## Three scalawags loose in the United States

The problem with purchasing furniture on the West Coast and selling it back East was the shipping. When I heard the auctioneer, Gorsuch, was planning a trip to Brimfield, leaving with an empty truck to fill with antiques to sell at the Brimfield market back east, I wanted in. He offered to haul me and seven heavy pieces destined for New York City across the country for five hundred bucks total. I had $240 to my name, so I said yes, planning to spin a baby grubstake into enough to pay him off by wheeling and dealing on the road.

The first dilemma, though, was John Swales, a handsome male gigolo who dabbled in collectables and was traveling also. That put three full grown men in the front seat for a week. We hatched a plan to create a comfy spot in the back box, now empty save for my furniture. The U-Haul eighteen footer had a tambour back door that rolled up. We considered creating a living area back there for one of us to hang out when the cab became too cramped. The third man out could enjoy fresh air and a view of the highway behind us.

“What if I have to pee?” John asked, the first of his two weeks of whining.

“Piss off the back,” Gorsuch said.


“Well, that might be awfully rude to any vehicles behind us.”

Gorsuch ran to the barn and came out with an eight-foot plywood panel. When he flexed it and slipped the barrier into the open door tracks, it straightened flat and filled the groves like it was meant to be there. Alan plugged in an electric drill with a doorknob cutter and cut a circular hole at penis level. We began to laugh at the thought of a weenie emerging at sixty miles per hour, and Alan, deciding it was too disgusting for adults to act this way, ran back to the barn. With a staple gun, he fas-

tened a plastic Halloween mask of Richard Nixon to the outside of the panel, Nixon's open mouth over the hole. At the notion of a weenie emerging from Nixon's mouth and spraying urine at the cars behind us, we laughed so hard Alan's wife came out concerned. Tears in my eyes, I pointed out, in the spirit of safety, that if one were to lose his balance with his dick in Dick's mouth, the plywood could bow outward, carrying the urinator to the pavement on a sixty-mile-per-hour wood sled, his wanger and Tricky Dick's face sanded away underneath.

At the outskirts of Chicago, we pulled into a suburban flea market at 6:00 AM. Alan carried a box-load of unblocked black felt cowboy hats he'd snagged in a Tacoma auction. Floppy felt hats, he figured with Tacoma logic, should be popular with the simple Midwest folk. "I'll look for your Stickley furniture," Alan told me. "If you wear one of my hats and yell 'hats' in a squeaky voice all morning." He caught up to me as the sun rose, trucks with merchandise still rolling in, and told me of a Mission rocker he'd spotted. I found it next to a carryall as the driver unloaded. It was nothing special, a mail order chair from a Sears & Roebuck catalogue.

"Got anything else in the Suburban?" I asked. "Any other Mission?"

"Got a big chair in there," he told me, lifting boxes onto the damp grass. "It reclines. It's still deep. You'll have to wait." He opened the side door. "See," he said. "Still buried."

I reached my hand around the corner, blind, and felt square spindles tickle my fingers like strings on a harp. Shit. Oh dear.

“Whatcha got on it?” I asked.

“One fifty,” he said.

“I’ll take it” I said calmly, the sum of one hundred sixty dollars—all the money I had in the world—in my pocket.

What we pulled it out was *da kine*. The first glimmers of morning sun fell on the dull brown lines of a Gustav Stickley drop arm spindle Morris chair, complete with chicken shit droppings from the barn. Hallelujah.

I carried it back over my shoulders and stashed it in our truck. I saw Alan. “Give me five hundred dollars,” I said.

“Right”.

“Give me the cash, please. Something I need to do. You’ll get paid back in New York.”

“A guarantee?”

“Scout’s honor,” I answered, and then I went to find the guy who’d sold me the chair. I had pondered giving him additional money for the chair I’d purchased but dropped the idea, realizing it was the meanest thing I could do. He’d wonder what treasure he sold too cheap. He might stumble upon a photo in an auction catalogue and realize he’d sold gramps’s ten thousand-dollar chair for a hundred fifty bucks. It would haunt him. So instead, I bought everything he had for sale. I cleaned him out, buying nothing I wanted. I even purchased the sad nursing rocker. When I paid one hundred dollars for the useless chair, I instantly lost sixty bucks. He’d go home tonight and brag to momma they’d cleaned him out—the best day he ever had.

