Russia or bust

A letter from Valerian arrived, inviting me to accompany my paintings on an all-expense-paid, one-month tour of the Soviet Union that would end with my first museum opening in Siberia (this is true, and it gets stranger). It was the opportunity of a lifetime.

Dan Haggarty was a Stanwood artist whose painting defied description. He lived in a dream world where people worshipped glowing globes that they carried in front of them everywhere. The chosen elite were allowed to hold their globes on top of their heads. He painted these visions like Marc Chagall at age five. Working as an orderly at the local convalescent home, he had no idea of the power of his works. I invited him to join me and exhibit our paintings together in the Soviet Union.

Communications to and from Siberia were, in 1989, limited to letters, which took weeks to deliver. As Dan and I waited for tickets to Russia to arrive, it occurred to me the phrase all expenses paid did not apply to our airfare to and from the Soviet Union. We were on our own for the flight to Moscow, $2500 apiece. We didn't have that kind of money.

I ran to the cabin, cracked an egg, and dipped a paintbrush into dry pigment. The "Jack and Dan Go to Siberia" scenes depicted us standing on a snowy tundra opening our great coats like flashers as we showed photos of the USA to Soviet Eski-

mos, as we inspected missile silos. I knocked the group out in a week because we had a plane ride to pay for.

The fundraising auction happened a week later. We needed five grand for the tickets. The event was waning, one thousand dollars short. Alan Gorsuch, my auctioneer from Tacoma, was wearing a German officer's cap. He stood at the balcony of the auction hall, a Jack Gunter original in his hand. He pulled a Luger pistol and aimed it at the painting. The significance of this threat was unclear, but it commanded everybody's attention. From his perch, Gorsuch auctioned the paintings off for a thousand dollars. Siberia, here we come.

We exited the Pan Am 747, picked as the airframe of choice because of its large cargo doors, in Moscow and entered a dimly lit chamber of immigration kiosks and plexiglass customs officials. Other passengers located their luggage and entered the inspection queue. My four-foot square painting boxes were absent. Perhaps we had to find a baggage claim for oversized objects. The chamber was empty of people now, and lights in the customs box clicked out,leading me to enter through an unmarked door that led into the bowels of the concourse. Inside, I searched the darkened interior for my art, aware that we were in a totalitarian adversary's house and that such a stunt in Sea Tac would land me in jail.

An order barked in Russian spun me around to face uniformed official. Busted. I tried the seven Russian words that I remembered from college as my predicament

deepened. Then, behind him, I saw the four-foot pizza boxes with paintings inside resting against a post. Redemption.

We weren't out of the grasp of the airport yet, though. Now they wouldn't let us into Russia with the recovered art and sequestered us and the paintings in a limbo zone between paperwork and entry. As foreign languages rained down, I spotted

Valerian among the welcoming faces beyond the gates. He leapt over and screamed Russian to our tormentors. Leaving Dan in the luggage no man's land, Val whisked me to the third floor.

The dour bureaucrat cranked three carbons into her manual typewriter as Val pleaded our case. "She wants to know if you belong to a political organization," he relayed to me in English.

Having grown up in the early days of television, I knew the story of Herbert Philbrick, the US Soviet double agent in I Led Three Lives. My answer to Valerian was, "Certainly not."

"Too bad," came a sotto voce murmur.

"I belong to the Stanwood Siberia Cultural Exchange."

Valerian passed on the instant fabrication to the clerk in Russian.

"Karashow," she said. We were in.

Not so fast. Problem number two: Ssnce we entered the country on the request of a private citizen, there was no paperwork regarding these large, flat crates with who knows what inside. Since there was no paperwork, no customs officials in the air-port wanted anything to do with them. This would turn out to be a big deal later. Funny how life-changing moments begin from humble obstacles on the road of a

long journey. Valerian solved the problem temporarily by having customs men bind the packaged in metal straps with security fastenings so we could transport them, un-opened, to Siberia and hopefully a willing customs agent there.

Hey, it shoe-horned us and the art into the country. We had a show to put on.

“Did you bring a truck?” I asked.

Valerian laughed. “Citizens in the Soviet Union don’t have pickups and vans like in your Stanwood, Washington. We have city cars.”

“Do you have any friends in Moscow with a truck?”

“No.”

Sixty kilometers from Moscow proper, Valerian walked out to a waiting line of taxis. He leaned into an open window, and the car whizzed off. “He will be back with equipment to carry your paintings,” Val explained. Half an hour later, the car arrived, now sporting roof racks.

“Do you have a credit card?”

Dan shook his head. I said no but told him I had three thousand in cash in a hidden money belt.

“Too bad. You can’t stay in a hotel.”

“American hundreds don’t work?”

“Our economy is collapsing,” Valerian told me. “The government wants all foreign money to go through the central bank. Any cash you pay will never get that far. By the way,” he added, “keep your mouth shut about the American hundreds in your belt.”

We stopped in front of a second-rate hostelry. Val entered the lobby and returned. “Foreigners can’t sleep here without Master Charge,” he smiled, “but paintings are not people.” On the eighth floor, we dragged the banded cargo onto one single bed. Sitting on the other bed, an unshaven traveler smoked foul-smelling tobacco. The paintings were housed. Now it was time for the humans. We spent the next three days bunking with university students and party-minded flight attendants till the flight to Siberia and our first show.

