Eric Clapton vs the grizzly bear

People who love fishing are fond of legends. There were stories of the great one that got away, the river of five-pound rainbow trout in Alaska's Keni Peninsula, the giant salmon in Mongolia called the *taiman*, and then there was British Columbia. East coast fishermen could only wonder about days of fantastic fishing under snow-covered peaks when they stood shoulder to shoulder with a shoreline of anglers at Horn Pond on opening day in the New England rain. Traveling with a love-

ly person, a painter with long, kinky, jet-black hair named Ruth, I decided to drive to the trout fishing capital of the world, according to a fishing magazine ad: Kamloops, British Columbia.

We erected construction pipes in the bed of my Power Wagon and made a canvas box behind the cab that held my canoe on top.

We picked up two hitchhikers west of Montreal on the Trans Canada Highway. In retrospect, it was a mistake; now we had two strangers, down and out by definition, camping with us on a three thousand-mile journey. They turned out to be okay people, musicians connected with a British Columbian band called Chilliwack, but now we had strangers in our campsite all the way across Canada.

Ruth had a collection of 70s road music on 8-track cassettes—Traffic, The Moody Blues, Crosby Stills and Nash, and Cream. Competition with the engine roar of a one-ton Dodge meant we blasted the music through the cab as we headed for the promised land. On the second day of our joined journey, with the riders lounging under the canvas tent, one of them said, “You have your tape player in the cab, eh? Well, we’re musicians, and if you stop at a Radio Shack we can get two speakers and listen to the music you’re playing. And we’ll pay for them. You can keep them after we’re gone.” Well, gentile reader, when Bose speakers in your home theater cover the face of the woofer and tweeter with cloth, it’s not to slow down the sound. We sewed the back speakers to the canvas walls, and they played our cab

music just fine, but they also broadcasted rock and roll through the canvas and into the street around us. When we passed quiet, sleepy hamlets, we had to crank down the volume in order to avoid blasting the residents off their porches. We'll hear from those speakers again.

In British Columbia we parted ways, the musicians off to drop acid in Stanley Park and Ruth and I to the fishing grounds. We found the resort from the ad in my East Coast magazine and paddled around this *legendary* lake for three days with no luck. On the fourth day, the owner said over a cup of coffee, "You know where I go fishing?"

"Tell me."

"Exactly one hundred kilometers north of Prince George there's a road to the right. Drive twenty-five miles in; there's a lake."

We drove five hundred miles north the next day. The lake we found was called Carp Lake. To get to it was a twenty-five mile harrowing, active logging road that could only be travelled at night or on weekends. We parked in a clear cut near the shore and caught huge rainbow trout that leaped and danced until they were exhausted and floated into the net.

A hundred miles from civilization, I heard a crunch in the darkness beyond my Coleman lantern. Ruth was under the canvas in the Dodge. "I hear an animal out in