Two days later, we landed in Shipshewana, Indiana-Amish country, home to a legendary flea market. Highlight of the market was the large Quonset hut exposition

hall featuring an auction every Wednesday. We entered the field as a four-day vendor and parked amid a sea of sad collectables for sale. We were there to fill Alan's truck at the auction, two days away. We took out some of our load and placed it beside the truck to appear to be one of the vendors while we waited for the sale. I

brought the Morris chair out, partly to search for a label in the sunlight and partly to see if any of the passersby had one in their barns.

I'm an expert in spotting the *Stickley* mark under the arm or on the back leg. I once found a faint mark a month after I owned a piece, its faint remains spotted with an angled light. This chair was wonderful in its original weathered finish, but real as it was, it was unmarked. It happens. I couldn't clean it now. They were re-making these chairs again, brand new. The oxidized varnish, the chicken shit, and the straw in the cracks were the only proof it was an original from 1910. The chair sat right in front, unpriced, for three days in my booth at Shipshewana, and no one was interested.

The auction was bizarre, in a farm country way. Families with loaded pickups would begin arriving on Monday for the Wednesday sale. The public was welcome, but no buying was allowed. We watched as a farmer unloaded the offerings from some barn. He drove away, leaving a teenager with twenty bucks for food to guard the pile till the auction.

Alan wanted a load for Brimfield, and he was an auctioneer. This came in handy because the auction was so vast they assigned six auctioneers to sell the room at the same time. Did I tell you there were "singing" auctioneers?

When Wednesday dawned, a cacophony of lyrical voices pulled in bids. Alan knew what he wanted, but they were being sold simultaneously by six melodic voices. He first bought the tallest object offered near the center of the vast hall, a step ladder. He climbed it to view all of the sales at once. He flashed his buyers card at an oak highboy in the corner, and he bid on a wicker settee with a super high open work back. The auctioneers were pros. They knew another brother with a fat wallet. Alan stole that auction like a Brinks driver. We stayed at the market through the afternoon to pack.

Buyers in this farm region cracked us up. In a flea market field filled with characters from a John Steinbeck novel, the primo objects we put for sale received zero attention. We were drinking beer…

On the last afternoon, amused by the lack of interest, we invented a *free* table, piled with legitimate collectables with a *free* sign in front. The reaction amused us for hours. There had to be a gimmick, the locals said. The beer flowed. Soon our flea market neighbor, a sad character who filled balloons and fashioned twisted poodle dogs on a stick seven days a week in the sun, offered a balloon sculpture to the free table. He placed an air-filled dachshund into a vase. The other vendors got involved. Across the lane, a candy vendor doled out M&M's and Juicy Fruits from plastic bins.  They had the contract for the sweepings of a candy company, they told us.  They added a pound bag of M&M's complete with rat droppings, sawdust, and machine oil to the table.

The drama on a hot Wednesday afternoon escalated. At the eighteenth request for the gimmick, Alan invented, "If you take anything from the free table it's yours. If you put it back you have to pay fifty cents." It meant no sense but it quieted the Amish crowd.

Two women came back. It was their third visit to the free table. In a low voice, one matron whispered to her friend that she'd figured it out. "When I pull the balloon on a stick from the vase," she told her, "something will explode."

The neighborhood vendors watched, amused, as the matron set her feet for flight. She snatched the balloon stick from the vase and jumped back, eyes closed for the bang. When nothing dramatic happened, she sheepishly returned the balloon dog to the table.

“Fifty cents!” echoed through the field.

Another woman approached our booth. “I came here for a rocker,” she said, eyeing the table.

“It’s free,” I answered, disappointed at the sight of an actual customer.

“I’ll have to try it first.” Satisfied that it didn’t wobble or squeak, she looked at me with suspicion. “Are you sure this is free? What does it actually cost?”

“All right, you got me,” I answered, head down. “It’s a dollar.”

“There, I knew it.”

“I’m down to three dollars and change in my pocket,” I replied. “A dollar is about all I can afford.”

“You want to pay me a dollar for taking this chair?”