Valerian took us to the Moscow McDonalds. Opened the week before, it occupied half a block on a corner across from Pushkin Park, home to the famous bronze of The Thinker. Accustomed to long lines, the Russians who had enough money to buy a Big Mac had formed a two-block queue to the entry doors. The experienced Moscovites chose to form the line in the park, eschewing the boring Soviet era architecture of the actual block with the burgers for sale. A uniformed policeman allowed groups of fifty to cross and enter. The face of “The Thinker” seemed to be scowling.

I had carried a suitcase full of McDonalds collectables from Seattle. With a set of Jack Gunter flying pigs hanging in the regional office in Bellevue, I had used my clout to score a bag of hamburger promotional trinkets for Soviet kids. With the first Big Mac outlet soon to open in Moscow, they were happy to oblige. The coolest prize was a box with a cloth sack inside holding a plastic replica of a box of

French fries. It was actually a transistor radio with an aerial and a dial on the side, an executive perk for a corporate conference, so rare I kept one.

In the US, we had heard stories of the Russian Mafia, alive and well in a splintering economy. Val, on his trips to the US, seemed immune to the Soviet collar, though, crossing the borders at will. Growing up in Woburn, I understood that the path to getting something done depended on who you knew.

The Moscow city park he took us to had a teeter totter, a pool, a swing, and a rocket ship for children to play on. We entered a building housing an exhibit of regional handy crafts in glass cases, ethic native offerings from all the provinces, from

Ukraine to Lithuania. All were newly made, so as an antique hunter I dismissed them.

At the top of the stairs, Val spoke to a receptionist, her desk next to a large leather-studded door. She brought us plates of cookies and tea.

The door opened. We entered the office of an important man to whom Val warned us not to speak. A large man wearing sunglasses sat behind a massive oak desk with two tank-sized bodyguards with arms crossed standing at his side. Val spoke, and one of the giants inspected his satchel. I watched Valerian go to a safe on the wall, opened with a combination by a one of the brutes. He pulled two camcorders in their boxes from his bag and placed them into the wall receptacle.

Val spoke and translated. “This is Ganaddy,” he told us. “He is blind. Therefore, he wears those glasses.”

Ganaddy spoke.

“He knows you are successful artists in the United States,” Val translated. “Ganaddy has these fine works of art from the Tuva region.”

He held up two squares of slate with glued-on colored sand in the manner of a landscape.

“Ganaddy is an important man. He wants to know how much you can sell them for in your country. Five hundred dollars, perhaps. More?”

These tourist squares might find a market in Atlantic City, I thought, along the boardwalk.

I spoke without thinking. “It is difficult getting five hundred dollars for my own paintings,” I told Ganaddy.

Val translated, and the blind man frowned.

“Perhaps some import shop could sell them for twenty dollars. I doubt a lot more.”

Valerian mopped sweat from his brow. He looked worried as he relayed my answer.

Shit. Oh dear, I thought. I’ve pissed off the Soviet mafia after only one day in the country. “I have a gift for Ganaddy,” I announced. Reaching into my bag, I brought out the limited run, McDonalds French fry transistor radio, still in the box. The man behind the desk received it and fingered the contents as he opened it. The batteries were included. He turned the dial and Russian language cut in. He smiled. Val took a deep breath and nodded relief.

In 1989, the multiple Aeroflot flights to a country seven time zones wide involved two- to three-day waits at the airport for the connections.

Sleeping on a bench and eating little, I heard two Aeroflot stories. The first was about a flight back from the Baltic South, from a warm, fertile province brimming with food surrounded by a starving nation. A traveler told me he entered the cockpit at 40,000 feet to see the pilots cooking beef and veggies on a charcoal hibachi grill between the seats. Another told me of a shepherd who entered the jet and put two sheep in the seats beside him. “No sheep,” the flight attendant declared. The traveler produced three tickets. “No sheep” was repeated. He calmly opened a knife and slit the throat of his seat mate. She bled out on the floor. The second passenger was allowed.

Akademgorodok was a secret city created by Stalin in the paranoid years after World War II and the bomb. In the 50s he “disappeared” sixty-seven towns from the national map and created gated regions for research, hidden from public view.

A stranger approached me in Moscow. “I know you’re an American,” he said. “I want you to wear this watch.” He produced a wrist watch with multiple dials. “If you take a train ride and they lower the curtains to the passengers, I want you to push this button.” He pointed to a bump on the side. “When they raise them, push it again.” I refused for a number of reasons.

In Akademgorodok, the Academic Town, we staged our first exhibition. “There is another American living here,” Val told us, “the wife of a UNLV mammoth scientist working up north. She would love a chance to speak English!”

We met her the next day. She told us that despite the information bubble isolating these cities from the outside world, her class had asked about a mythical doll named The Barbie, an icon that had sliced through the Soviet layers of isolation and entered the minds and hearts of the Siberian girls she taught.

“I brought a Barbie with me,” Dan said. “Hoped to give it to someone.” The next day, a Barbie miracle fell on a class of Siberian girls in an isolated, secret town.

My first museum opening happened in the House of the Scientists (ironic) in Akademgorodok, Siberia in the fall of 1989. Viewers were confused. “These are protest paintings,” the questioners speculated. “The government here decides to level a village and construct eighteen-story buildings without consulting the people living there. You are against the government forcing an airport in your town. You are free. You can vote against these projects, and yet you create protest paintings.”

