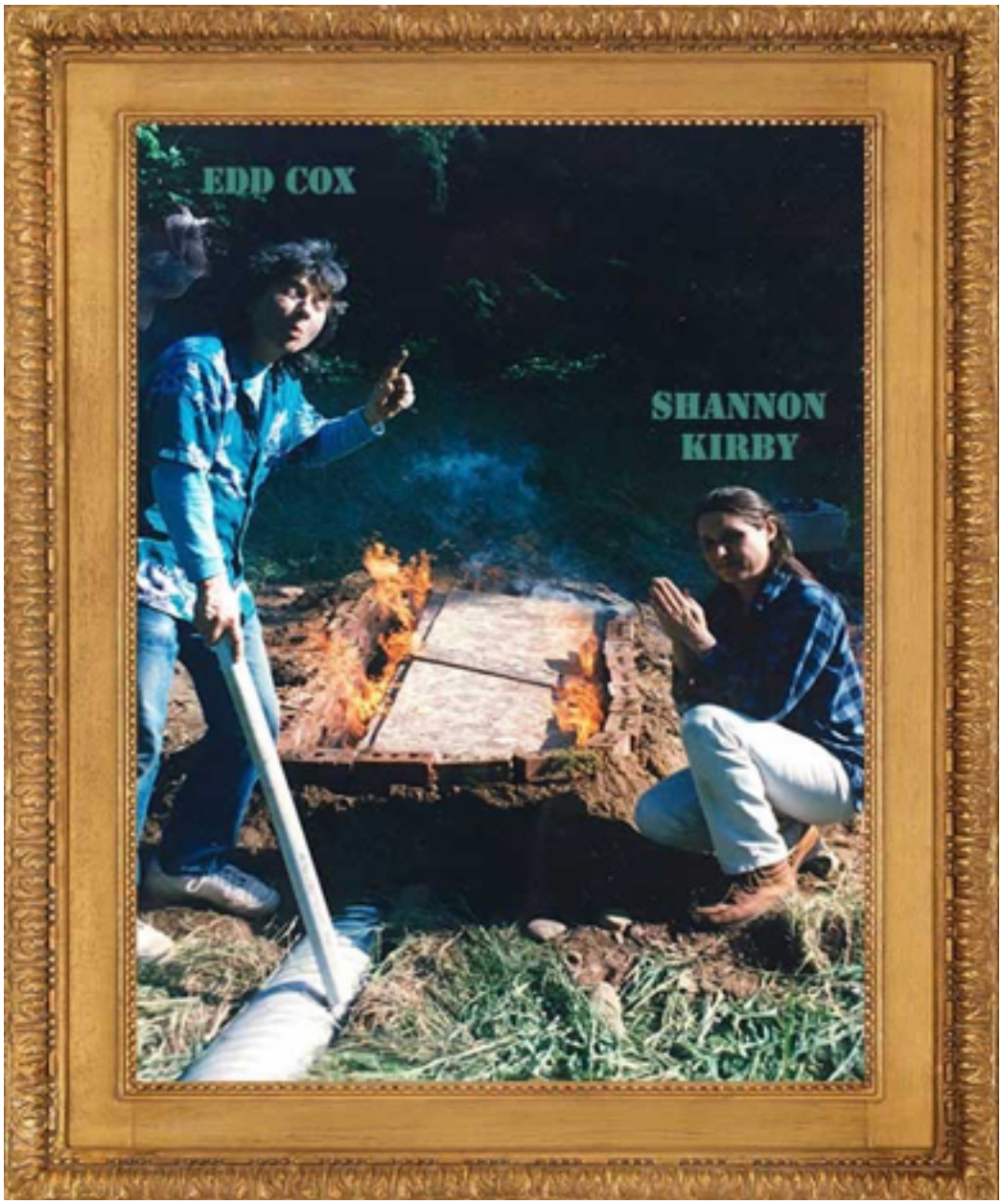
Secrets of the Mount Vernon Culture

When I was elected Snohomish County Artist of the year in 1996, they hosted a retrospective at the art center. I borrowed the few paintings not in my Gardner apartment at the time of the fire and hosted an exhibit surrounded by twenty years of paintings.

When I sat down to create my next painting, nothing came to mind, a lifetime of art already on the walls. It was time to tell some new stories, but I craved a different media. I chose pottery—no, *ancient pottery*. My output as a ceramics teacher back in 1979 consisted of one object: a faux cardboard box with ceramic tubes of paint. My skills on the wheel were atrocious. I had purchased a box of prehistoric Southwest pottery shards the year before. Karla and I had reassembled it with Elmer's School Glue, the restoration adhesive used by conservators. It became a large bowl, painted on the inside with gaps for the missing pieces. Even incomplete, it filled me with wonder, thinking about a potter making it five hundred years before Columbus and the invasion by Europe. I liked the thought of a destroyed masterpiece coming back to life. It was time to tell the story of the prehistoric Pacific Northwest on the sides of glued together shards. *Secrets of the Mount Vernon Culture* was born and would involve me for the next five years.

The first step was to make a pot. With my skills in ceramics akin to a blind monkey's on *Ambien*, I made my first visit to a greenware shop, the place where

crafters and scrap-bookers smoked Camel cigarettes and watched Oprah while they painted pink ceramic glazes on Santa's face. I was looking for an olla-shaped vase or bowl to practice on. Among the cast plaster dogs, nativity figures, and horse heads, I found three shapes resembling prehistoric vessels to experiment with. Glazed with a tan stain and black figures in the style of prehistoric petroglyphs, they fired at cone 07 and came out looking brand new. I wondered about how to age and break them so they could be reassembled to tell a more convincing story.



With a nod to Maria Martinez and the San Ildefonso Pueblo, I dug a hole in the front yard and burned the vessels in sawdust with a plate of steel on top to keep out the oxygen. It worked; broken from the uneven heating, the shards looked like they were pulled from the hinges of hell. The first artifacts from the long lost Mount Vernon culture had been discovered.

When I was showing my ravaged and restored artifacts to the horrified greenware proprietors whose biggest challenge to date had been painting red-colored glaze on Santa's suit and hat, I spotted a thirty-inch monster vessel the shape of a fat Mediterranean amphora. It sat on the top shelf and had gathered a layer of dust. "We've never sold any of those before," the owner said.

"You can make more?"

"It takes a week to make one; it's a giant mold. Your price, as an artist, is twenty-five dollars each."

"Start pouring," I said. "See you next week. I need a lot."

It was time to open the sketch pad. History had to be written.

Since the vessel was round, the decoration couldn't have a beginning or an end. Each pot required three drawings. With a political stick still in my ass, I drew the circular story of the first landowner; the ancient people wondered why they couldn't walk on property their republican neighbor claimed belonged to him.

I created cave-painted figures digging clams. *Incident at the Nude Beach* had Picasso's Beach Frolickers on one side and uptight, black-garbed women from a Grecian urn on the other. I drew an affirmative action story in which a woman gets hired from a line of muscled men. As the notebook filled, an idea was maturing. As a scientist turned to art, I knew Camano Island was a geological feature known as a "lateral moraine." The shape of Camano Island is the pile of overburden pushed ahead by a snowplow wall of ice as the last Ice Age scoured the bedrock of the coastal valley, surging forward into Puget Sound before it retreated fifteen thousand years ago. "What if," I pondered. "What if there was a thriving subculture on

the mainland, erased from history by five-thousand feet of ice and found in broken pieces under the debris pile now called Camano Island?”

I could create a complete culture, I realized—a magical blooming of innovation in a continent, half a planet wide, populated only by animals, a thirty thousand-year-old civilization wiped out by climate change.

The notion turned into an artist’s wet dream—an idea factory. Stories poured out of my head, one after another. I decided to create a mirror of our twenty-first century foolishness and translate that into a prehistoric world. I drew five pots with Seattle’s iconic aluminum ferry, the *Kalakala*, as Noah’s vessel to rescue animals.

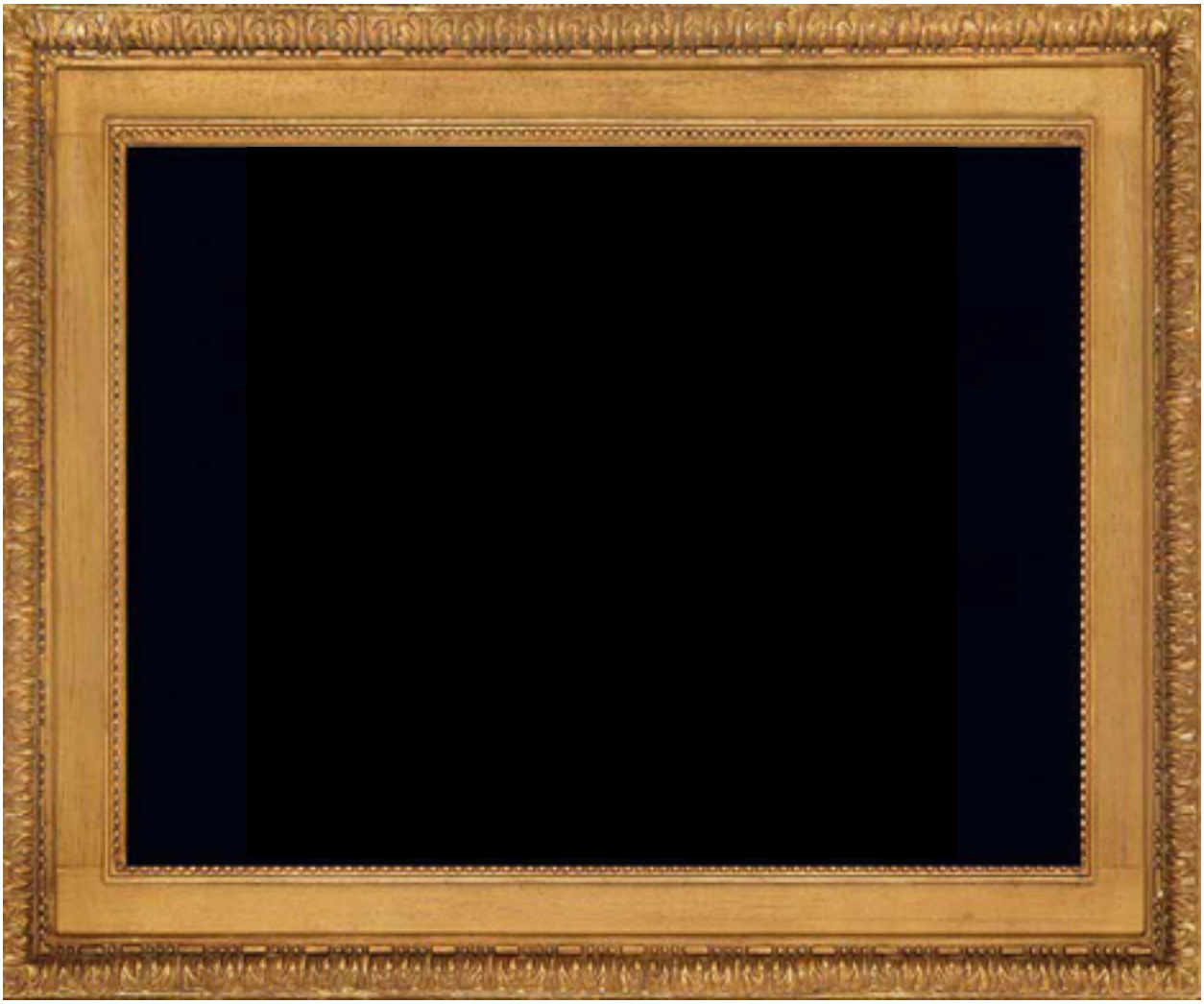
I created a math system, first in binary with a nod to Bill Gates and later in the hexadecimal system that programmers actually use. In Mount Vernon, thirty thou-