“You’re killing me,” I said, puling all my net worth from the pocket. I counted the change and said, “Three dollars and seventy-three cents. You busted me.” I handed

the cash to the customer who was now thoroughly confused. She pocketed my money and walked away with her prize.

I sold the Stickley chair a day later in Troy, New York for $4500 cash. Alan still hasn't forgiven me for beating him on my $500 bluff.

## The art muse returns

Five years after the fire, I still couldn't pick up a brush. Sure, I made a couple of paintings, but each one was a struggle of craft over motivation. No joy flowed into my hand; no dreams of an NYC show propelled me to get back to work as a painter.

I'd dated an odd woman who baked marijuana into every meal and refused to drive on freeways. Bothered by her weight, she worked as a swimmer pool lifeguard in Carhartt coveralls. We ended badly. Months later, she called.

"What do you want…Kendra?" I asked coldly.

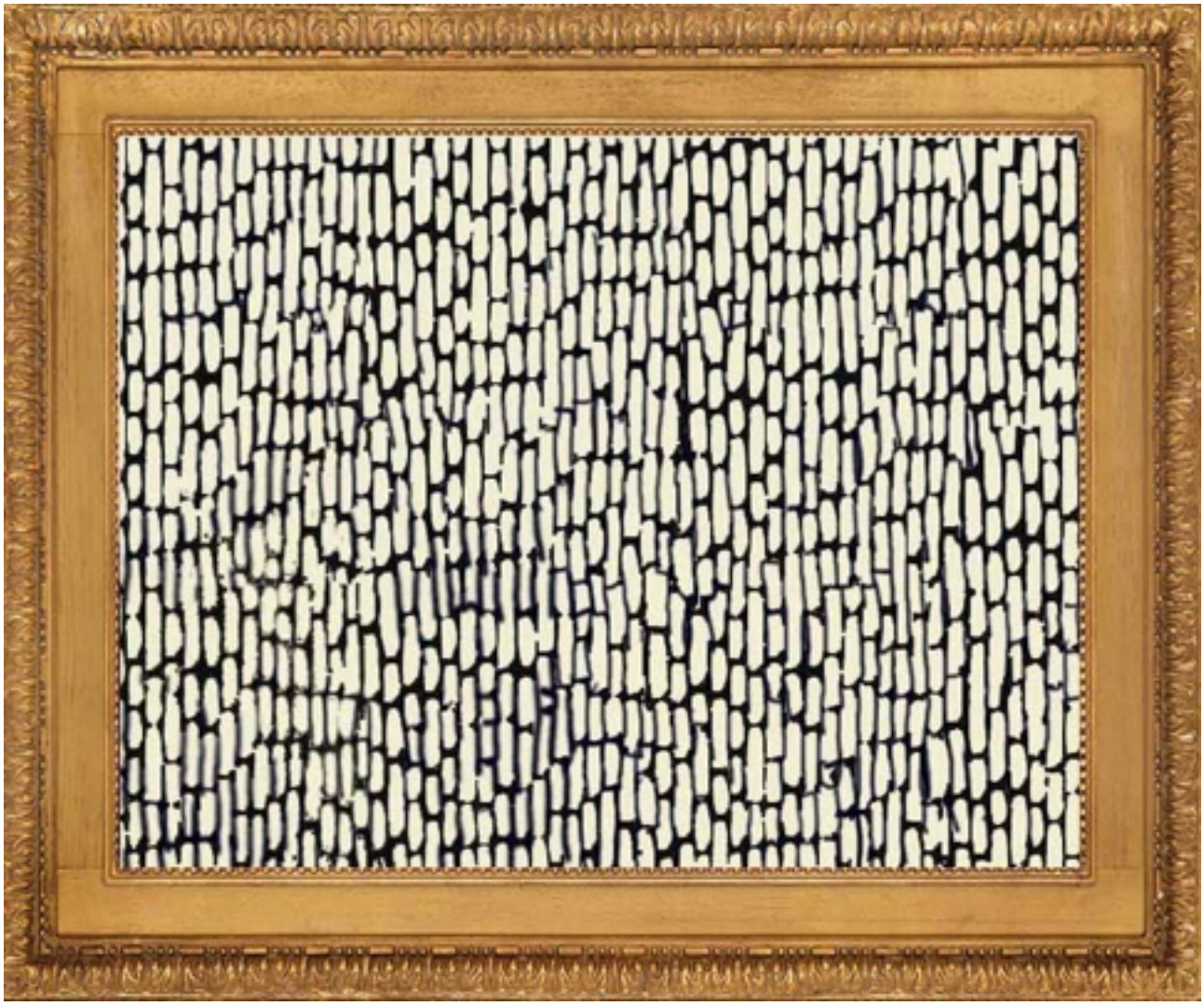
"My friends live on Camano Island and rent a cabin on the west shore, high bank, with a great view of the Olympic Mountains across the sound. They're leaving and don't want to turn it back to the realtor, prefer to pass it to a friend instead. The rent is $150 a month."