I told them that our government had a division called the Army Corps of Engineers that pretty well did what it wanted with our landscape and that we had to invent an endangered species like the spotted owl or the snail darter to fight them. It was a moment of international understanding.

A woman with a little English, standing in front of my butt-cracked view of early morning plumbers at Helen’s Kitchen, said to me, “It’s the same here.” I had made a bridge.

With museums in Samara and in Moscow waiting to exhibit the works later in the year, we flew back to the USA.

The Karla decade

Karla was still there when I arrived home, and our Stanwood gallery began to get noticed. Our goal was to host a Pilchuck Glass School show. Sitting high in a hill-top meadow above the town, the school had been started by Dale Chihuly in the 70s as a studio glass academy. Luminaries from China to Murano taught two-week summer workshops in their individual techniques and philosophies. Lamp working, kiln casting, glass blowing, cold working, hot worked sculpture, and plain old bizarre experimentation percolated above us every evening while the locals slept or tipped Budweisers.

The instructors wandered down the hill to the village of Stanwood on rare occasions for a cold one. Hot gals with big hair and tattoos, New York hipsters, and lanky Italians made the locals nervous. I drove up there one day to invite the artists to exhibit in our Stanwood gallery, *History of the World, Part 4*. The answer was a polite no. The staff here are important artists whose works grace museums, I was told. Who would benefit from an exhibit in a town full of dairy farmers? Thanks to Karla, though, we had a hole card, a spectacular New York quality venue with high white walls, and quality lighting. Pike Powers, the then-artistic director, visited the space on her way to the tavern and changed her mind. The first Pilchuck School Summer Staff Show opened in June, and it rocked the valley. All the artists grumbled at the layout. Half complained we put their pedestals far away from the Chi-

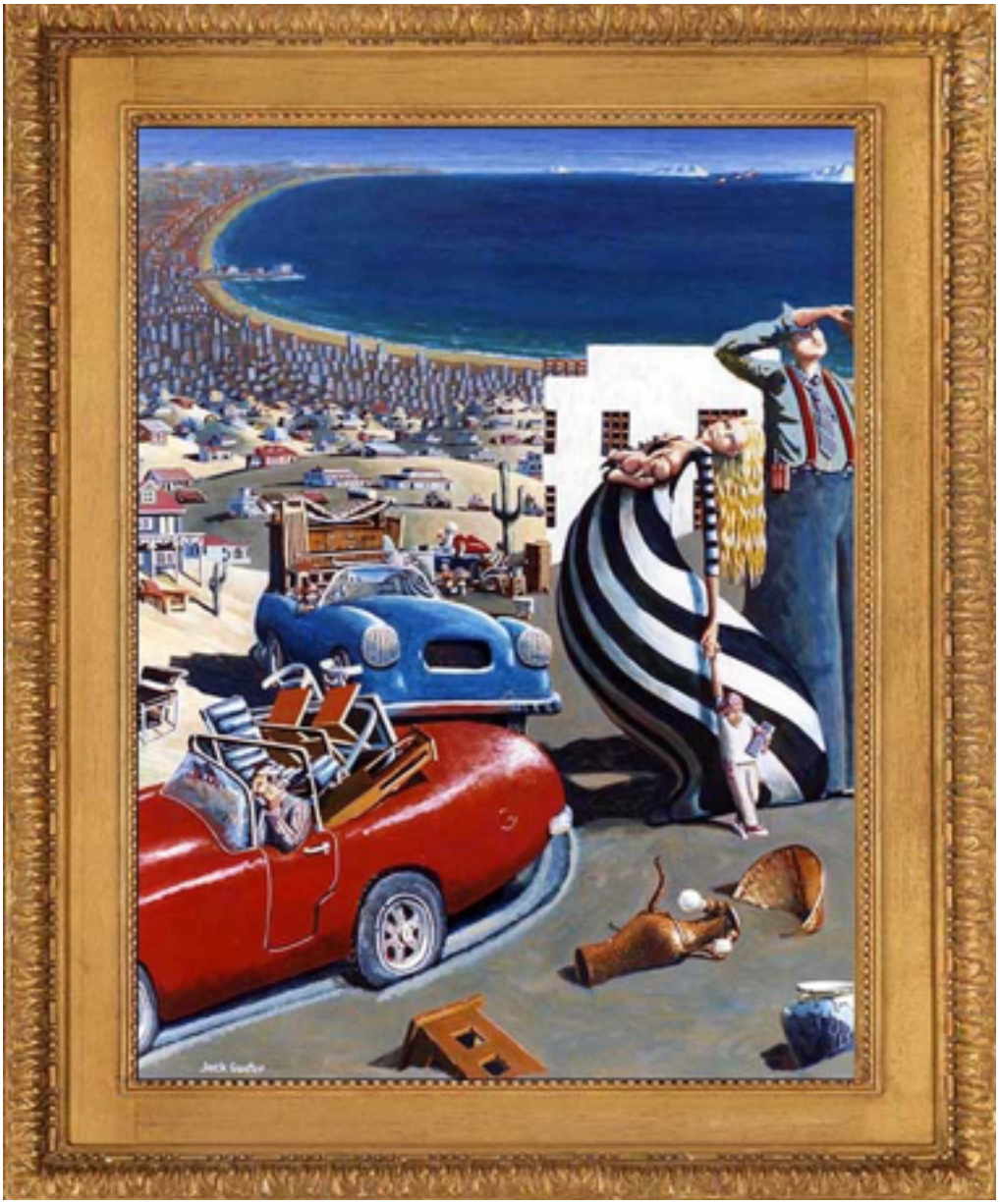
huly nest of bowls; the other half felt their pieces were too close by. We sold a ton and gave the staff an exhibition space for their tenure and a surprising number of sales.