sand years ago, their math system used the number *16*. With eyeballs, a hand, a six-pointed snowflake, a kitty cat, an asshole, a pair of breasts, a vagina, a flaccid penis, an erect one, and a fart cloud among the symbols, I fashioned two monumental vessels, a subtraction machine and an adding machine. I gave them a fractal decorated pot design and invented a holy wedding vase mapping out the steps to the *Macarena*.

My mind was filled with brand-new thoughts daily; I traveled with a notebook beside me and sketched pot narratives at red lights. Karla was nervous at this new ob-

session with no resale potential, though I made beautiful new paintings in the wee hours to keep a roof over our heads.

The Willendorf Venus figurines were known to archeologists. Primitive stone carv-



ings of women, frequently pregnant, made in Europe forty-thousand years ago were looked at as some of the first art made by humankind. We needed some Camano Venuses. Armed with a twenty-pound bag of terra-cotta clay, I invited a woman I'd always admired to come to my cabin and sit naked while I carved her

form from a three-inch cube of red clay. She said yes. *Holy smokes*. I was fifty years old and had never asked a woman to pose before. By the end of the year, nearly all the women I knew had offered their form to be carved by me as they sat on my Frank Lloyd Wright sofa. Born-again Christians, old hippies, and even local teachers said yes if they liked their bodies and no if they didn't. The daughter of a buddy told me she'd love to pose but she was seven months pregnant. I said, "Perfect."

I remembered, as a youngster, reading the articles in *National Geographic* featuring Stone Age discoveries. Each story had at least one nifty oil painting of cave-people doing their thing—killing a mastodon, scraping hides in a smoky cave, or making tools. I wanted to create large versions of these paintings with my hockey-playing women dressed like characters from *Clan of the Cave Bear.* I needed a suitable ice-age backdrop for fur-clad beauties to pretend to play prehistoric hockey. After a hundred or so carvings of Camano Venuses there would be no trouble finding volunteers for some photographic studies. The problem was the location.

We settled on a helicopter junket to a glacial basin on mile-high White Chuck Mountain with seven close female friends carrying hockey sticks, scraps of fur for clothing, and little else. Tony, from Highline Helicopters in the town of Darrington, deep in the North Cascades, quoted me a rate of seven hundred fifty dollars an hour for the use of a chopper. Yikes. I had a Stickley chair so dear I wanted to be

buried with it and buried it in the not-for-sale section of my collection. The question was simple: do I keep the chair or leverage it for a helicopter ride to the top of a mountain with seven women to play hockey naked?

When a friend who was a videographer volunteered to accompany us and capture the day on film, he got a seat. My attorney, after crafting a *hold harmless agreement* for the helicopter ride, insisted he join us for on-the-spot legal advice. He didn't get a seat.

On the glacier, an insurance secretary, a professor at UW, my partner, Karla, a housewife, my next door neighbor, and Shannon did their best to cover some of their bodies with scraps of mink and fox and ran around the ice chasing a knobby dog ball as the puck. The late summer sun reflected off the glacier and caused sunburns on rarely-tanned places. While I snapped photos for the paintings, the videographer hovered above and filmed the unusual competition from one hundred feet.

Since we had the option of filming straight down, I instructed the team to lie on the corn snow ice and make geometric shapes with their naked bodies for helicopter shots of the patterns. This caused a minor revolt about working conditions, solved when I removed my trousers and sat on the same material till the poses were complete.

The helicopter pilot, having the best day of his flying career, sheepishly asked the team to pose in front of his machine, naked with Mount Baker on the horizon. By now they were laughing and drinking beer. They agreed and had him lie on the ground in front of the copter under the foot of a buxom Amazon like the victim of a recent hunt. I suspect the one-hour photo store in Darrington was buzzing later. The team thanked me for providing the afternoon of a lifetime, and I returned home to paint five monumental works of art. The video footage would come in handy later.

The newly cast plaster vessels were appearing once a week. I found that a pencil created a dark line on the soft surface, and one-by-one the sketches were added to the blanks. Unlike real clay, the vessels wouldn't accept additional material, so the relief carvings were limited to the thickness of the vessel wall. I used a *Dremel* tool to carve holes and smooth details. The fine dust scared me, even with a paper mask, and I promised to make thirty vessels and then quit.

Under-glazed and fired to cone 07, the bisque fired pot ended up in a hole dug into Camano glacial hardpan for a pit fire. I drove to Stanwood High School the day of a firing and took five leaf bags of sawdust from the wood shop for the fuel. The shop teachers loved me as I emptied the bin.

After lowering the bisque fired pot into the hole, I filled it with wood shop debris, sprinkled a squirt of lighter fluid on top, and set the sawdust on fire. A heavy slab

of rusty iron from a Puget Sound shipwreck was dropped on top to form an oxygen-starved reduction fire. In the morning, the hole was empty, not even an ash, the pot now a pile of shards at the bottom. After a rinse, the vessel was re-glued from the base to the top as it spun on a lazy Susan.

The new idea fest was on automatic pilot now. A techie friend, Chris Sandys, had discovered Abode Premiere, a film-making app. “I can film your pots spinning as they tell their story,” he told me. Since the flow of each pot decoration was horizontal, his suggestion opened a new world for me to tell stories. I invented a belt-driven lazy Susan, and we captured all the pots as they turned. “I can make a video of your discovery,” he told me one day. “Want to make a little movie?”

Of course.

“You have to make a storyboard laying out each video clip next to the narrator’s text,” he told me. “This will be my guide.”

I’d never heard of a storyboard. In the library, I plowed through books on film making, zeroing in on the index at the end for the word “storyboard.”

A pamphlet named *How to Make an Industrial Video* finally explained it. You draw a box on the left side of an open notebook. On the right page you write the narrator’s text. *It is important not to linger on a clip for more than five seconds,* it told

me. *Find multiple views or other clips to follow the narrative to keep the viewer interested.*

Wisdom flowed from this handbook. Believing I now had a pretty good handle on filmmaking and screenplays, I opened a college lined notebook and began.

I planned to run the film in a PBS *Nova* format, the only documentary style I knew. The storyboard began in an opening image, and words appeared beside it to the right side. I told the story of mankind as a preface, no idea where I would get the video to put in these boxes. Although a bit grandiose, I wanted to bring the viewer to the Clovis Point Culture of 10,000 BC and prove the Mount Vernon culture flourished much earlier and, in fact, influenced the rest of the world when the land bridge to Siberia opened and they brought naked women's hockey to Europe via the silk road. (It was a stretch, but so was the culture.) The storyboard took nine hours to complete. It required two hundred forty pages, including the sketches to lay out a fake documentary—expected to run for an hour on TV.

Chris was horrified at the three-inch thick manuscript. "I have a job, you know," he told me. "I make four hundred thousand dollars a year. I agreed to help make a two-minute movie. I'm out."

By this point, Karla and I had represented the artists from the Pilchuck Glass School for seven years. I applied for the Emerging Artist in Residence Award and

won eight weeks making glass at the prestigious school. The purpose of the residency was to invite talented artists to experiment in areas they knew nothing about and see what developed. I qualified. I had no experience with working in hot glass. My project was to make wax copies of Mount Vernon artifacts, cover the wax shape in plaster, melt out the original wax, and let crushed glass frit melt into the cavity inside a kiln at 2200 degrees. I planned to cast two four-foot glass columns depicting the number system before and after the censorship and cast two slabs of glass resembling ice for my Camano venus figurines to play hockey on.

Eight weeks later, after eating Dinty Moore Beef Stew in the microwave and running back to Camano for weekends with Karla and the gallery, they were done. Some were successful, and a few failed. I turned the failures into positives because they were supposed to be thirty thousand years old and primitive.

I applied for a venue at the Bumbershoot 2000 Art Festival, offering the artifacts, paintings, figurines in bronze stadiums, and seven films. It was a bit of a bluff, since my filmmaker had backed out and I owned neither a computer nor a movie camera and had no clue how to use Adobe Premiere or Final Cut Pro.

They accepted *Secrets of the Mount Vernon Culture* as an event and assigned me the Rainer Room for the installation. Running a two-week event eighty miles from my home required complicated logistics, from staffing to transport to layout. Thirty days before the start date, a white knight gifted me $5000 to purchase a G-4 Mac, a

Sony camcorder, and the $600 version of Final Cut Pro. With volunteers to recruit, a complicated set up plan to compose, and seven films to make, I opened the box with a computer inside and began reading the manual. Final Cut Pro had its own manual, a thick document which made as much sense to me a Chinese scroll. The camcorder and its FireWire connector was a third learning curve.

My brain ached as hundreds of foreign technical terms bounced around, unconnected as the set-up day loomed.

Karla stopped by to find me in tears, barely able to speak as I juggled a technical mountain. She was there to complain about our bills. I dropped to my knees and begged her to pretend—for two more weeks—that everything was fine.