$150 a month, high bank, view.

"Nice to hear from you, dear," I answered.

The day I settled into the eight hundred-square-foot box on a cliff top, my muse returned. I began a painting on the second day. Everything came back: the thrill of

turning a square of brown pressed sawdust into something beautiful, the dreams of a painting career, the trance of creativity that flowed for days. I began exploring a new technique based on science and Robert Vickrey's *how to* book. Vickrey taught painting with egg tempera transparent glazes. He stressed a bright white undercoat using rabbit skin glue gesso, because its brightness would bounce back light passing through the layers of color like filters on a camera lens. The color green was produced, in part, by clear blue over clear yellow over white. I loved the fact this



green was the product of optical physics rather than a colored pigment. It was a color that didn't exist in a jar or a tube, and that pleased me.

Vickrey painted city sidewalks and stone walls. In his demonstration book, he splattered colors on his white gessoed panel with a tooth brush flick. His streets and stones were clear layers of color over the multicolored speckles. It worked beautifully.

Searching as always for an elegant proof, I invented a method to transform random speckles into my version of fine art. As a veteran of Dr Hoagland's physics class with a fondness for entropy and chaos, I looked at the human body as a sack of chemicals walking and talking and falling in love with another bag of atoms, lured in at times, by the shape of the container. Call me weird. Looking carefully at my own skin I could see through it—the blue veins, purple bruises, and magenta messages from my liver, a riot of colors visible through the tanned, Caucasian surface. My paintings can work like that, I reasoned. A thin layer of reality over chaos. Transparency and reflected light—the key. I wanted to pixelate the work, to separate the random under-colors.