Karla, Karla, Karla. She was a white water kayaker and a world-class skier. She liked to brag you could bounce a quarter on her ass and balance a cup and saucer

on it at the same time. She painted in a hard-edged New York style—bold slabs of color and darkness in soft pastel with titles like *Two Sheets* and *Portal*. With two years as a preparator at SUNY Albany, she treated each exhibit as a work of art in itself.

We took to wandering the wheat fields and river valleys of Eastern Washington catching daybreak sun as it dissected the walls of old barns with diagonal shadows to find landscapes for her to paint. My job was to invent crazy mailers the recipient would fold, cut, and assemble into cardboard sculptures that would escape from the pile of today's mail and sit on their desks as art, reminding art lovers of a new opening. For every show we counted out the six thousand invitations into the six-teen postal routes on Camano Island at a cost of eight hundred dollars. Every mail-box received an invitation the next day suggesting art was fun and owning it was good for your health and well-being. The overworked postal clerk took to calling in sick on the day we walked in carrying sixteen cardboard cartons for sorting.

LA pretender



My acceptance as a twentieth century decorative art exhibitor at the yearly LA. Modernism Show opened a door to the world of high-end collectors. It was the venue of my dreams since my accumulation of twentieth century decorative art was growing faster than my bank account was dwindling.

The Modernism Show in Santa Monica was a game of rich-man hardball, and I was the poorest person in the room, including custodians and stage hands. In the weeks preceding the event, I had combed the Northwest for anything great so I wouldn't be embarrassed next to the millionaire exhibitors. I would be side by side with old money Art Deco housed from Paris with their table top Calder mobile for $75,000. Pretending I belonged next to the big guns, I countered with a Frank Lloyd Wright bed as a display platform, *throw away chic*.

A stout, bearded Egyptian named Zack Haddad admired my selection of Austrian Secession objects and invited my entourage to his home in the Pacific Palisades hills north of the city. With a view of Los Angeles Bay twinkling below, Zack ushered us to his rooftop patio where we were confronted with an original Paris art nouveau subway entrance, complete with the word "Metropolis" hanging under the arch. Yes, it was one of the original metro stations—the famous ones on postcards. It was on his roof.

"Is this an original," I asked.

"Of course, 1902."

"How could you have one, here in L.A.?"

"Guimard knew there would be accidents and damage risks for a sculpture next to the streets of a great city. City of Paris Public Works ordered five extra structures

made as insurance for replacements. They sat in a dark municipal storage shed for ninety years until I bribed a public works night watchman into selling me one."

When a slim housewife dressed in a simple blouse and skirt walked into my booth, she looked familiar, like a five-foot-five, one hundred-ten-pound version of Barbara Streisand. "This can't be Barbara," I thought, "she looks so normal. Where's the aura? Where's the marching band?"

"How much is this?" she asked, pointing to the Dirk Van Erp hammered card holder, unpriced since my business cards were using it and I was showing off. Two feet from a superstar, my mouth waited for instructions. None came. When I reached back into my mind to pluck a coherent answer, the shelves were bare. Speechless, a word appeared: *price*. The dialog between the left and right hemispheres was:

Left - "We need a price; it's Barbara Streisand for God's sakes."

Right - "I don't know the price. It wasn't for sale."

Left - "I voted to sell it from the get-go, but you said it's so cool I want to keep it."

Right - "Try to find another."

Left - "It's a card holder, not the Hope Diamond. Barbara needs a price; let's go."

Right - "All right, but it was made by Dirk Van Erp. Some of his lamps sell for $70,000."

Left - “It’s a fucking card tray.”

Right - “We bought it on Hewitt Avenue in Everett. I don’t have a head for business. What did we pay for it?”

Left - “$175.”

Right - “Let’s double.”

Left - “I agree.”

“Three hundred fifty,” I said.

“I’ll take it,” Barbara Streisand said and opened a checkbook.

I flirted with the idea of offering her a discount for a kiss, then chased the thought away. I later sent the check to Woburn, Massachusetts so mom could touch something Babs had signed.

Despite being the poorest person in a hall full of international dealers, my booth looked hot. To hang a three hundred-pound, aluminum-ribbed light fixture from the original Sea Tac Airport above us we had to hire two union shop maintenance workers at a hundred bucks apiece to bring a ladder. (It’s L.A..) Since our corner was designated *the stage* for theater performances in the Santa Monica Civic Arena, we had to hire two additional riggers from the theatrical guild to stand next to it (Tinseltown). Four hundred dollars later, I climbed the ladder and hung it myself. It

made the booth sing and sold for $10,000 to the owners of a clothing store I'd never heard of called Camp Beverly Hills. The rest of my booth sported a huge Dirk Van Erp copper and mica lamp, unsigned, with dubious provenance, a $25,000 Dale Chihuly nest of sea form glass, a hammered iron fixture signed Edgar Brandt, a Stickley drop arm Morris chair, and a six-foot Jack Gunter painting (did I tell you it was LA.?)