"It's not all right," she told me.

"Make believe its fine. Please. I can't handle any more information. My brain hurts. Another thought shoved into it will give me a heart attack or a stroke."

Karla was not a fan of make-believe when it came to money. She unleashed a string of all the times I'd fucked up, times I had let her down, the thoughtless acts I'd unleashed to hurt her feelings, and her frustrations with a four-year project she felt had kept me from my gallery duties. Gulp.

Helpless, a torrent of transgressions filling my ears, I shut down. All thoughts, worries, technical questions, and emotions faded to black. As I floated, ungrounded,

away from my useless body, calm descended. I looked up to see her mouth still moving and felt the complete peace of emotional oblivion. I was cured during this strange baptism, and as she drove away, still muttering, I returned to work with an empty spot in my body where emotions used to live.

The solution to seven promised videos was suddenly simple. From past Bumbershoots, I knew the movement pattern of twenty-thousand visitors who wandered from venue to venue as they waited for Joan Jett to perform in the arena. A line of people would enter my room and flow in a counter clockwise direction until they reached the entry door again and left. I had choreographed the experience into eight sections—an introductory preview, the excavation of the discovery, a Noah's Ark corner, prehistoric sports, life and times, politics, religion, and math. As the visitors circled the exhibit, pushed forward by the surging crowd, each person saw twenty-seconds of video on each TV before they moved along to the next section. I didn't need to make seven videos, I realized; I only needed videos consisting of a string of unconnected jabbering about math or sports or archaeology convincing each fleeting viewer something important was being discussed. No viewer would stay in one place long enough to realize the TV screen made no sense at all. Each television screen displayed gobbledygook that resembled something that made sense to hurried visitors passing by. As an artist, I loved the pure disconnect. The installation became a piece of fine art.

Thus armed with nonsense videos, I loaded the rental truck and spent the next two weeks lying to the people of Seattle about my fake discovery of a fictitious civilization in which assholes, penises, and kitty cats were part of the math system and women played hockey naked. Though two weeks and twenty-thousand visitors was exhausting, the installation was well-received. A tanned archeologist with tears and a smile told me he'd recently returned from Jordan after ten years on a dig. The head of the expedition, he told me, found two stone columns once supporting a third-century porch. He'd declared they were "standing stones" of great historical importance and published a paper. "They supported a porch roof," my visitor told

me, shaking his head. “Your exhibit should be in the lobby of archaeology meetings,” he added, “to remind my colleagues not to take themselves so seriously.”

Two high school girls passed me on their way out of the Rainier Room. “I hate history,” one said. “Me too,” said the other—positive feedback.

Returning to Camano Island, I fired up the computer and took my time crafting a real documentary—actually, a real *mockumentary*—based on the two hundred forty-page storyboard that had frightened my videographer away the year before. *Secrets of the Mount Vernon Culture—the movie* was narrated by Howard Shuman, a retired Channel Five anchorman. It had guest appearances by Bruce Baillee, the legendary avant-garde filmmaker, and Russell Johnson, *the Professor* from Gilligan’s Island, as the authority who lied about my artifacts with a straight face. I ended the film with a helicopter shot of my naked women hockey team walking across a snow-covered glacier.

The Whatcom Museum of History and Art courted me for a five-month exhibit of the Mount Vernon Culture during which the museum guides kept mum about the fact it was a load of newly created gobblygunk while keeping a straight face.

Karla and I had parted ways as lovers but were still running the gallery together as best friends when the airplanes hit the World Trade Center towers. Amid the national mourning, it occurred to me that the paintings still trapped somewhere in

Siberia were images of commercial aircraft crashing into American buildings. I could envision the scenario: an American artist captured smuggling large paintings of terrorist acts, from Russia, no less. With the Patriot Act, and Guantanamo, and shock and awe, and Attorney General Ashcroft covering the nude marble sculptures with sheets so no one could see the pee pee, I promised myself to bring a film crew with me if I ever had a chance to bring *The Last Time They Saw Helen's Kitchen* back to the United States to cover my artistic ass and avoid rendition in Cuba.

Auction turns into a novel

I received a call at 10:00 pm while drinking wine and watching the Mariners as I sat on my Frank Lloyd Wright sofa. “What’s the most valuable American antique ever sold?” an unfamiliar voice barked.

“Who the hell is this,” I asked.

“Answer the question, the most valuable.”

“Alan?” I was guessing Alan Gorsuch, the Tacoma auctioneer I used to cross the country with.

“Answer the question.”

“Probably something Chippendale,” I answered. “Maybe the hairy paw Philadelphia chair from the Antiques Road Show.”

“Not bad for a Stickley whore. Think Rhode Island.”

“Probably some chest of drawers or desk by those guys, Goddard and Townsend. Why? Did you get one, you son of a bitch?”

“A signed Townsend desk with three shells, as a matter of fact, walked into the shop yesterday.”

“What’s it worth, four million?”

“Five million. I’m going to auction it next week.”

“What’s your commission?”

“For items this important I have to be competitive with Christie’s and Sotheby’s, and they do it for free. But then there’s the…”

“Buyer’s premium, added at the end; why you’re going to make half a million bucks for five minutes work. Are you inviting me to drive to Tacoma to watch you get rich?”

“Actually, there are only three or four people in the world who pay top dollar. I’m charging fifty dollars to get in…to keep the riffraff out.”

“Even me, your cross country partner?”

“Especially you.”

Alan Gorsuch, the auctioneer who’d first lured me to the Pacific Northwest with a Gus Stickley spindle side table, with whom I'd spent a crazy three weeks on an antique junket across America, was going to strike it rich. Good for him. And he called me to gloat, still wounded that I bluffed my way across the country, to invite me to pay fifty dollars to watch him do it. Bastard.

Determined to watch this windfall, I decided I was going to write a story about the auction for some antique magazine and create a press pass to enter without paying.

Silly as it was, since I hadn't written anything but *The Gunter Papers* twenty-five years before, I cold called *The Maine Antique Digest* to offer my services to cover the sale—a sale making waves, I'm sure, on the East Coast. They told me they were sending a reporter out to write the story. I told them I was already here and could save them airfare; they told me the writer had published a book on Goddard and Townsend furniture.

I called the *Arts and Antiques Magazine*. The editor there promised me nothing but agreed to look at anything I sent them. Thus hired, I printed out a press pass card to put in my hat and avoid Alan's extortion at the door.

That Saturday in Tacoma, I sneered my way past the cashier at the door, pointing to my press pass, and entered the auction hall, nearly deserted. The desk, a table, and a framed ancient portrait were the only items on the stage. Not being an expert, I thought the desk looked old and important.

Alan was there, dressed to the nines. His wife, Cheryl, looked like a million bucks too. I helped myself to baby eclairs, fresh squeezed orange juice, and champaign while they glared, knowing I didn't pay.

The auction began with few in the room. The man I assumed was the consignor, a thin gray-hair in a three-piece suit, sat in back. A TV reporter talked with her cameraman. I saw the fellow from *Maine Antique Digest*, a camera around his neck and

a notebook in his hand. A couple of newspaper reporters grazed at the food table. No bidders.

No bidders in a million-dollar auction? I wondered if the sale would take place on phone bids. Alan took the stage, walked to the painting, supposedly part of the original estate, and began an auction to a room devoid of buyers. He declared the person in the painting was definitely not the gentleman who owned the original furniture as originally believed. In fact, he continued, the painting was worthless, painted by a nobody. He started the bidding at one thousand.

The consignor in the back raised his paddle and bought it back.

How bizarre. Gorsuch strode to the drop-leaf table and denounced it as a boring, ordinary Chippendale table of no merit, and the label varnished to the underneath surface was a cheap xerox copy stained to look old. Definitely not the work of John Townsend. He started the bidding at one hundred dollars. I realized the only other person in the room who made a living with antiques was me. I smiled at Alan and raised my paddle to shoot a fish in a barrel. It was still a two hundred fifty-year-old table, fake label or not.

Alan grimaced. “One hundred I’ve got,” he squeaked. “Do I hear two hundred?”

“Two hundred I have,” he said, pointing to the back. I spun around to see the TV cameraman with a bidding card. I remained looking at the nervous youngster as

Alan asked for three hundred. I raised my paddle daring the cameraman to battle. It was an auction gambit I learned years before. He caved, and I won an original Chippendale table for three bills. Gorsuch frowned.

The desk was next. Pulling himself full upright in righteous indignation, the auctioneer looked into the TV camera and blasted the shrinking consignor as the evil that gives antique dealers a bad name. He told the man his attempt to fool the public with a fake reproduction should be punished. Brandishing a red metal gas can, Gorsuch theatrically ordered the desk be wheeled out into the Tacoma street. The odd gathering followed in an awkward parade. On the sidewalk, standing so the TV camera had his best side, the auctioneer commanded the wilting consignor to pour gasoline over his fake and set it on fire to burn away his shame. Really. I was standing there.

The cowed consignor refused.

Alan now summoned the police, who laughed at his request to take the desk into custody, saying they only arrested people.

As I drove home on a Saturday afternoon with a Chippendale table in back, I reflected on the absurdity of the morning's events, thinking no writer could make up something so bizarre. I toyed with the idea of traveling to Vancouver Island where the consignor lived and trying for an interview to embellish the story I planned to

write for *Art and Antiques Magazine*. I chickened out, though, thinking I'd be five hours from the safety of Camano Island trying to locate a person who didn't want to be interviewed and whom I already knew to be a criminal. On his turf with no back up plan.

I pondered what perils would befall me if I had to run for my life, chased by a felon in British Columbia. It occurred to me the story would make a great book, and the first chapter in Tacoma was already written—better than I could have imagined.

The second push to create my first book in twenty-five years came from my neighbor, Natasha, one of the hockey women. As a filmmaker, she had been one of my biggest cheerleaders when I made my *mocumentary*, but one day she felt honest and gave me a critique. "Did you ever decide late at night that the chapter in the book you're reading is the last one tonight before sleep, only to read a sentence at the end propelling you forward into the next chapter despite yourself?" she asked. "Well, when we're watching your movie and a chapter ends, we're hoping to go home rather than go to the next one. Sorry." Ouch, again.

What I took out of the conversation was the way to write a great novel is to make the last line in each chapter so compelling the reader can't close the book. In other words, I didn't have to write a great book, only fifteen great chapter endings.