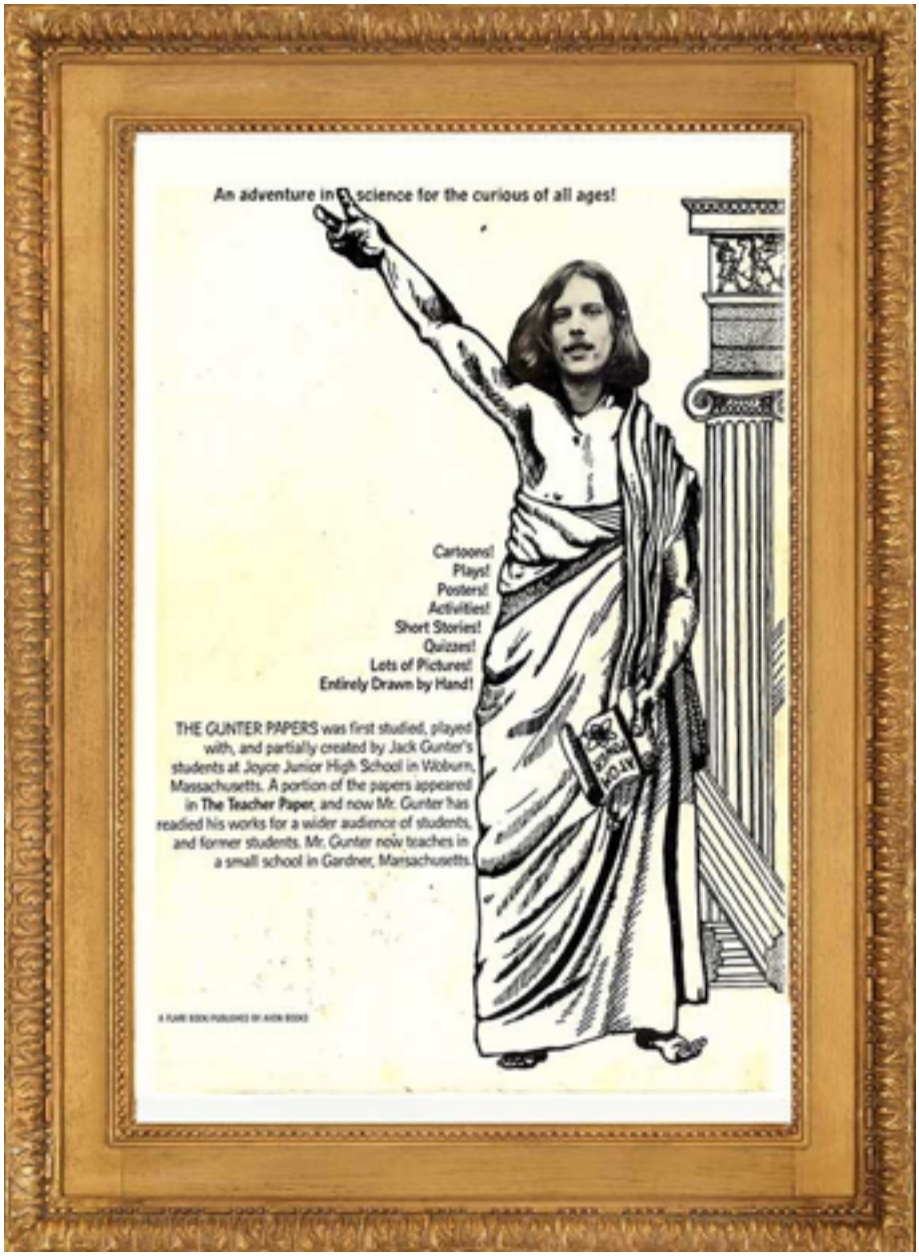
the slash," I told her. Lifting the lantern revealed a huge bear on his hind legs, as big as the truck. He took a step forward, honest to God. "Ruth," I whispered, running for the safety of the cab. "Get in the cab with me. There's a bear out there!"

"I've seen bears in New Hampshire," she said. "I'm okay." I coaxed her into the front seat as a giant creature entered our campground smelling salmon. We had no gun, no phone, only the safety of Detroit Steel. Faced with a miserable night in the cab while a beast ravaged our campsite, I turned on the ignition key and reached down to shove Fresh Cream into the tape player. Eric Clapton's guitar filled the

stump farm from the back speakers. Thank you, hitchhikers. We watched the beast leap from the sound and bound away. That's the day when Eric Clapton saved my life from a bear.

That left a typical 70s *Another Roadside Attraction* road trip during which we picked up a hitchhiking couple in Canada and agreed to drive them to Berkeley, California to pick up a lid of pot to drop off at the Hog Farm in Tennessee. Ruth made a still life from dried flowers culled from the trip and decorated the dash-board.

A Futuristic Junior High School Science Curriculum and Guide to the Fourth Dimension



My credit card company called me when I arrived home after the ten thousand-mile journey to say, “Cut apart your credit card. Some madman has charged $2000 worth of gas to your number.”

Unemployed, I decided to respond to Mr. Wyatt from Avon Books to see if there was any money in the book business. Bob Wyatt, executive editor of The Hearst Company imprint, who'd recently bagged the paperback rights to a fifteen million-copy run of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, showed up at Logan Airport in a tattered jean jacket and Levis. Expecting a properly dressed New York executive, I almost missed him. Back in Woburn, across the street from the landfill where they'd found Bobby DeLorenzo's arm, he combed through my saved mimeograph handouts and declared we had a book.

I found work at the Massachusetts Department of Education. My job was to create behavioral objectives to break down my occupation into specific tasks for ten cents a word. Hungry for more ten cent words, I engaged old craftsmen and millwrights happy to discuss details of their occupations, debriefed them on a typical day, and transcribed their routines into measurable job actions that could be graded. That paid the rent until winter when snow fell, and I plowed the streets of North Woburn for twenty-five bucks an hour using my Power Wagon.