For my first exhibit in the city of angels, I lined the inside box of the rented eighteen footer with my paintings once the antiques were unloaded. Parked by the back door, it was now a pop-up gallery with twelve of my best works on the walls. For three days I invited visitors to my L.A. Modernism booth to walk into the parking

lot to visit my gallery. One person agreed ,and we exited the glamour and stood in the back of a U-Haul truck. His name, he told me, was Steve DeJarnett, a film maker. I asked him what he'd released, and he said his main film had run into money people who offered a huge sum for him to change the ending. He refused and was now living in movie land limbo. The film was called *Miracle Mile*. He was a cult hero and a pariah. "I loved the film," I told him honestly. "I watched it twice. I love the ending." We have been friends ever since.

A man walked in and bought a tall wood prairie school plant stand that would have made Frank Lloyd Wright proud. As he paid, Joel Silver, the producer of *Die Hard* and many other blockbuster films, told me to deliver it on Monday. He gave me a card. Monday morning we drove into the Hollywood hills to the address, a Frank Lloyd Wright house, so deep in the posh neighborhood of superstar homes we were forbidden to enter with our large truck, a sign we ignored.

The "Hollyhock Residence" was our destination. No shit, a Frank Lloyd Wright house. A maid answered the door bell with "Mr. Silver is at the movie studio."

"The card he gave me listed this address to deliver this plant stand," I answered. "Can you call him?"

On the phone, Joel Silver asked us to drive the plant stand instead to his film studio in the valley with his purchase, offering a reward for the detour. I asked him if our

modernism team could look inside his home, having never seen a Wright residence from the inside.

The housekeeper opened the door. In the bathroom she asked why we were curious about the toilet and the sinks. “We have to see everything,” I told her.

With the hundred-dollar reward for delivery, I took the team to lunch on La Cienega Boulevard. Inside a swanky eatery, I waved Ben Franklin’s face on a hundred dollar bill at an aloof manager and asked if she would bring three burgers for my crew out to the U-Haul parked in front. “Sir,” she admonished me, “we don’t do that here.”

“That’s thirty-three dollars per burger,” I pushed back. “My team is not dressed right to bring them inside.”

“This is absurd,” she started.

Lounging on the fine sofas among movie stars, we used up the reward money, caused a scene, and drove back to Seattle.

Siberia Again

Communications with Siberia back then were a challenge. As the time to return to bring my paintings back neared, I invited a kooky Tacoma artist named Lynn DiNino to spend a month on the second journey. In retrospect, it was a mistake.

With only a passing acquaintanceship we admired each other's work but were strangers. Spending a challenging month with someone you don't know, travel writers advise, is always an iffy situation. They were right.

We arrived at Sheremetyevo Airport with suitcases filled with food. In a country with empty market shelves, where hosts were known to raid their winter supply of food to create a banquet for the American visitors, we tried to bring over as much as we ate and introduce new taste sensations to a people who feasted on raw fish and beets. I carried a smoked whole chicken and beef brisket in peppercorn brine, protein safe to travel with in a world without refrigerators. I packed Jiffy-Pop, peanut butter, marshmallows, and chocolate bars.

Lynn brought Mexican dinner fixings, including mole sauce and a frighteningly hot string of Habanero peppers from Pike Place Market. At the end of a long line to the customs booth, we casually walked through the diplomatic entry carrying more food than I could get across the California border.

In the gloom of airport industrial downlighting we sat for six hours waiting for a friendly face. Lynn eyed me with suspicion. Valerian marched in, a phone to his ear, and greeted us like it was no big deal being half a day late. He drove us into Moscow proper to his mother's house to crash, a grand apartment full of art I'll remember later in my novels.

I woke up early the next morning to encounter Valerian's mother pulverizing raw fish heads with a mortar and pestle. At breakfast later I opted for the yogurt.

Lynn and I entertained Russian artists with 35mm slides of our work. When we reached Akademgorodok, the secret city in Siberia, her slide shows of her signature *dead dog* coffee table had confused all who viewed them. Cloth covered over a steel frame; a dog lies on his back and holds a glass tabletop on his feet.

"Vy does the dog hold up the glass?" they would ask, expecting some existential angst played out in the living room.

"My furniture is fun," she answered.

"How can furniture be fun?"

She was the perfect person to unleash on the Russian psyche.

I kept asking Val to see the paintings. He told me, “No problem; we’ll see them later.” Lynn admonished me to quit bugging him. She was slowly beginning to hate me.

We cooked a Mexican dinner for eight in a cottage outside the town. Lynn and I took over the small kitchen and served *Pollo En Mole.* Our hosts politely ate our offering, looking for some uncooked fish to wash the taste away. We didn’t unleash the string of habaneros, thinking we’d freaked them out already.

In a cafeteria, a voice in English filled the room. “Hello,” a bearded Siberian said as he slid a chair to our table. “It’s nice to hear English spoken.”

He sounded like John Houseman. His words were crisp and better placed than mine. “I’m a linguist,” he explained. “Can speak thirty-seven dialects, but I studied English at Oxford.” He invited us to his home for dinner.