Armed with a total of one insight, the pre-made first chapter, and little else, I gave myself permission to write my first novel.

Jack makes a novel

Publishing a year's worth of Junior High mimeographs thirty years before did nothing to prepare me for writing a real book. I invented a character named Wally Winchester, a dodgy character with a good heart. I wanted a flawed protagonist. I pulled out my own neurosis, my bad habits, and my personal obsessions and pasted them on Wally's back.

The plan was to start the first chapters with the actual auction scene I'd just attended, with Wally there instead of me to start the ball rolling. I figured to get fifty pages, free, as a head start by replacing a name and telling the true story. Then would be the time to turn to fiction and send Wally deep into Canada to seek out the consignor. Once in the middle of an adventure, I thought, the novel will write itself. This was a very naïve approach to crafting a work of literary fiction.

I had an ace in the hole to help me remain ignorant of the dos and don'ts of writing good fiction: twenty-five years of antique dealer stories. I knew firsthand of the swindles, the lucky days, the shenanigans, the legends, the shady deals, and the fakes that sold for millions. I figured using these stories could save me a hundred pages of inventing fiction. I was going to tell antique dealer stories and string them together with a made-up tale of murder, antique picking in Canada, and a race from a villain back to the US. I knew I wanted it to end as Wally is strangled with the

back bar of an L & JG Stickley Morris chair. I wrote it in a month and typed it into Microsoft Word. Looking back, the first draft was a nasty document with hundreds of errors, a complete misunderstanding of comma use, and many misspelled words, illuminating a totally amateur attempt at fiction. I loved it, though, especially when I typed *The End*. The title was *Original Finish.* The editor of *The Gunter Papers*, Robert Wyatt, was still on my mailing list thirty years after we'd collaborated. I'd enjoyed keeping him abreast of my painting career. Now excited about finishing my first novel, I sent him the first rendition. I waited a year for a response but heard nothing.

> Book two was percolating.

Mercado Libre is the Latin America version of eBay. Posted in Spanish, an entire continent's antiques and collectables are for sale if you read the language or can translate the page some other way—far too much work for all my scumbag colleagues. If a Stickley table turned up for sale in Argentina, for instance, who down there would figure it out? Maybe no one. Wishful thinking? Perhaps, but scrolling for antique furniture in Chile with a link to altavista.com for translation if needed was a great way to spend an evening with a nice bottle of merlot. I found some cool decorative art objects down there but no Stickley. I took a chance, sending five hundred dollars in unsecured funds to a Western Union box in Brazil to purchase a fantastic Austrian ceramic head. I figured if the deal went south, so to speak, the opportunity to add the sordid details to my book would be worth the price. It arrived fine. South America was, to my naïve thinking, my personal shopping grounds.

I talked with the dean of Art Deco in New England who told stories about storage containers of Galle glass he'd bought in Chile for pennies.

"Were these objects brought there when Nazis were fleeing to South America with their ill-gotten booty?" I asked.

“It’s not the Nazis; it’s the trophy wives,” he told me. “Trophy wives…One hundred years ago, multinational corporations thriving on the backs of natives to export South American natural resources, like Anaconda Copper and United Fruit, sent new managers from their comfy homes in Shaker Heights or the Hamptons to run the head office in South America. The wives objected to the move to an outpost in Chile or Guatemala. Who could blame them? There goes the country club and the cotillion.

“The wives,” David Gilgun told me, “were sent to Europe on unlimited company funds. The objects of virtue,” he told me, “were brought back to South America by returning wives. More than you can imagine.”

He showed me a Polaroid snapshot of a Wurlitzer 910 bubble-rise jukebox he'd found in a ten thousand-foot Chilean Village, told me the town had not experienced a rain in the last hundred years and was run by a warlord called Joe, the Pole.

“How in hell did you locate this?” I asked.

“Cardinal Cushing from the Boston archdiocese,” he answered. “A friend of mine sponsors a network of Catholic missionaries who serve South America. His private, personal project is to record the languages of the last tribes in the Amazon basin and capture any stories before they are lost. Because of the Shining Path and other rebel groups, the governments have clamped down on the import of personal

recording devices. So when I go to South America, I fill a suitcase with tape recorders and video cameras and deliver them to the missionaries, and they tell me when they run into interesting collectables in their journeys. That's how I heard about the jukebox at ten thousand feet."

"I'm not fond of Art Deco," Gilgun told me.

"But you're the king, at least around here. You are known for your amazing objects."

"I'm on the board of several banks," Gilgun told me. "When a country is expected to have a currency crash, we get wind of it days before. I have a buddy who is the South American sales representative of a major pharmaceutical concern. If, say Uruguay, is devaluing the Uruguay dollar by ninety percent on Friday, it would be prudent to show up at 9 AM when the shops open with a pocketful of North American dollars in cash. My buddy would show up as the doors opened at the most exclusive shop in town, a store filled with great examples from the continent, mostly Art Deco and Art Nouveau, before the proprietor got wind of the fact that his country's dollar was now worth a dim and we could buy his best decorative art at ten percent. Much of my Art Deco came from this gambit. The business grew from there." I was hooked. South America was an untapped gold mine of important objects, and I was the one of the few people in North America who knew.

The Egg Rocker, Ingram Books, 2004, is a South American caper. Wally's wife has two tickets to Chile, and he is watching an amazingly rare chair, offered in Spanish on the Chilean version of eBay.

With no feedback from Wyatt, I turned to Elmore Leonard. His whodunits crackled with crisp dialogue. The descriptions were sparse as the conversations drove the story. Book two, I decided, would be delivered through spoken words.

Settings in a continent I'd never set foot on were another question. *Gorky Park* was my guide. It was said Martin Cruz Smith penned his Soviet Union thriller after two weeks in Moscow in 1973. I decided to spend a month south of the equator to taste, smell, and absorb the flavor of an unknown continent.

As I looked into a nineteen-hour flight to southern Chile, my pal, Mike Nestor, traveling in Mexico, emailed me from a Hispanic internet café with a dilemma.

Proud owner of a vintage VW split-window bus, Mike had reached the Arctic Circle in his favorite car-toy and was in Latin America hoping to drive to the most southern point on the Pan American Highway to bookend his bucket list at the Antarctic Circle. At the mercy of Hispanic internet cafes for information, he asked me to find a path through Panama into Columbia through a region appearing to be roadless: the Darien Gap. From the comfort of my Camano Island cabin, I tried to find a way for him to cross.

It turns out the one hundred sixty-kilometer, undeveloped region of swamplands and forest was one of the most inhospitable places on earth, with daunting terrain, bold, thirsty natives, criminal gangs, and drug dealing cartels. A north-south highway was off the table. From the comfort of my desk, I discovered an attempt by a Range Rover team. Mechanics in the party would disassemble the vehicles for water crossings and reassemble them on the other side. The journey took one hundred sixty days. I messaged Mike to tell him the bad news. I suggested he meet me in Punta Arenas, one hundred miles from the coast of Antarctica, and we could rent a car and drive north.

Despite warnings from loved ones, I flew alone to the southernmost point in the western hemisphere with no language skills and a debit card, a fool hearty caper with no backup plan. I had a book to write. As I disembarked in Punta Arenas, the smiling face of the president of the Camano Island Chamber of Commerce was in the greeting crowd. We rented a car with a fifteen hundred-dollar drop-off charge because of the difficulty of getting it back. Three thousand kilometers and a month later, we reached Santiago.

My movie camera filled fifteen cassettes as I recorded the trek from the Pacific to the Atlantic and back again through a gap in the Andes Mountains.

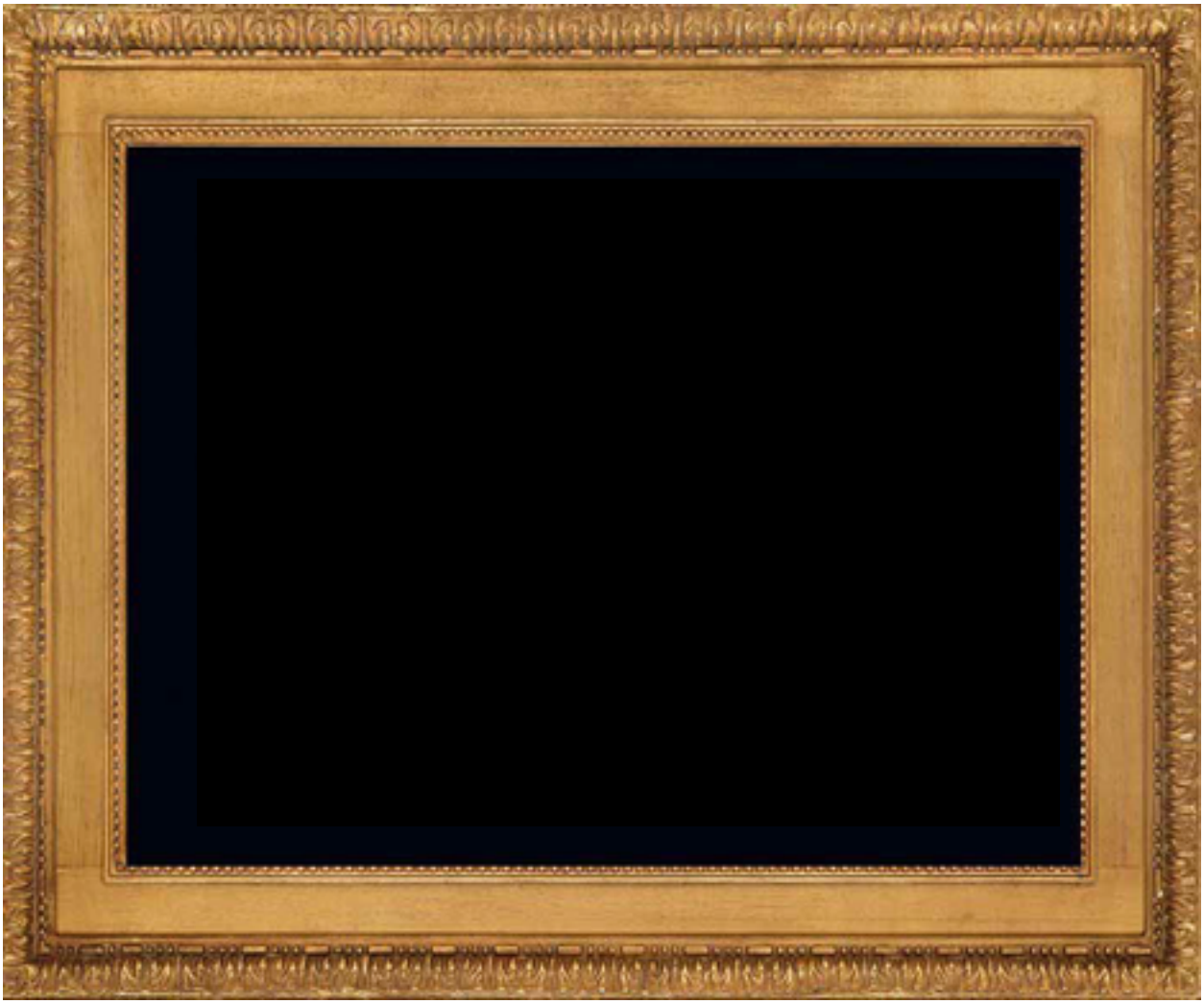
A Chilean family I knew on Camano suggested we look up their kinfolk in Punt Arenas, particularly the youngest daughter, a wild abstract painter laboring in a

vacuum. Her name was Chana, “short for Sandra,” she told us. She was a wild child with international aspirations. With her close-cropped red hair and the body of a leopard, she became a character in the book.