Wyatt liked my hand-lettering on the mimeograph lesson plans and asked me to hand-letter the science book. Using blue-lined transparent paper and Rapidograph pens, I penned *The Gunter Papers*, as it was named, and prepared to publish a book. With finished, hand-drafted, original pages in a box, I flew to New York City to sign a contract. Wyatt, Hearst Corporation's wonder editor, tried to rent the Im-

pressionist Room at the top of the Metropolitan Museum as a lunch date for us, but it fell through. We instead dined on a fish cooked on a hot table stone, and I agreed to a thousand-dollar advance and four percent of the book sales.

Working for the department of education, I had access to the state help-wanted ads. One jumped out: *Pre-vocational skills instructor for an alternative school*. As a behavioral objective grunt in the ranks of government wordsmiths, I recognized they were looking for a shop teacher. I wanted to teach at an alternative school where I would be free to create an effective curriculum and applied.

My book hit the shelves a month later. I had the pleasure of walking my son to a bookstore in Woburn and showing him six copies on a shelf. He looked at the introduction where I wrote: “This book is dedicated to my son, John, who told me I was his teacher and he was mine”.

“It’s the same for all of them,” he announced proudly as he found the inscription in all the books on the shelf.

The Gunter Papers was reviewed by legitimate authorities like *Kircus Reviews* and selected academic authorities. A professor from Kansas State claimed I spoon fed science to my students. He was correct. He stated no human could feel the wind from cosmic rays passing through the body. He was correct again, but it made lively reading in a class full of hooligans bent on flipping fish guts onto the light fix-

tures. The one positive review came from Stewart Brand, creative force behind *The Whole Earth Catalog*. In his newest project called *The Co-evolution Quarterly*, he praised the science play and gave my textbook a pat on the back.

Teaching on the edge

My second venture into the world of teaching brought me to Gardner, halfway across Massachusetts, ten miles from the New Hampshire border. The Westminster Mini School, occupying three buildings on the outskirts of the decaying Gardner State Hospital, offered me $100 a week as a summer job for ten hours of personal time with the students, usually found at local youth centers. Having no experience as a shop teacher but willing to fake it, I took the summer job to get to know the kids I would face in the fall. I posted a teen center ad inviting Mini School students to visit an architectural commune in New Hampshire as preparation for the shop class. Four teenagers showed up for the excursion, three fourteen-year-old girls and one boy. Driven by the Mini School math teacher, Tom, we crossed the New Hampshire border with four underage adolescents.

As we drove north. I introduced myself as the new shop teacher and gave a lecture about alternative life styles. It was a commune we were visiting after all. Two hours north, we drove down the dirt road to the compound and were met by a nude woman about to give birth. This was not the greeting I expected. Pendulous breasts hung over a swollen stomach and a hairy bush as she caught grasshoppers flying by and ate them. A hairy naked man with a ZZ Top beard walked over and recognized me. I watched, in slow motion, my career as a teacher go up in smoke. But we were here. I announced our mission to him: to inspect the marvelous build-

ings—the three story treehouse, the yurt, the foam dome, the geodesic dome, and the A-frame for my shop teacher job.

“We’re a naked farming commune now,” ZZ Top said as the three fourteen-year-old girls gasped.

“All is lost,” I told myself. “We might as well see the buildings.”

The structures were indeed amazing, but I was thinking about attorneys.

As we were leaving, ZZ Top pulled me aside. “I caught your students stealing pot we had drying in the yurt,” he told me. “I know you’re a teacher. We’re proud of

you. I'm a teacher also, so I gave them some and said you don't have to steal from us."

Great, I thought. I've taken four adolescents over a state line to see naked adults who gave them drugs.

As Tom drove, I lectured the four students on the dangers of drugs until they begged me to stop. It wasn't a lecture; I was building up quotes for my trial. Nothing happened. Apparently, these kids didn't have family dinners with Mom and Dad.

If you lived in north central Massachusetts and were fourteen years old and hyperactive, self injurious, depressed, angry, had poor reading skills, and presented yourself as a major pain in the ass to your school system, you were probably a Westminster Mini School student. The facility was created to teach behaviorally disturbed students— throw away children, the bad apples of educational interactions. State funded, the school sent letters to every school system in a thirty-mile radius of rural Massachusetts asking them to send their worst behavior problems. Our student population was thirty of these troublemakers, all at the same location, who were parceled out to the teachers in groups of six. I loved these kids, but not at first.