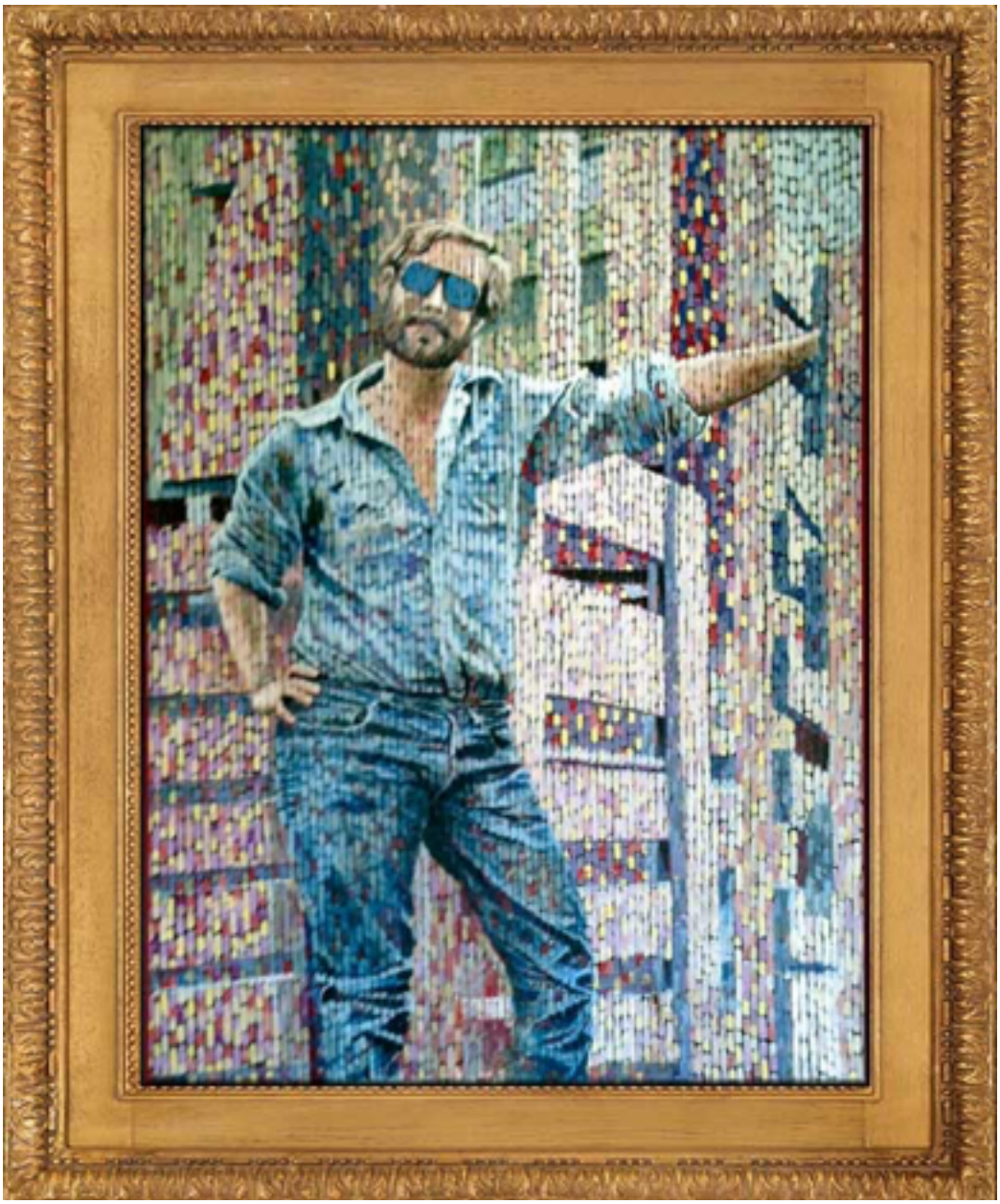
Starting from a black-painted panel, I brushed a thousand titanium white dots. After a pencil sketch of the ferry boat or a market full of veggies, the bright spots were glazed in random colors, the more random the better. My chaos.

When I finished my first dot painting, it vibrated with the battle of the random under-paintings with a very marketable image on top. The effect was eerie. Though familiar with impressionism, I made these paintings from a metaphor of life itself and entropy. They were beautiful. Something in the color struggle brought it to life. I watched these panels gain souls as they progressed.

> They sold like hotcakes in local exhibits.

## Steve and the virus

Brother Steve, who lived in Stanwood, wasn't feeling well. Word in the gay community in the early 1980s was a new killer virus was beginning to kill people after



sexual contact. Steve, a regular haunter of Seattle tea houses at 4:00 AM, had a partner, a gorgeous, small man with a twinkle in his eyes, whose last job was passing out towels at a bath house. He and my brother walked on the tight rope of a risky lifestyle. Doctor after doctor sent my brother home with flu medication. An Arlington GP took the second step, considering his lifestyle, and tested for HIV. He was positive. Steve was both elated he had been right and crushed by his death sentence.

Our mother back in Boston was frantic. Her son with a fatal disease three thousand miles away tore her heart out. She begged him to come home.

As his disease worsened and pneumococcus took hold, he was scheduled for a total blood transfusion in Providence Hospital, one of many attempts to combat the inevitable. I took a three-foot painting in my dot style and carried it up to intensive care.

“You can’t bring that up here,” a care nurse told me. “This is intensive care.”

“Excuse me,” I said softly as I pushed past her to Steve’s room. Steve was frantic. He’d spit out the relaxation medicine and thrown off headphones with recorded oldies. “I’m dying and they want me to listen to bad music,” he cried. “I don’t want to be zoned out when I take my last breath.”

I placed the colorful work on his dresser. “Thanks Jack,” he wheezed. “I’m safe now.”

Years later, I would donate that exact painting to the hospital lobby where it now resides, helping people to feel safe. Seven hospitals in the Pacific Northwest now have my work on their walls.