Hoping to write my next antique dealer thriller with authority, my job was to look for killer collectables in a foreign language as a clueless North American gringo. After talking a used furniture dealer out of a thirties metal German crane and bucket toy truck in the southernmost town in the western hemisphere, my goal for the next month was to find original Stickley nine thousand miles from upstate New York. I located one, the rare and wonderful Gus Stickley drop-arm spindle Morris chair, in an estancia farmhouse near the Puerto Moreno glacier; however, Mike vetoed the return trip of one hundred kilometers on the treacherous roads. I plan to return for it someday. In Santiago, a high-end dealer I met, wishing to be in my upcoming novel, told me of a Joseph Hoffman classic reclining chair, the *Sitzmaschine*, floating around the city but warned me the smart money believed it to be fake. I would run into the chair again and buy it a year later, only to find the Santiago rumors about its authenticity to be correct.

I penned the novel in three months, a string of Elmore Leonard conversations with a multinational cast. Chana Ulello was transformed into a rainforest orphan, now a professional killer in the employ of Claus Brown, son of Eva and Aldolf, waiting for his chance to restore his father’s legacy.

After discovering the spelling and grammar tool, I crafted a fast-paced thriller with dialogue carrying the action forward. I emailed the document to Bob Wyatt, undaunted by his silence after book one. He called me this time, asking when I'd learned to write between novel one and novel two. Equipped with unlimited phone service, he orally dissected each line from the first page till the end as I took notes on a printed manuscript. Having an editorial expert walk me over every word and punctuation rule of three hundred pages of my sentences was like the ultimate foot rub. In a month, Wyatt taught me to think like an actual novelist and make editorial decisions as I wrote. He called himself "your meddler."



Ruth and John go to heaven

As Wyatt trotted *The Egg Rocker* around the NYC publishing houses, my parents began to die, one after the other. It was heartbreaking. Two years of cross-country flights for bedside support ended at Ruth Gunter's grave with my brother, Wayne, the family hero. My mother had loved life with a passion, and her passing took my biggest source of self-confidence and support.

Dad died first. Full-time physical care was beyond the family resources. I attended the intervention during which we told dad he had to leave his chair in front of the TV and enter a hospice facility. I drove dad to his place to die. He didn't see it coming. In the office during his orientation, he saw a computer. "Show me your webpage," he asked. The staff brought it up and dad saw hundreds of paintings I'd

made that he had been previously unaware of. The expulsion from his home sapped

his spirit. He was gone in a week. It was still the right decision.

Mom rebounded in a house free of death trauma and flourished. She began to paint again. Her passion about being alive and experiencing the universe still inspires me. Thwarted by the time zones, we would talk on the phone. She was proud of me, her artist son. My job was to lift her spirits—to look further into her new life without dad and find new places to grow.

Wayne ran sixteen pharmacies. His family duties, the only son for three thousand miles, were daily. He managed caregiving, business, and his family all by himself.

I could only help via the phone. The call came at 11 PM. “Get a flight,” Wayne told me. “Hurry home.”

He called me an hour later, 3:00 AM his time, and told me to take my time.

When he met me at the airport, Wayne handed me a photo of Ruth Gunter from the 70s. “You have two days to paint this picture,” he said before offering me a Scotch in the passenger seat. The casket is closed, and your painting will be what everyone sees at the funeral.

I had no art supplies. Nothing. So in the morning, I grazed the craft outlets and came up with a palette of Acrylics, some brushes, and a canvas board with a frame.

I spent the day after my mother’s passing looking into the photo of the face of my best friend, Ruth Gunter. I painted the highlights in her eyes. I brought back Ruth Joanne Shaneck, the teenager who’d fallen in love with a sailor and started a fami-

ly. We spent some excellent time together, Ruth and I, when I highlighted her nose and the tops of her lips. We debated her background, settling on a light blue.

Pig Book

I returned to the Pacific Northwest in the middle of *snowmageddon*, a three-foot blizzard so rare to the West Coast that traffic ceased for two weeks. Unable to paint my way out of trouble with the roads impassable, I watched my bank account dwindle. Running a business always cut into my creative imperative. I longed for the wealth to allow me uninterrupted alone time for my paintings and my books. But with my gallery unreachable and visitors and sales nonexistent, I realized being broke with no options was as liberating as having a trust fund. With images of

over a hundred paintings of flying pigs through the ages on my hard drive, I settled down with Photoshop to craft a full-color coffee table book.

The Pictorial History of the Pacific Northwest Including the Future is a one hundred fifty-page journey through my art career as a wise, old curator who happens to be a black and white pig explains the natural history of *Sus Essex Aviatrix* to a pair of young pigs skipping school. It begins with God's first thought: "I'd like to see a pig fly," and ends in the distant future in which pigs look across a deep gorge at Seattle landmarks peppering a line of strata on the cliffside cut.

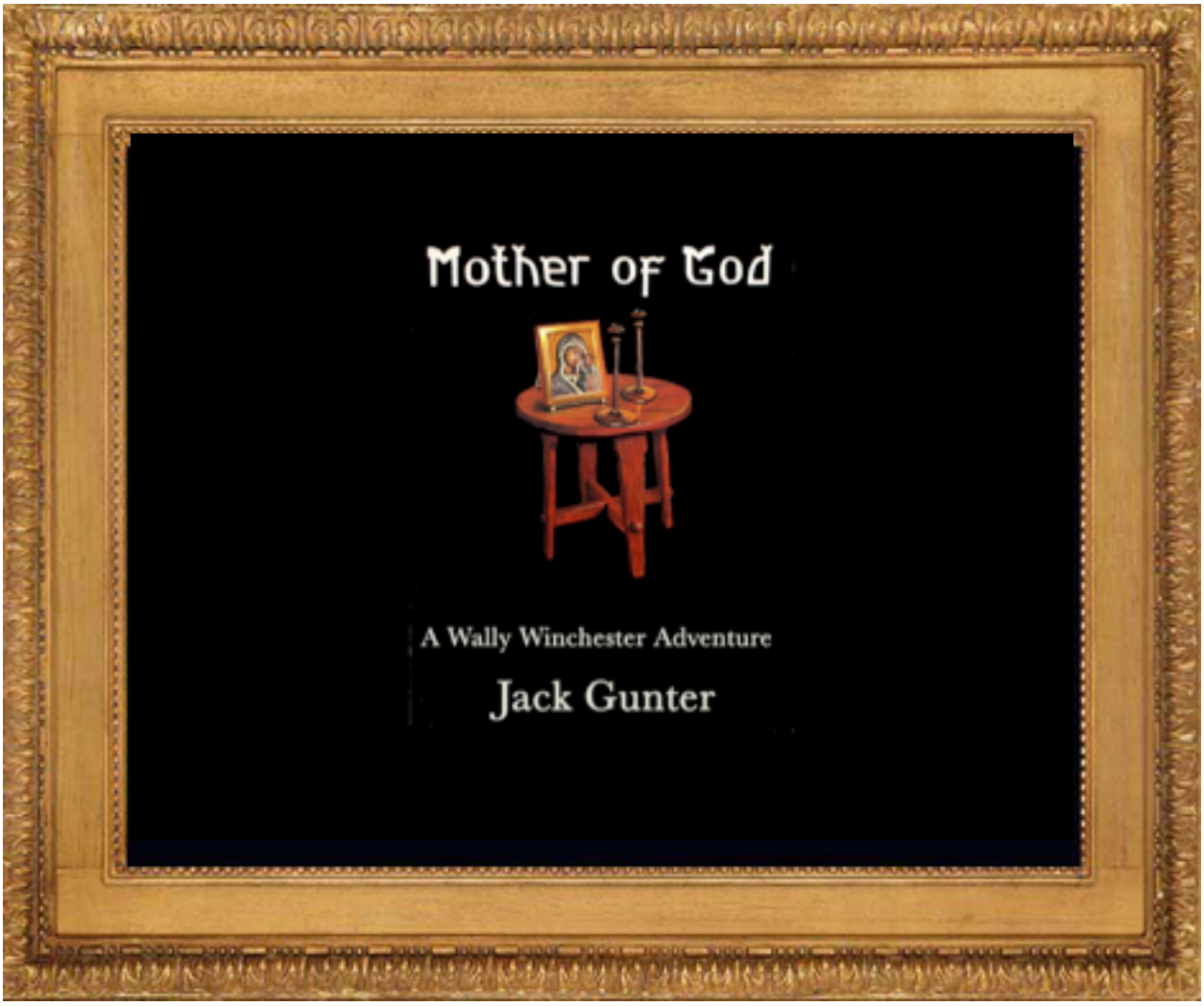
Mother of God

As my wife, Gina, and I lay in bed on a lazy Sunday morning with a cup of coffee and the Sunday Times on our laps, a story on page seventeen described the Pope returning a sacred icon to the Russian Orthodox Church. Long a thorn in the side of both organizations, the *Mother of God of Kazan* was known as the protectant of Russia and had been used to ward off invaders for five hundred years. The Roman Catholic Pope had the icon in his bedroom, an anathema to the furious Orthodoxy in Moscow. The article continued. The original *Kazanskaya* had been lost in 1907 when its cathedral in St. Petersburg had burned down. The object of all the fuss was the next oldest example, quickly elevated to holiness by Russians fearing their safety without it. Stalin, himself a non-believer, had allegedly flown the copy over Moscow defenses in 1944, hedging his bets as Hitler's army drew near the gates.