None of these students played by the rules. As a veteran of mean streets and the strict discipline of Joyce Jr High, I was in heaven. Early on I'd picked up chatter about cars. These kids were a hair away from getting their driver's licenses. There's a hook, I thought, inventing a curriculum on the fly. Gardner was a wood town, home of Heywood Wakefield, Conant Ball, and many smaller furniture makers, but the industry was dying. I decided these kids needed a gas station to work on cars. Many of the first shop classes were spent driving the country side, looking for a suitable garage. Born in the hollows of Appalachia, my students acted like miniature dogs as we drove—lots of bluster behind the glass windows.

Blacks, another minority in the backcountry, met the wrath of my students. My students would roll down the windows to shout the N word as we drove by. Women were another target for drive-by abuse.

So were policemen, who caught "pig" calls as I drove. I invented a strategy. When the students called out insults to a passer-by, I would stop, engage the victim, and introduce him or her to my carload of students who were, of course, horrified at the face-to-face confrontations. The kids came to expect me to stop when they yelled epithets out the window. I loved stopping, they knew it, and the behavior ceased.

Once when we approached a T in the road, a pair of gals who looked like they had popped out of a cake the night before were hitchhiking, probably back to Boston. I turned right to the sound of cat calls out the window. "Whores!" I turned around and picked the ladies up, one in the front seat and one in the back. "Some of my students have questions they want to ask you," I said.

"Ask away," said the passenger in the rumpled dress.

Silence.

"You guys have any questions?" I shouted into the back.

Silence.

Randy, in the second back seat, summoned up the gumption to ask in a stutter, "Do….d…d…..do….you want to go to bed with me?" The passenger smiled but declined. No one spoke out the windows again. Our students were normal kids but for some reason damaged and disrupted in their passage through adulthood.

I wanted to write a second book, a science text using the systems of an automobile and the internal combustion engine to bring a child to the science behind it all. I named the book *The Venturi Effect and Other Carburetor Stories* and began cranking out mimeos for my shop students to read, a technique that had worked at the Joyce Junior High.

For my efforts I heard, "This is fucking shit, Jack. Whadda you think this is, reading class? I'm not reading in shop. This is fucked up." I abandoned the book to concentrate on teaching. I opened a repair station complete with gas for sale and moved my shop class there. Rudy stayed in the wood shop at the state hospital while I worked with fledgling mechanics, teaching the students not to steal from the cash register.

With one year of teaching and twenty years of shenanigans under my belt, I knew handling cash would be a challenge to these future felons. One of the tools in my behavior modification belt was the Friday afternoon assembly during which I handed paychecks to the automotive branch of Westminster Mini School for their hours at the garage. Our junior mechanics received from three to ten dollars in a

paycheck envelope, and for most the weekly recognition it was a big deal, a positive outcome for good behavior. The afternoon came when the cash in the till and the receipts were off by $19.99, a twenty dollar bill. I lined up the five culprits and explained the discrepancy, suggesting someone must have pocketed the sawbuck on the walk back to the office and forgotten to put it into the cash register. I looked at a line of conspirator smiles. “That’s all right,” I announced with a bigger smile. “This actually helps the garage.” The smiles faltered. “Remember that first meeting?” I asked. “When I said if any money ended up missing no one would get paid that day? Well, today’s the day, thanks to one of you. By my calculations the shop took in $86.15 today. Deduct the missing twenty, we get $66.15 the garage can keep. Today that profit will buy shop tools. So thanks to the person who pocketed the twenty. To the rest of you, thanks for giving up your paycheck today. What do you think? Should I get that impact wrench we need?”

The next day, one of the boys sported a black eye, and money was never taken again.