We showed up prepared to cook corned beef and cabbage. Inside, he offered us a glass of peppered vodka. “I’m part of a pepper vodka club,” he said. “Every week we meet and place a pepper into a fresh bottle of vodka. Then we drink last week’s bottle.”

“What else do you do?” I asked.

“That’s it. It’s a simple club”

I winked at Lynn and said, “We have a gift for your pepper vodka club,” and pulled out the branch of the hottest peppers on earth.

The curator of the National Art Museum in Samara, on the Volga River, population seven million, met me in Val’s office after a three thousand-mile journey to see the American artists. She told me the art show was a hit in her city. A group of art dealers from New York City, looking for undiscovered Russian artists after the fall of communism, showed up at the door, expecting to find unknown painters. They found one—me.

“Oh my Lord,” I gasped. “I’ve been trying to get my art into New York for years. How bizarre they’d be introduced to me here. What did they think?”

“They were horrified,” she said, “and fled.”

I kept bugging Val about seeing my paintings. “No problem,” he told me. “Later.” He put us on the Trans-Siberian Railroad for a three-day passage to Moscow on the Love Train. It turns out there was no place in the country for lovers to get together. With most apartments filled with grandpas and uncles sleeping on the divan or floor mats in the living room, there was little privacy. Most young people didn’t have cars to watch the submarine races at the lake, and they had few or no motels. A two-day train ride in the sleeper cars provided a hotel on wheels. That train was rocking, and it wasn’t from the rails.

Lynn, by now, hated me. It wasn't my fault, of course, but there was no fix in sight. One night while drinking vodka in a forward compartment with a rowdy bunch of basketball players from the University of the Urals, my new best friend asked me if Lynn was my woman. "Certainly not," I answered, considering she was barely my friend at all.

"I love her," he said.

"Really?" The Russian threshold of true love apparently had a lower bar than the US.

"If you give me the key to your cabin," he told me, "you can sleep in this compartment and I will court your companion."

This posed a dilemma. Did I have the right to deny Lynn—a liberated woman—a chance to find romance? Conversely, giving my key to a stranger could be interpreted as a personal attack.

"Knock yourself out," I answered and handed it over. Lynn, in a chilly conversation later, actually smiled and told me the man spent the evening on one knee, flexing his biceps between marriage proposals.

Our apartment back in Moscow was a third-floor walkup with a sink full of dirty dishes, two bare mattresses, ashtrays filled with cigarette butts, discarded vodka and whiskey bottles, and no soap, silverware, towels, sheets, or toilet paper. Lynn

thought it was a government party house for sexual liaisons. We took turns venturing into canyons of Soviet era high-rises with no street signs, looking for food, soap, and toilet paper. The shelves were empty.

Valerian appeared every afternoon to whisk us to another meal with his friends. "I'm getting eager to get my hands on the art to package it for the trip home," I told him.

Lynn gave me another *what an asshole you are* look.

Valerian said, "There's a problem."

Now it was a problem.

It turns out the customs agent who watched when I opened the cartons last year was missing, a casualty of communism's fall. There was no paperwork to export my paintings. They had to remain. The news numbed me.

"Come back to Russia another time," he told me.

"They're all signed, and the name is on my passport," I protested.

"Without something they can stamp, no agent will allow these to leave the country," he said. "Why would they risk their jobs to break the rules for an American they've never met?" We flew to back Seattle empty-handed with little hope of seeing my paintings again. There was no phone service, the mail took three weeks,

and five grand and a month to spare was unlikely to happen any time in the near future. Though heartbroken, I felt no pain. My first five years as an artist were a pile of ashes on a Gardner hilltop; the best painting of my life had suffered an unimaginable fate with Gill; and another major work—the six-foot painting of the Gardner State Hospital cook—had burned in a dwelling blaze. Now seventeen more big paintings were swallowed up and about to disappear. Once again, I felt a kinship with Navajo sand painters whose creations were swept away by the evening breeze. The journey was the reward.

Bummer or not, I'd learned my creativity thrived on intense emotional surges. The womb of a painting in progress had always been my safe harbor in stormy times. I launched myself into ten large paintings of Russia viewed through the birch trees lining the Siberian Railway tracks. I named the series *Berioshka*, Russian for "the tree," and priced them high enough so I could keep them for a while. I felt like a boy who continuously lost his mittens till they were pinned to his coat sleeves.

Back to Tinseltown

Vintage Stickley was easy to find and purchase in the early 1990s. I couldn't drive across the state and not return with a truck full. Under Karla's expert decorator's eye, the gallery in Stanwood offered fine contemporary art peppered with fine, twentieth-century designs.

My rival appeared in Seattle, and his name was Jeff Hill. He opened a quality arts and crafts antique shop on Capitol Hill, and the race was on.

During another L.A. Modernism Show I spotted Jeff's entourage around a table in a swanky Venice Beach eatery after a long day. Surrounded by four associates, I waved and asked our waiter to buy Jeff's table a round of drinks on my tab. Moments later, forks clinked against wine glasses, and the table held up its free drinks. Jeff had no choice. When our waiter announced his return gesture, I asked, "What's your most expensive champagne?"

The waiter bowed. He said without hesitation, "We are lucky to have a bottle of Moet & Chandon Dom Perignon White Gold, sir. The price is $950."