The transfusion gave my brother another year of life. His pneumonia cleared, and his strength came back. Doomed as he was, he was granted a reprieve.

## John John and the road trip 2

I bought a car, a 1967 Firebird convertible. It was rough, black paint over cream, the four hundred-cubic-inch engine replaced with a straight six, but it was so cool. John, between colleges, agreed to another cross country trip.

When he arrived it was early spring in the Pacific Northwest, the month of March reduced to thirty days of cold rain. Our plan was simple: drive south along the Pacific Coast until it was warm enough to put the top down and then take a left for New England.

When we arrived at Big Sur it was barely above freezing, but we cruised the spectacular drive with the top down, heater on full blast and a cold sun on our heads. We had to get to Los Angeles before the temperature was warm enough to travel roofless. We turned left on Interstate 10 above the Mexican border.

John's fear of my antique obsession was still in gear. As we sped across the desert, we made a deal: if we spotted a sign for antiques on the interstate, I could stop; otherwise we would continue to drive east. It was a good bet for my son since antique signs on an interstate are rare.

Halfway through Texas, near the town of Tyler, an authorized exit sign displayed the word *Antiques.* We left the highway as agreed. The shop was like any other, the proprietor an Iranian, laundering his family's gold. A hammered-copper wall sconce resembling an art Nouveau cobra with old mica in the shade was priced at $150. I bought it, containing my excitement. Deep in his back room I found a painting on velvet, a theorem with a still life of watermelon and fruit. It wasn't a velvet Elvis; it was a painting from 1820, a rare piece of primitive art. I purchased it for the same price.

Inside the convertible I said to John, "Oh my God. I made six thousand dollars at that store. We gotta look around."

"A deal is a deal," he said, and we drove to Boston in a straight line.

I sold the Dirk van Erp sconce for five hundred dollars when I got there. The theorem brought a grand. I had a fat bankroll in my pocket when the magical woman named Shannon arrived at Logan Airport for the trip back to the West Coast.

## Shannon

When I arrived in the PNW I was told there were few artists in the area. A number of people referred to a mysterious sculptor, in wood and clay, who lived in the woods of Camano Island, reachable by a bridge.

When I finally met, her we clicked. A glow of excitement combined with innocence and experience sat above her head. To describe her would be a waste of English words. Perhaps the Aztecs had a phrase.

Our relationship was simple. She told me, “You’re fun. I’d like to run with you. Someday I’m going to find my mate, and I will leave. Take it or leave it.”

I took it and loved every minute we spent together. I was so cowed by my respect for her I didn’t fart in her presence for a year and a half. Her artwork was organic, found driftwood with harrowed faces in clay. She spent part of each year pulling salmon off nets in Alaska, lived in a log cabin, and ate vegetarian food. She was also a licensed masseuse and could find the cranial pulse with the best of them. And she was pretty as pie.

Shannon met me in Boston for the drive home. Armed with six grand in cash, the deal was we could drive to anyplace in the USA she wanted to visit as long as I could look for something square to buy. Her wish list included a top-down drive along the Blue Ridge Parkway and a visit to Lake Okefenokee in Georgia.

We had one of those expanded trip maps extending the itinerary to small towns that didn't appear on gas station road maps. Shannon spotted a hamlet named Climax in North Carolina. We decided to mail postcards with the Climax postmark to her


friend, Curly, the postmaster of the Stanwood Post Office.

Finding Climax, North Carolina was not easy. Lost on a secondary road, we spotted a cast-iron sign from the turn of the century—*Climax - 3 Miles* with an embossed arrow. I wanted to steal it, the perfect bedroom (make that living room) wall decoration. A farmhouse in the distance, honesty prevailed, and we drove on.

In the township of Climax, the post office had three deposit bins: *Instate, Out of State*, and *Climax Postmark Only.* I guess we weren't the first couple to make that journey.

On an island called Waycross, sixty miles from dry land in the Okefenokee Swamp, I bought a Stickley chair. It was only a mahogany side chair from Stickley Brothers, but I had to buy it due to the weirdness of finding it on the only solid land in the middle of a hundred-mile swamp.