Terror in the steam tunnels

Since its construction in the early 1900s, the sprawling hundred-acre complex named Gardner State Hospital had been heated with steam tunnels connecting all the buildings to the main boiler structure located in the main complex, a quarter mile away. The state hospital night watchmen didn’t like catering to the school for

juvenile delinquents squatting on the back forty acres of the hilltop run by uppity hippies with master's degrees. Their favorite torture for me was locking the shop building from the inside to render my ring of keys useless at 8:00 AM. Early on I learned to gain access to my locked wood shop through these frightening passage-ways. The creepy tunnel connecting the main building with my shop was a war zone of litter, empty whiskey bottles, and foul mattresses whose history I tried not to think about. The occasional light bulb still working cast a spooky glow that heightened my paranoia. Thoughts of a century of loonies—or worse, blood thirsty psychopaths using these passageways as subterraneous lairs—flooded my mind as I crept through, hunched over in the five-foot concrete shaft. Ground water dripped with audible plops. The floor, sticky from who knows what activities, grabbed at my boots as I walked into darkness toward my cellar door, red metal with a screened glass, eye-level window. Particularly frightening were the gloomy inter-sections where other tunnels met mine. I chased away thoughts of current residents still housed in the main building making the long underground journey. I resisted the urge to illuminate these right turns with the school flashlight, not wanting to see the face of an inmate, glazed eyes over a Thorazine drool, staring back.

As the watchmen grew to know us and hate our middle-class meddling even more, they locked the door to the steam tunnel as well. Blood pressure grew as I reached out to turn the doorknob, not daring to look over my shoulder, and found it secured

from the other side. When a slow turn revealed no monsters behind me, I would have to retrace my sticky steps over a hundred years of surreptitious behavior to make my way back.

Cast of characters

A cross section of the students and the staff of Westminster Mini School was like the cast of *Dark Shadows*. The student body was thirty bad apples. Albert Sweeney was a hulking teenager whose father, a Coca Cola truck driver, had been blown to sticky bits during a war between delivery drivers and the union. Albert was prone to anger and frequently wore a red-faced flush from broken blood vessels in his cheeks after throwing a chair through the window or another classroom confrontation. Danny Moore was a talker, though only to himself. Our headmaster related his meetings with the lad. “I have a box here on the table,” he’d tell Danny. “Inside

are your demons. Want to look inside with me? Maybe we can chase them off and you'll feel okay,"

"Oh no, Ed. Don't open it. Oh boy. Oh boy. That's scary."

In wood shop, Dan's chosen project was reducing a two-foot block of hardwood to sawdust using a folded sheet of sandpaper. He made good progress that first year, reducing the chunk of wood to shoebox size. "Maybe you want to try fifty-grit paper instead of the one-twenty," I suggested. "We can have that block reduced in no time."

"Oh no," he said. "I wouldn't dare to."

Muriel Conway was sixteen turning thirty. Beautiful with long dark hair, she drove a '63 Chevy convertible to school. Her boyfriend, she told us, was a biker with a murder rap who promised he would kill her and all her family if she ever left him. Then he would torch their house for good measure.

Kenny DiNito was four foot seven due to a lifetime dose of Ritalin fed him by his grandmother to keep his fidgeting to a minimum. Ritalin was known to stunt adolescent growth and was never prescribed for more than a year, but we were powerless to intervene. Kenny had a fascination with the custodial trade and was an eager volunteer for the wide push broom at the end of the day. Sometimes I'd lend him my key ring that held the shiny brass masters to all the school buildings, all spring

mounted to my belt loop. His eyes would widen with all this responsibility in his hands.

The staff was equally odd, but they had more degrees. Tom taught math and didn't speak much. Gill, his gal, was a weaver. Peter Minnich, a mountain man and poet, sprouted his knowledge of the Whole Earth Catalog and lived deep in the New Hampshire forest. Peter Gagnon taught social studies and spent his off-school life playing in an adult baseball league and hiding out with a highball in his hand at the American Legion watching TV sports. Long-bearded Dennis taught a brand of science and was consumed with thoughts of the ocean of air above our heads. Ed Gordon was the headmaster and a thoughtful leader. After a stressful day of weirdness, he once told the staff, "These kids choose to be emotionally disturbed. If you want one to stop misbehaving, simply line up three students and ask each one, in turn, to act and behave in a sane manner. You shoot the first one and then the second. Chances are," he said, "the third student will become normal in short order. The secret to our success," he told us, "is finding the proper motivation."

As teachers we heard legends of other schools that wrestled with populations such as ours. Our favorite was an extreme education outfit out of Texas. They had three facilities: one in the Alaska permafrost, one in the arid emptiness of Death Valley, and the last in an alligator-infested Florida swamp. These residential treatment academies were staffed with former hockey players who didn't know much about

education and didn't care. Security was not necessary with alligators, scorpions, and polar bears on the perimeter. Upon leaving these *schools*, recalcitrant students were told their *first* missteps (not the second or third) would earn them return trips. I'm told the success rate was high.