"That icon was not lost in 1907," I said to Gina. "It was stolen, and the church was torched to cover the theft. Wally Winchester is going to find it."

Gina rolled her eyes and returned to her coffee; I began to write *The Mother of God*.

I fell back on my experience at Westminster Mini School to craft a tale of an antique dealer who lands a job as substitute teacher to hunt for Stickley on the grounds of the turn of the century state hospital. When he discovers a Russian



handmade map in the old library, he ends up in Mongolia with the icon under his shirt on a perilous five-day train ride across the continent. I researched the most colorful Russian religion cults and the Orthodoxy and added the Blue Army, a radical splinter of the Catholic Church, and threw them on the train on its race to the book's conclusion. The book ends in the dreaded steam tunnels that had terrorized me thirty years before.

Soft Focus

As my collection of twentieth-century decorative objects grew faster than my painting proceeds, I opened a funky antique store in Stanwood on a road that every Camano Island visitor used, a perfect lure for the weekend millionaires and all of my neighbors. I filled it with high-end merchandise, hired a staff, and opened the door.

Months passed and curious locals wondered why Joseph Hoffman-designed chairs were worth four-thousand dollars. The helpers begged me to lower my prices. I felt like I had opened a Tesla dealership in Darrington. Sitting on the main drag, the shop had to be open seven days a week, and my need for creativity cried out for more time.

I swapped a nice Jack Gunter clam digger painting for a 1985 Corvette one fine day. My son, John, suggested if I wanted to give him another car I could drive the ‘vette to New England, pick antiques on the way over (alone), and rent a van back east to pick them up on the drive back.

I agreed with the request on principle but was having too much fun driving the car. An idea popped up for the next novel instead. What if Wally had an extraordinary vehicle, like a Shelby Cobra, and was offered a small fortune for it if he drove it to

Boston. Wally could pick all the towns on the drive east, the payoff when he arrived in *Beantown*.

Thus began *Soft Focus* book four in the Wally Winchester series. Gina, a fine photographer, had a hero: Julia Margaret Cameron, a mother of ten living on the Isle of Wright in 1860 whose images using the newly invented device called a camera propelled her, a woman, to the top of the British art circles when people of her sex were supposed to be knitting. Cameron's husband uprooted her place in the art table and sailed with her to Ceylon, off the coast of India, where her photography ceased. I'd suggested to Gina that we fly to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and search out Julia's plantation estate to see if she'd left a mark of her presence on the island. Old newspaper clippings, a grave site, and an attempt to door-knock her former home to look for traces of her art was my plan. I'd further suggested she could use her photographic sills and write a book about Julia's last days. She was horrified with the idea, though. It was a dangerous place (if you were a Tamil Tiger), so the project was shelved.

Fiction allowed my to take that trip: Wally was going to fly to Sri Lanka to look for Julia's lost photographs as a sub plot to the road trip. I threw in a cute Mexican assassin as Wally's travel partner and decided they'd fall in love.

This was my premise for book four: *Soft Focus*. Working in the shop every day, I kept a college lined notebook on the passenger seat of my pickup. Every spare

moment I would race to the cab and write another paragraph. As the story reached critical mass, it began to invent itself. I'd be listening to a matron while she told me about her grandmother's collection of doilies when the next sentence appeared like a blinking highway sign. I'd excuse myself to write it down before it faded. On trips to Seattle, I'd take Old Highway 99, twenty miles of stoplights. An idea would pop up as I crawled to the next intersection, hoping for a red light to write it down. With the words now on autopilot, I could knock out a chapter in an afternoon of clogged traffic. I finished the first draft, penned in stolen moments, in less than a year.

True love

Leslie Moore came into my life when her mother saw one of my paintings in a La-Conner exhibit and recruited her daughter to buy it for her. When Leslie and a friend showed up at the south-end gallery, she negotiated a reduced price as, helpless, I gazed into her beautiful eyes. I invited her to my cabin to discuss my new book; she, a bibliophile, agreed. When she told me of her early life as a chemist, I swooned. “I decided not to spend the rest of my life,” she told me, “doing column chromatography.”

“Say it again,” I asked.

“C-O-L-U-M-N C-H-R-O-M-A-T-O-G-R-A-P-H-Y.”

I was in love.

We discussed some recent studies in genetics where genetically linked individuals, like cousins, smelled bad to their kin, a built-in mechanism for gene diversity. We sniffed each other all over and decided we smelled great. It was one of the most erotic episodes in my life.

Science meets art

My big brain load of organic chemistry and optical physics had taken a back seat to art for forty years. Now it wanted to join the party. When NASA published photographs of Mars, they offered a 3D view. The artist in me liked the effect and the scientist in me pondered the process. I began to utilize *ChromaDepth* glasses I'd discovered online, on a page announcing, *Now you can make a hologram without a laser.* The act of choosing colors that leaped off the painted panel or receded into the wall behind it allowed my painting to float in space.

Another breakthrough came with fluorescent pigments glowing in full color in the invisible beam of a UV lamp. To my surprise, the finished work had mega dimensionality with the glasses on. While surfing optical chemistry patents on the web, a third alternative to the visual spectrum popped up, literally, with the discovery of rare earth salts and strontium aluminate compounds that absorbed light and glared in a full palette of colors in a pitch-dark room. As a chemist, the scientific abstracts made sense. The discussion of SrAl204 when combined with europium was easy reading. Now my painting could float in the dark all night in 3-D. My scientist brain thanked me. And there was more.

In the dark days of winter, with low spirits and a negative bank account, I was invited to a dinner and an intervention. Over dessert, Susan Cohen Thompson, herself a great painter, and her husband, Clay, told me I could change my circum-

stances with intention. “Thanks, you guys,” I told them, “but I’m not in the mood for New Age fixes.”

“Your pigs fly in your paintings,” Clay said.

“Of course.”

Susan said, “You also have painted a series of sheep who try to fly and fail.”

“Everyone knows pigs can fly and sheep can’t,” I said.

“When you show us the sheep paintings, you say they are you. ‘They try so hard to fly,’ you tell us, ‘and they never succeed.’ We believe if you allow the sheep to fly you’re giving yourself permission to achieve your potential.”

They were so right. A simple act of catapulting my sheep into the air with my paintbrush removed self-imposed handcuffs binding me to the mundane world of making a living.

To thank them, a couple who had homes on both coasts, I bought a square of galvanized steel and used magnet-backed paper so my sheep could fly from the Pacific to the Atlantic.

I painted landscapes with movable characters, critters and forests on sheets of magnet-backed paper, and cut them out with scissors like a third grader. My paintings could now move at the will of the observer. I cut out painted magnet-backed

bags of money, a heart, and peace signs for the sheep to carry. Adding a magnetic toll kit holding hopes and dreams turned my art into an intention machine.

I had a novel Wyatt was pitching to publishers in NYC. No news was not good news, but I had no choice but to wait. I fashioned a magnet New York publishing book contract and placed it in a flying sheep's mouth on the East Coast. Day by day I moved them toward the West Coast where I was waiting for an answer. A week later, when the magnet sheep had arrived over my cabin, I received a letter in the mail. The answer was No, damn it, but the concept worked if you were clear about what you wished for.

When I painted the steel and magnets with both phosphorescent and fluorescent colors, my paintings could be played with in the dark, in full 3D.

My science brain was unsatisfied. It wanted a place in my writing, based until then on a lifetime of antique hunting and travel. Book five, *Masterpiece Fever*, was an attempt to drag a vast store of chemical experience into my pen. When Camano Island was thrown into a pandemic when the mad cow disease prion was introduced into an aquifer, Wally, an idiot with an obsession for Stickley, teamed up with a cute (of course) chemist for the Centers of Disease Control to find a solution.

The path to the cure required me to use real science—Nano technology—to save the population from the brain-wasting micro-villain. The search for a plot line lead

me to the buckyball, a single compound of carbons forming a hollow sphere of seventy-two atoms, which, under an electron microscope, appeared like a diminutive soccer ball. I imagined a genetically modified buckyball attaching itself to the deadly flat prion protein like the cockleburs, which stick to stockings after a walk in a field. This physical obstruction would keep the prion from stacking up into the fatal plaques that killed brain cells.

I believe today the cure would work. More even, I suspect the micro carbon cockleburs could find themselves effective in other plaque forming maladies like Alzheimer's disease and blood clots leading to strokes and heart attacks. Though the technology of gene manipulation eludes me, I'm pleased to have found a real world cure to a deadly disease while looking for a plot twist.

When I woke up one morning to look at a large painting finished under tungsten light bulbs the night before in morning daylight, I was more amused than upset to see three large carpenter ants eating my painting high up on the panel. The were having breakfast on the fresh layer of egg yoke and water, my painting medium. I paint with food, after all, I shrugged.

Dogs had three times licked a finished painting into oblivion. Mice had left tiny toothmarks across the bottom of a recently painted panel resting on the floor. Rats had gnawed nearly a foot of a carelessly positioned painting, standing on their feet, and their toothmarks caused a major repair. Thank goodness they didn't get near a

face. Despite the fact spiders in my cabin had amnesty and were routinely captured and released outside, I gave up my co-habitation truce and caught two monsters in a trap. The problem ceased.

At the risk of revealing my housekeeping shortcomings, I can tell you there's a slug family living in my bathroom, over where the shower over-splash keeps the dark corner damp. I discovered *Slug-asso* by noting a meandering line of missing new paint beginning at floor level and meandering up a freshly brushed four-foot panel. The little guy munched his or her way up the side of the painting. Halfway up, the path took a ninety degree turn. Visualize a map of the United States. The slug started in Florida and traveled the coast north till Virginia, where the path headed west across the painting. I followed the quarter-inch wide trail of tiny toothmarks up toward the state of Maine. This time the westward exploration followed the northern border till Montana before turning south and reaching the floor near the Mexican border. I caught the slimy art critic/explorer one evening at 3 AM, halfway up on the artwork left on the floor on purpose. Little thing, maybe thee inches long. The color yellow seemed to be his flavor of the evening. I felt a bond with this diminutive risk-taker and left the scene to sleep, looking forward to charting the little guy's adventure. My art was improved by this collaboration. Someday I'll paint multiple layers of tasty colored egg yoke on a panel and let my housemate create an original.