"I'll take it."

We toasted Jeff's table with $200 worth of bubbly in each glass. He smiled and waived back, not having seen the bill. That's what you do.

Jack goes fishing in the real ocean and gets really seasick

My dad and mom arrived for a visit. While Ruth was entertained by the Farrey's, Pop and I drove over the border into Canada, hopped into a vintage DC-4, and flew to the west coast of Vancouver Island to fish for salmon.

It was rare and wonderful to spend a weekend with my father, heavy now with a bad back. His first question in all our phone conversations was the same: "Are you making any money yet?"

"Dad," I'd tell him, "I'm living on an island with mile-high mountains at my back, the silhouette of the Olympic Mountains on the horizon at sunset, a peek-a-boo glimpse of fourteen thousand-foot Mount Rainier through a gap in the trees to the south, in a cliffside cabin where I occasionally see Orcas or whales spouting in the view of the bay from my porch."

His retort was, "But did you make any money?"

As we motored out into a storm-chopped Pacific Ocean, he watched dawn burst over jagged mountains and said, "Now I see what you mean."

At dawn, the charter boat captain looked at us, the Stanwood Rotary Club plus dad, and some Boeing machinists on vacation. He said, "There's a blow coming our way, mates. It's going to be lumpy out there, *flat-landers*."

He was right. If you color some bubblewrap blue-green and call it the Pacific Ocean, our vessel would be an ant negotiating the swells. I began to throw up early. Vomiting began again when we anchored twenty miles off shore and rode each wave like a roller coaster. The Stanwood guys laughed and made jokes about seeing me under a bench in Pioneer Square. I'd punish them later with art.

When we landed at two o'clock in the afternoon, I was wiped out and barely remembered being driven up island to Tofino where my friend Steven motored us to the sliver of granite in the Pacific Ocean named Wickaninnish Island, a trip already arranged.

I woke up to the sound of surf. Three naked children ran across dark basalt with large Pacific Ocean rollers crashing on the rocks behind them. The kind native face of Stephen smiled. "Welcome back," he said.

My eyes found Suzanne, a shaman whether she admitted it or not. She beamed.

This is how the day ended on the most miserable day of my life. Back home, I started to sketch. I was close to the pain. I painted one hundred fifty originals in the next two months—crazy horizons, waves we navigated like a bacteria negotiating the tongue papilla, views from the deck as my mouth heaved over the side. I saw a lot of feet clothed in yellow Helly Hanson slickers. I noticed my initial drawings of the huge waves had a mammary shape, one of my favorites. I wondered, in my im-

paired state, what would happen if we were hit broadside by one of the lone waves known to vibrate across the Pacific. What if the wave was pink with a nipple on top, I pondered. What followed was a thirty-six-foot strip of four-foot panels on

which a rouge breast wave sweeps the boat up to the six-foot nipple and releases it back to the ocean. I still have this series; it seems to be hard to place.

South Camano Island, the land that time forgot

Our gallery was blooming when our landlord was indicted for running a Ponzi scheme. As rain fell continuously in a Northwest winter, he sold the building out from under us to raise legal funds.

We were out in the cold, literally. Gallery dissolved, we needed a large amount of storage, as the gravy train of Pilchuck Glass Shows, “Honey, I Shrunk the Art,” and antiques dissolved in the bitter winter rain.

The only building available was out on the south side of Camano Island, accessible via a bridge. Seventeen miles from Stanwood; seventy-eight miles from Seattle customers. We cried as relentless rain hit exposed surfaces of egg tempera paintings and left Stickley chairs to soak up a downpour as the retreat to dry storage began.

The building we rented was a two-story prefab with garage door front and back and an office with a man door. Despite the remoteness, Karla and I decided to open our gallery here, on the south end of Camano Island, a remote area, recently electrified, where many of the customers of the little grocery next door displayed missing teeth as they purchased their bottles of Thunderbird.

The process of turning a fiberglass boast building garage into a high-class art gallery was daunting. A framer worked weekends for six months in exchange for a

good Jack Gunter painting and constructed a second floor with a staircase salvaged from Boeing surplus and did the framing for sheetrock. We sprayed the huge high ceiling with flat black one dark day, painted the sheetrock, and hung my Seasick Show—all one hundred and fifty paintings.

I created a false, full color newspaper called the Salmon News with color shots of millionaire collectors wearing yellow slickers and holding up my paintings like they were sport fishing trophies. The collectors loved being abused as I dressed them in fishing garb. I then found a paper bag distributor manufacturing vomit bags for airlines. That would be our mailing envelope for *Jack Goes Fishing in the*

Real Ocean and Gets Very Sick, the opening show in the frontier of Camano Island. It kicked ass. I tried to disorient visitors with tilting horizons and close-ups of feet, an attempt to make them as uncomfortable as I was. Abuse sells.

Artists capture the Camano Island Chamber of Commerce

Reverend Chumleigh, an aging vaudevillian who was shot out of cannons at county fairs for a living, suggested the island's artists take over the chamber of commerce.

"I attended a meeting," he told me, "and found three elderly ladies with businesses bravely gathered to keep the charter alive. The chamber owns the land at the fork in the road called Terry's Corner," he continued, "and they hated handing lame flyers to island tourists from the visitor center in a dilapidated travel trailer with mouse droppings on the floor." With our gallery seventeen miles further down island on the rural south end, the idea of an attractive welcome kiosk with directions to our shop seemed like good business.