Traveling along the south coast of the United States, we discovered I was the only person local dealers had ever met who was interested in Stickley furniture. I bought an L & JG Stickley magazine stand from under the elbow of a Mississippi dealer as he leaned on it to tell me, "You won't find that Northern furniture down here."

We approached New Orleans on the eve of the weeklong celebration. In the Mississippi town of Bay St. Louis across the water, we stopped for a Sunday afternoon cocktail, only to find the town was dry.

A swanky place called The Antique Club caused us to stop. "You can have a drink here," the desk person told us. "But you have to be a member. Here's the form."

After signing my name, we settled on a table with a view of the bay. Shannon left for the ladies room. Moments later, lights flashed, klaxons squawked, and Shannon

exited. The bartender smiled. “There’s a full size male mannequin in the ladies room,” she told me. “A loin cloth covers the genitals with a sign above it warning: *Don’t Peek*. Lifting it breaks a circuit and announces a naughty girl to the room.”

Shannon smiled and said, “Good.”

In New Orleans, we rented a room for five days on St. Charles Street. The parades were beginning all over the city, leading to the final night of Mardi Gras.

I scored a set of eight early, heavy Gus Stickley chairs at a fancy shop with a national reputation for older objects. Shannon explored the French Quarter. We were advised to take my load of antiques, piled so high by now we couldn’t close the top, into our rented room and close the convertible on the last night of parties.

I sang with Charmaine Neville in the French Quarter when she spotted the only Caucasian in the room and stuck a microphone in the white boy’s face. I managed to recreate the last note she had sung and repeated it, holding my warble until she grew bored with messing with the tourist and moved along.

There was an antique flea market opening at 5:00 AM east of the city. I planned to be pick it, but the city was becoming electric. We sent a bottle of Crown Royal to the blues band at a joint called Johnnies, and they took us to after-hours parties.

I ran to the flea market after no sleep, at the end of a night partying at bars. At ten in the morning, when I pulled up in front of our rented room, Shannon was sitting

among my acquired objects on the lawn, evicted for the next guest. She'd been waiting there for two hours.

Unable to pay for the triple rents for the last night of the celebration, we fled. At a twelve-pump gas station near the French Quarter, I filled the tank, my ring of keys in the locking gas cap. It turns out Pontiacs, a GM product, have the ability to leave the car running if you extract the key.

We were fifty miles west of New Orleans when I realized there were no keys in the ignition. The gas cap, I realized, had been left on my back bumper in the center of New Orleans on the night of the final parade. We drove back into a city in full party mode. Nothing there. Somewhere, on a street full of bling, a gas cap with all my keys on it sat unnoticed.

We drove west to Texas, careful not to turn the car off. When we reached a town, I would drive to a phone booth and check the yellow pages for locksmiths. Three towns into Texas and we found one. At the local motel, I turned the engine off with the promise of salvation in the morning. The locksmith charged me $75 to rekey the ignition. He wanted another $75 for the trunk key. I declined, a bad mistake.

Four days later, north of Globe, Arizona, we negotiated a cliffside road leading to Tortilla Flats, where John Steinbeck wrote the novel. At the crest of a thousand-

foot drop-off, the rear tire blew. Thirty miles from anything, we had no key to the trunk. We had no way to call.

“Break the trunk open,” Shannon said.

“It’s a classic car,” I countered.

We pulled out the back seat after unloading the pile of treasure and found, in the beefed-up body of a convertible, no way inside. We were stuck. No water. No food.

Shannon led me by the hand and walked me up the slope where we made love. It was her greatest gift. I’ll always love her for that day. An hour later, a state patrolman stopped on his way to investigate an accident ahead where a van of seven Japanese tourists had fallen into the canyon and died. He called a gas station back in Globe and asked for assistance. The owner appeared in two hours and towed me sixty miles on cliffside roads to punch out the lock in the trunk and fix the tire. I told him I had $170 total in my pocket and had to get to Seattle. We settled for half the money in my pocket.

Shannon’s fondness toward me seemed to be waning. Unable to close the top due to a plethora of furniture in the back seat, our plan now was to park under highway bridges to wait out rainstorms. When we finally reached Camano Island, Shannon’s mouth was a straight line quivering at the corners.