I decided to paint a picture ants would enjoy eating and use it as a backdrop landscape of a working ant farm. I had been invited to an exhibition with the theme of eating and thought it would be perfect. The subject matter was easy—a colorful picnic blanket covered with goodies, a frosted cake, fruit in a bowl, fried chicken legs on a plate, sugary pastries, and an open bottle of red wine. It was painted like a tilted Diebenkorn landscape with a foreshortened backyard at the top with green grass at the blanket edge.

I was not eager to introduce wood-eating ants into a painting—one that would hang on someone's wall in a wood-framed box. Next stop, the basement joists. After the painting was finished in egg tempera, I coated the sweet food, like the cake, the pastries, and the top rim of the wine bottle, with honey—food for a less-threatening ant colony.

The frame was a work of art in itself: black painted maple. The assembly held a glass face one inch from the painting with room for an ant farm at the bottom. A neat sliding door on the side was the portal for squirt gun moisture. Round, screen-filled holes up the sides were ventilation. The top was removable for maintenance and ant colony introduction.

Where do you find the ants? I remembered old comic book back page ads offering mail order ants and wondered if they were still in business. Instead, though, I called my picking buddy, Jerry Cook's father, a retired entomologist, for advice.

Halfway through my request, he hung up on me. I called again. He didn't answer, negative feedback.

Undaunted, I called the extension university in Pullman, somehow confident that since it was WSU they had a civic obligation to answer my taxpayer's question. I was either right or lucky. A helpful insect expert told me the ants I was looking for were in my yard. "Moisture ants," she called them. Honey lovers, maybe even vegans, perfectly safe for the average person's home if they didn't keep sugar in the pantry. How do you harvest them? I asked. Do you have to dig up an anthill? Do I need to capture the queen?

No, I was told. If you want ants who like honey, simply place something with a flat surface out in the yard, and they will volunteer to live in your painting. It was the perfect answer, an elegant proof.

I painted a second bottom panel below the blanket painting, the panel behind the sandy soil, I hoped, would be transformed to an underground city, like my paintings of the denny Regrade years before. Wouldn't be a shame, I thought, if the ant living spaces reached the back wall and there was nothing on it? To this end, I painted tiny Jack Gunter paintings, hoping they would be visible inside the burrows on the wall, just in case.

In the back yard on my knees looking for ants, I made another discovery. A garden hose lying in the unkempt grass was an ant superhighway. Preferring an easy hose

stroll over a scramble over thick undergrowth, they had discovered the express lane across the yard.

The big day was here. I planned to capture as many volunteers as I could to build my ant farm and stroll around on a painting of a picnic to have lunch. Why wouldn't they love it? The frame stood against the house with the top off, waiting to receive its new citizens. I painted the words *I love Karla* with honey on a flat cardboard square and placed it over the hose with a dab of honey at the edge to get their attention. It occurred to me that it was a shame I didn't have time to print out tiny road signs on tine wood signposts to place beside the hose at ant level to encourage the volunteers—signs announcing *Enlist in a great art adventure, Win a free trip to Seattle,* and *Tired of the same old anthill? Jack Gunter's luxury ant farm offers travel, good food, fine art, and a view. Apply ahead.* A close-up video camera could capture the march of the honey ants up the hose, past the road signs encouraging to join. It would be a short, thoughtful film. I'll make it someday.

When I returned to the cardboard, it was already covered by a quivering living font and conscripts were still arriving. Snatching the panel off the grass, I shook moisture ants into the farm top, trying my best to ignore the stream of escapees running down my arms. My art team at first was upset about the change of residence, but soon they settled down. The next morning, I saw passageways open to the glass with happier ants busy cleaning the living spaces.

The Bumbershoot Art Exhibit, *Setting the table*, curated by Ron and Kathy Glowen, invited fifteen artisans to create an object with that theme. My work fit right in. Deemed too heavy to hang on the temporary walls, the painting titled *Picnic* five inches thick sat on the floor. It was a sizable painting, and it looked fine as a sculpture. My favorite object in the show was a full-sized cafe table with two chairs—each created in one piece out of French bread dough and baked in a super-sized oven. While I was drawn to this sculpture, I was not alone.

The Seattle Times columnist Jean Godden wrote a piece for the paper about a young Bumbershoot art visitor who noticed a trail of ants marching in a line across the carpeted floor. They were leaving a painting on the floor, headed for a bread sculpture on the other side of the room. Seems my security measures were insufficient. I like the thought of a solitary freedom seeker who finds the home of his dreams and makes the journey back to the silly ant farm to tell the colony. Ms Godden noted the Bumbershoot staff had created a *no step* zone and constructed a raised edge on both sides of the migration.

I was somewhat heartbroken they preferred another artwork. The bread construction, they told me, was destined for a city park for the birds after the exhibit. I was happy to hear the news, happy to know my art partners from Camano Island were headed for a happy home.

With all the dark rooms in my brain working together, my world of creativity took a giant step.

Siberian rescue

Facebook opened a door behind the Iron Curtain in 2013. Valerian Ivanchenko friended me and said hello from Siberia. Valerian Ivanchenko, for God's sake, the keeper of paintings trapped there for twenty-four years. It was a glorious reunion. "I'm glad you're alive," I posted. "Are my paintings safe?"

"They're here," he answered.

"Is the customs paperwork fixed?"

"No," came the reply. "But you're welcome to try."

Hallelujah! I was going back to Russia after twenty-four years. The first order of business was money. A *GoFundMe* page to bankroll the rescue journey raised $3000, helpful but not enough. Two filmmakers agreed to join me to record the adventure with *documentary film* written all over it. Jesse Collver had returned to his Stanwood boyhood home after ten years working for CSI, NY and a prize-winning film at the Sedona Film Festival. Ken Rowe made science fiction webisodes and was working on a Bigfoot thriller.

There would be bribes to pay, tickets and camera equipment to purchase, visas to procure, hotel rooms to rent, and shipping charges. The budget was $20,000 plus. Enter the antique dealer. Gus Bostrom, a Stickley collector, offered $15,000 if I

sold him five of the 1989 paintings—at the 1989 prices. “You son of a bitch,” I told him.

“You’re making a documentary. It’s a great story.”

“There’s no guarantee I’ll be able to get them out of Russia.”

“I’m willing to take the chance.”

My brother lent me five grand, and we held a fundraiser for which I dressed as a Mongolian warrior and did a dance on a Stickley table. We were going to Siberia.

Valerian advised me to book a return flight leaving Novosibrisk out of Russia on the first jump. The paperwork, he told me, if we succeeded at all, would be sketchy and not likely to hold up if we changed planes in Moscow. I found a direct flight from Siberia to Beijing, China.

I planned to misbehave on the rescue attempt. The Winter Olympics were scheduled for Sochi, and Putin was cracking down on the LGBT community. I purchased five colors of fingernail polish to decorate my digits. With Edward Snowden springing WikiLeaks from a secret Russian location, I fashioned a life-size cardboard cutout of the defector with plans to pepper our Siberian film footage with Edward in the background. I was comfortable with tweaking the Russian psyche, believing the Siberian population, like Alaskan natives, didn’t give two hoots about political machinations of their nation’s capital—six thousand miles and nine time

zones away. The overnight in China was a different story, though. If the Red Chinese discovered professional film gear and Edward Snowden in our suitcases, I could find myself eating moldy insect-infested rice in an Asian hoosegow. The team, sans Snowden, left for China and the Taiga Forests in September of 2013. We had eleven days to locate the lost art and grease the appropriate palms.

On the thirteenth hour, Trans Pacific crossing, as I jotted dialogue for the sixth Wally Winchester novel, *Dogs of the Sun*, a tale of shamanacide and super conduc-

tivity in the Russian Far East, Jesse asked, “Is someone going to meet us when we arrive in Siberia?”

“Don’t know. Val communicates via Facebook.”

Ken asked, “Do you speak Russian? Do we have a car or a place to stay?”

“No, no, and no.”

“What happens if no one is there to meet us and we are forced to survive on Russian vending machines in a remote airport on the permafrost? Do the Russians even have vending machines?”

I looked up from my notebook and said, “We keep filming.”

Novosibirsk is a city of two million, five hundred miles from Mongolia on the Ob River. Our destination was Akademgorodok, a science town of institutes and dwellings on the outskirts. Valerian looked the same, but twenty-four years older and twenty-four kilos heavier, when he met us. In the lobby of the hotel he’d arranged for us, they sold t-shirts printed *Back in Novosibirsk*.

I purchased six.

Mic’d up, leading two cameramen, I walked into the basement of the Novosibirsk National Art Museum the next morning. The paintings sat in a neat stack, bright as

the day they were painted and wearing a purple heart of snatches from the three museum tours in 1990. It didn't require any acting ability to capture my delight.

A storeroom twinkled with light reflected by antique bronzes, gold-leafed icons, 1920s vodka bottles with cartoons of drunken Cossacks on the labels, and a wall full of paintings. I asked if I could enter. The answer was, "Of course."

Inside was a treasure trove. As I sidestepped masterpieces deeper in the repository, I asked (I had to) if anything was for sale.

Valerian translated. He answered, “Everything is for sale.”

Wow. I stopped at a framed painting of a Soviet capped woman at the window of the truck she was driving, factories behind her cab. Killer. The price was $4000 US. A large oil on canvas rested against the wall, the interior of a Soviet ear political hall, with two hundred politicians gesticulating like a communist version of Hieronymus Bosch. I found Edward Snowden in the crowd of 1930s bureaucrats and pointed him out to the cameraman, Jesse, as he zoomed in. The price for this painting was $5000. Did I have a buyer for it? No. Did I want to own it? Hell, yes. With money set aside for shipping and bribes, though, I walked away.

The next morning, Valerian announced our day: I would meet with the museum curators in the afternoon about the new exhibit of my paintings.

“What?”