At the next chamber of commerce meeting, five artists and a UW economics professor walked in, full of energy. The words "thank God, some young people" spread across their wrinkled faces. They were gleeful when they heard our ideas and stepped back into a cheerleading role as a loosy-goosy group of local artists took the reins.

The first order of business was the Hantavirus trailer. Architect Dan Nelson drew up free plans for a modern building with echoes of farms and barns with a fifteen-foot Jack Archibald leaded window. Archibald, a chamber member now, donated

the magnificent window. We had no funding and were light in the permit department. We scoured up framing and sheetrock, a proper roof, and sustainable bamboo flooring. The county was thrilled and turned a blind eye on setbacks and permits. We developed a flower garden around a spectacular bronze of three flying snow geese, a Paula Rae bronze named *Fishboy*, a towering stainless steel monument Karla Matzke called *Gateway*, and a four-foot Jack Gunter painting of clam diggers.

The problem now was the property behind the newly created Camano Island VIC (Visitor Information Center). The seventeen acres had languished as a weed infested gravel pile since Brown & Cole Corporation shelved a plan for a shopping center there. A smarmy local developer had recently purchased the rights to the tract, intending to sell off hundred thousand-dollar lots to retailers to build anything they wanted. His grand eyesore included plans for a motel, a Taco Bell joint, and another gas station.

The chamber pushed back, images of hodgepodge structures with no theme or general plan turning the entrance of our beautiful unspoiled island into a version of Lynnwood, in our heads. We fought the project with sewer and water flow issues and environmental impact, handcuffing the unscrupulous developer on every issue. As his scheme floundered, the chamber hatched a plan.

Mike Nestor called one night at 11:00. “Draw up a sketch of Terry’s Corner as an art park with a small museum at the center,” he ordered. “Add a park-and-ride lot and a Camano Post Office.”

“When do you need this?”

“Tomorrow morning. We’re meeting with Brown & Cole’s CEO to see if we can get our hands on it.”

As I walked into a meeting room with ten color copies of a dream scenario, I met the owner, flanked by our lawyer, Bill Zingarelli, and Mike Nestor. I didn’t know the agenda.

“Have you considered gifting the land to the people of Camano Island to build an art park in exchange for a million dollar write off to our 501-C3?” I blurted out, handing him a sample drawing of the proposed site. Zingarelli extended two fingers behind him in a victory salute. The owner, Craig Cole, smiled as Mike laid out our plan.

The project depended on selling off the back section to the state for a much-needed park-and-ride and a second lot for Camano’s first post office, but anthrax killed the deal. Poisonous letters infected the reputation of the US Postal Service, and the internet combined with Fed Ex weakened the profitability. They pulled out.

Then, though, a white knight named Jeff Ericson stepped into the breach with an architecturally consistent concept for a coffee roasting business and an outdoor marketplace. Craig Cole signed off on a million-dollar gravel pile, and the people of Camano Island had an art park instead of a retail cluster fuck. Cole had the naming rights. He chose *Freedom Park*, in honor of his father-in-law, one of the remaining Pearl Harbor survivors. It was a perfect fit. A park for all the citizens, honoring a dwindling band of ninety-year-old American heroes and welcomed tourists with a rolling field of sculptures.

The chamber championed the art created by local sculptors and sought to brand the island as a haven for artists. We produced bumper stickers proclaiming, *Camano Island – A Northwest Masterpiece*.

Paula Rae described tourists as "island sinkers" and suggested a campaign to encourage visitors to spend money and go home. My bumper sticker declaring *Welcome to Camano Island; Don't Let the Sunset Hit You on the Ass on Your Way Off* was voted down.

Emboldened by our political success, I entered the national debate with a series of political paintings. With President Clinton skewered by conservative spears, I painted Bill and Hillary on the floor of a Roman coliseum threatened by every republican on the planet. Bemused at Mayor Giuliani's chaining shut a New York museum's door, I portrayed Newt Gingrich in a Prussian spiked helmet attacking

Big Bird, Ernie, and Elmo, helpless with their wooden swords.When a talented

artist who leaned to the far right dissed Karla and I at a party ("Why it's Karla and Jack. How on earth did you get invited?"), I painted her naked at Newt's bare knee as republican toadies gathered around them in a Renaissance landscape.

When I was invited to a gallery exhibit in Olympia, in the shadow of the state capitol, I brought my spoofs, hoping to get into a fistfight with a Fox News fan. The gallery owner, who had a thick Swiss accent, and I ventured to the capitol dome, hoping to place an invite in all the legislators' mailboxes. A bored guard directed us to the basement, where cubbyholes held the daily mail and government notices. We were happily inserting a flyer into each of four-hundred cubbies, inviting each elected official to the fistfight when a state trooper demanded to know what the hell we were doing down there in the bowels of the capitol dome. When Marianne

spoke English with a foreign twang, he froze and detained us, eventually dragging me by the ear into a legislature in full session. There, in front of Washington State's lawmakers, we were marched to the Sergeant of Arms, who smiled at my images, approved the mailers, and threw us off the grounds.

The next morning, Timothy McVey blew up the Oklahoma City Federal Building. We missed getting shot by twelve hours.