“The Novosibirsk State Art Museum wants to host what you Americans describe as a *pop-up show* in the last week the paintings will be in Russia,” he told me. “It will be covered by Russia TV1. You can watch the segment the next morning on your hotel television. “

Goodness.

“But first,” he said, “we have to meet a man.” He piled us into the Subaru and drove us into the city. The man at the bar was *already on his lips*, and it was ten in

the morning. He'd discovered the evening before that he was to be a grandfather and was celebrating, I was told. This is where I met our driver for a twenty-hour journey I knew nothing about—a truck to where the roads ended. (As I told you

before, Valerian planned our itinerary.)

Our driver ordered me a Remy Martin Cognac—a bottle. He bought a bottle of chilled vodka for each of the crew too. My video team filmed as they drank. They caught our driver as he tried to recruit two diners to be our concubines on the trip

to Mongolia. The women moved to another table and complained, and the waitress came to our corner and kicked us out. Our driver, a friend of the owner, disappeared into the back. When he returned, an additional bottle of wine was delivered to our table. On camera, I advised Rick Steves, the Mukilteo travel star, not to go there and use my name.

Val announced we would now drive on an eight hundred kilometer junket into the forbidden frontier to visit the Altai Mountains—his favorite place on earth. Jesse suggested we find one of our lost paintings at wherever they were taking us, guaranteed to be great video, our impromptu road trip now linked to the rescue documentary. The editing room was ten thousand miles away. I said, "Let's do it."

I managed to find a Siberian office store to translate my I-Pad photo of two of the paintings into a print. A Siberian frame shop provided two rustic, locally made frames. I mounted my new prints in them and stowed them in our gear as we drove eight hundred miles to the Alta Mountains, Valerian's Shangri-La. As I said, this trip was out of my control. We were hosting a nationally televised art opening in five days, and now we were also passengers on a mad road trip to the Mongolian border. We kept filming. They took us to the ends of the roads, and we hopped onto a lake boat to venture deeper.

Valerian had arranged a shaman to meet us and take us to her yurt for two hundred dollars.

When she appeared out of the forest and led us up a steep, rocky path, the cameras were rolling. In her yurt, mic'd up, with a crackling fire sending embers toward the opening at the top, she sang a song in the Alti language. Val said to me, "It's your turn to sing a song."

Lavalier mike on my collar, I froze up. My mind raced to find songs I knew. None appeared. "We All Live in a Yellow Submarine," I chanted, four times. The Siberians in the yurt murmured along.

After the ceremony, I pulled a #24 Marshawn Lynch Seahawks game jersey over her silk finery and asked her to shout “Go Hawks!” The Shaman’s spoken language was *Altai*, a thousand-year-old primitive dialect. She missed my instructions. Her

response was “Go fuck!”

Great video.

We ran out of cash (mine) at the edge of the Mongolian Taiga Forest and made a midnight stay and dash from our rented cabin. Three in the morning found us in a

hunting camp at the top of a switch backed drive. Party time in Siberia—vodka and raw fish.

We hung the copy of one of my paintings in the outhouse. Jesse followed me with the camera as I opened the door to a poop-hole in the floor with my painting above it.

Bingo. All the Altai Mountain shaman footage was relevant. I pretended to buy it from the confused hunter, and we packed it up in a Seahawks Football Blanket.

The press conference for the opening of *The Last Time I Saw Helen's Kitchen* at the Novosibirsk National Art Museum was scheduled for noon. I sweated my words, broadcast to five million Russians on Russia TV1, and decided to be myself.

The morning after the opening, the team hunched over the hotel room TV, waiting for the Jack Gunter story.

It was a slow news day of Russia TV1. We watched a bisexual marriage during which the betrothed flew down zip lines in Valerian skirts. Another featured the problem with drunken bus drivers, caught on webcams as their careening transports tore doors off of parked cars. My TV premier on Russian television came after a video story of the wonders of making cheese.

The ransom I paid to *experts* for the preparation of official documents for export was twenty-five thousand rubles, forked over in five thousand-ruble notes. Filming of the transaction was allowed. Perfect.

At the export office, Val mopped sweat from his brow. “No cameras here,” he admonished. “And from you, Jack Gunter, no wise cracks or misbehavior. This guy holds the key to your rescue.”

We were rejected. Unperturbed, Valerian announced we would have another go with the document experts. (I’m from Boston; I knew what it meant: more money.)

Forking out more five thousand-ruble notes, surrounded by a basement chamber with fine art on the wall, I noticed a winter landscape for sale on the wall. “If I

> added that painting to my purchases," I asked. "Would the paperwork go smoother?"

The answer was yes, and we left with an improved appeal for export.

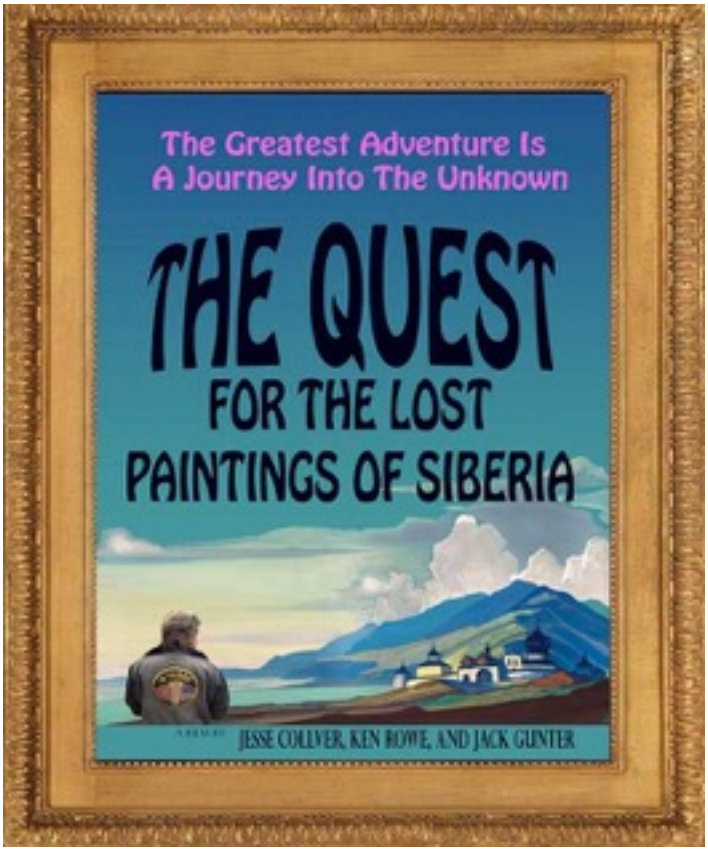
There was a DHL office in Novosibirsk, and my paintings were wrapped and ready to ship, pending paperwork and a credit card.

My only means of communication was emails from my I-Pad. Wells Fargo Bank offered phone numbers. I recruited three friends to simultaneously ascend on the

bank branch manager to assure her a $3500 withdrawal on the debit card, from Siberia, was legitimate.

The credit card swiped the DHL machine and nothing happened. My heart sank. A chattering sound and the whirl of the tape was money to my ears. The paintings arrived a week later.

The search for the lost paintings of Siberia, a ninety-minute documentary of the rescue attempt, will appear in theaters in 2016.



Our Gofundme campaign asked for ten thousand dollars for editing and sound mix for the film. Ten minutes after the fundraiser opened, Leslie informed me a pledge

of five thousand dollars had been made, earning the contributor the title of Executive Editor and a large Jack Gunter painting of the film's poster. That was a stunner. The pledger was named James Kennedy. How odd. The name didm't strike a bell. Did a total stranger become the white knight I'd been looking for all my life? Did a stranger step into my life and help one of my dreams come true on the big screen?

James Kennedy showed up as a Facebook friend, one of fifteen hundred. According to his profile, he was living in the Bahamas, born in Hadley, Massachusetts. I called him. Before he picked up, it hit me. James Kennedy. Jimmy Kennedy. Jimmy Kennedy? A voice answered. I asked, "Are you the James Kennedy whose mother builds concrete boats?"

"I am," he answered.

"Little Jimmy Kennedy who travelled to Florida with John and me? That was forty years ago."

"That's me. The year you spent with mom and me and the great adventure we shared in the Everglades was very important to me."

"Wow."

"You were the father I never had, and I've waited all these years to find a way to thank you."

Family

My motivation for writing this tale came from my family. John John. also an aspiring writer, wanted to share of our times together from birth through age sixteen, when I left for the Pacific Northwest. I wrote the book for him. From memories of

our times together, I traveled backward in time to my birth with a veil and extended the narrative to the present day. I watched four threads appear early in my life:

> art, writing, science, and love weaving in and out and occasionally converge in the quest to make something wonderful. The journey is a story of time loops.

An unclosed loop in time

As I drove west on New Hampshire Route 101 towards Gill's house in Peterborough, N.H., I was filled with dread. The woman who'd taught me what love was and broke my heart forty years ago was now a recognized artist, living somewhere in the hills.

I wanted to hear about her life, without me, as she forged an art career. I was dying to ask her about the day she and Tom destroyed the best painting I've ever made, a close up of her in love. I had caught true love in her eyes. She'd wanted it destroyed. I'd given it to her, told her do what you want, and then driven off.

What was that day like for her? I wondered, an artist destroying the true image of her feelings. Did they cut it up with a chainsaw and put it in the fireplace? Did they make a bonfire and throw the perfect capture of Gill in love in the fire?

I stopped in the Sharon Art Center to find her phone number. The desk told me they couldn't give it out but they would ask her to call me. I drove to Peterborough to wait for the call.

My son and family expected me back in Nashua by six o'clock. I headed into the hills and found a re-new shop in a mill village. *Piggy's Reclaimed Shop* the sign read, but I missed the connection. Still waiting for Gill's call, I walked into a roomful of sad collectables and asked, "Have any old Mission Oak furniture?"

“We don’t get important objects here,” she said, “but there’s a big oak chair in back. We don’t understand…”

Wally Winchester lives.

A book in a bag

Robert Wyatt, the editor of *The Gunter Pages* in 1974, and my life-long meddler, recently commanded me—a clever fellow who invented things—to come up with a new invention in the field of on-line literature. My immediate solution was a *book in a bag*, a total reading experience, that arrived at the reader's home with a book, a bottle of wine, a joint, and a foot rub.

Here's your book. The wine and the reefer are probably beside you already. Here's your foot rub:

Jack Gunter