A brief moment in the history of ridiculous situations occurred in the second year when the superintendent of schools for the entire public school system decided to use our campus as his office. His suite, situated next to the reading class, endured our normal decibel level of one hundred twenty db for classroom behavior and more during the daily upsets. One day, he marched into Ed's main office and demanded to know why a student was sitting high up in a tree in front of this window and why we weren't dealing with it.

"We are dealing with it," Ed told him.

"Dealing with it by doing nothing?"

"That's correct, Dr. LaMontaigne. During the bus ride to school this morning, the boy, Artie Knowel, heard a radio report that Henry Knowel had been arrested last night for rape and assault."

"Is Henry Knowel his father?"

"His father or his brother. He doesn't know which."

“Get him out of that tree and into counseling.”

“He is in counseling.”

“In a tree?”

“It’s the safest place for him today.”

Setting the river on fire and other gas station stories

The gas station needed a genuine mechanic if we wanted to teach something besides changing oil, pretending to clean spark plugs, and pumping gas without stealing the money. One of the six applicants interviewed, a young guy named Dave, was chatting with me when the wood shop students closed my office door, snapped a padlock into the hasp, and began to raise hell. He never blinked and continued our discussion about carburetors. He was perfect. The success story at the garage was Albert. Working at the gas station seemed to focus his attention and quiet his

rage. Violent tantrums and popped blood vessels had dwindled to none. The reading teacher found him interested in writing a letter to the regional Coke distributor to get the station a pop machine. Lord knows they owed him. In math he now wanted to learn to add up receipts and calculate tax. A heavy boy, he now rode his ten-speed from Fitchburg to school, a matter of twelve miles, so he didn't have to leave the garage at 2:30 when the school bus came.

The problem Dave had as he worked on a repair, though, was getting parts. He knew enough not to leave certifiably mischievous teenagers alone with tools and flammable liquids on a trip to the parts store. Once a day, at least, he would pile the entire crew into his wagon and close the gas station completely to pick up some replacement part.

When the English teacher, Alice, found the passenger window in her brand new Gremlin stuck, she consigned the task to our crew. She parked it by the gas pump and caught a ride back to school. Dave had to pick up a carburetor. As he closed the garage door and ordered the six students into the van, Albert begged to remain. "You can lock up the station," he pleaded. "I'll sit outside and pump gas. We need the money." At 2:30, I arrived at the satellite shop with Alice in tow to pick up her Gremlin. When we arrived, the station was closed up tight. Albert sat on the front step. "I stayed, Jack," he told me bravely. "I stayed around. It's my fault."

Alice screamed, “My car! What happened to my car?” Before her, the vehicle, still in the honeymoon of the new car smell, was destroyed, the entire side bashed in. She screamed again.

“It was in front of the pump,” Albert tried to tell her. “I tried to move it so we could get gas customers.”

Alice didn’t hear him, seeing her baby crumpled from fender to fender.

“Where’s Dave?” I asked.

“Went to get parts. I stayed, Jack. I can fix it. I’m so sorry.”

Alice screamed again.

Albert’s face began to turn red. He hopped on his ten speed and raced off up the busy street. I turned to Alice, but she was inconsolable. Albert had stopped in the east-bound lane on the hill crest. He’d parked his bike in the travel lane and straddled it, face away, to wait for the approaching motorist to end his life. As I watched, three cars slowed and drove cautiously around him on their way to Gardner center. Alice’s voice had turned to a low moan. Albert’s face snapped up, blood vessels popping under his skin. One hundred yards up the road, he looked down the throughway. A car passed the station on its way up the hill. I saw Albert engage the gears and begin acceleration, shifting gears as he picked up speed. “Oh Christ,”

I thought. “He’s going to pull a Kamikaze at forty miles an hour into oncoming traffic.”

As Alice whimpered, I ran into the street. Albert, hitting fourth gear, had reached twenty miles per hour with a car approaching, unaware the cyclist had plans to meet his bumper head-on. I caught Albert by the arm as he whizzed past and knocked him to the ground in an ugly tumble. Now the driver stopped and grabbed my arm. He demanded to know why I had cold-cocked a boy on his bike, unaware I had saved him a lifetime of second thoughts. In the distance I could hear Alice’s screams.

These were different times, and we were cowboy educators. The headmaster agreed to keep the incident silent and sentenced Albert to two months fixing the car, which came back complete. I knew at that point I was with the right crew.

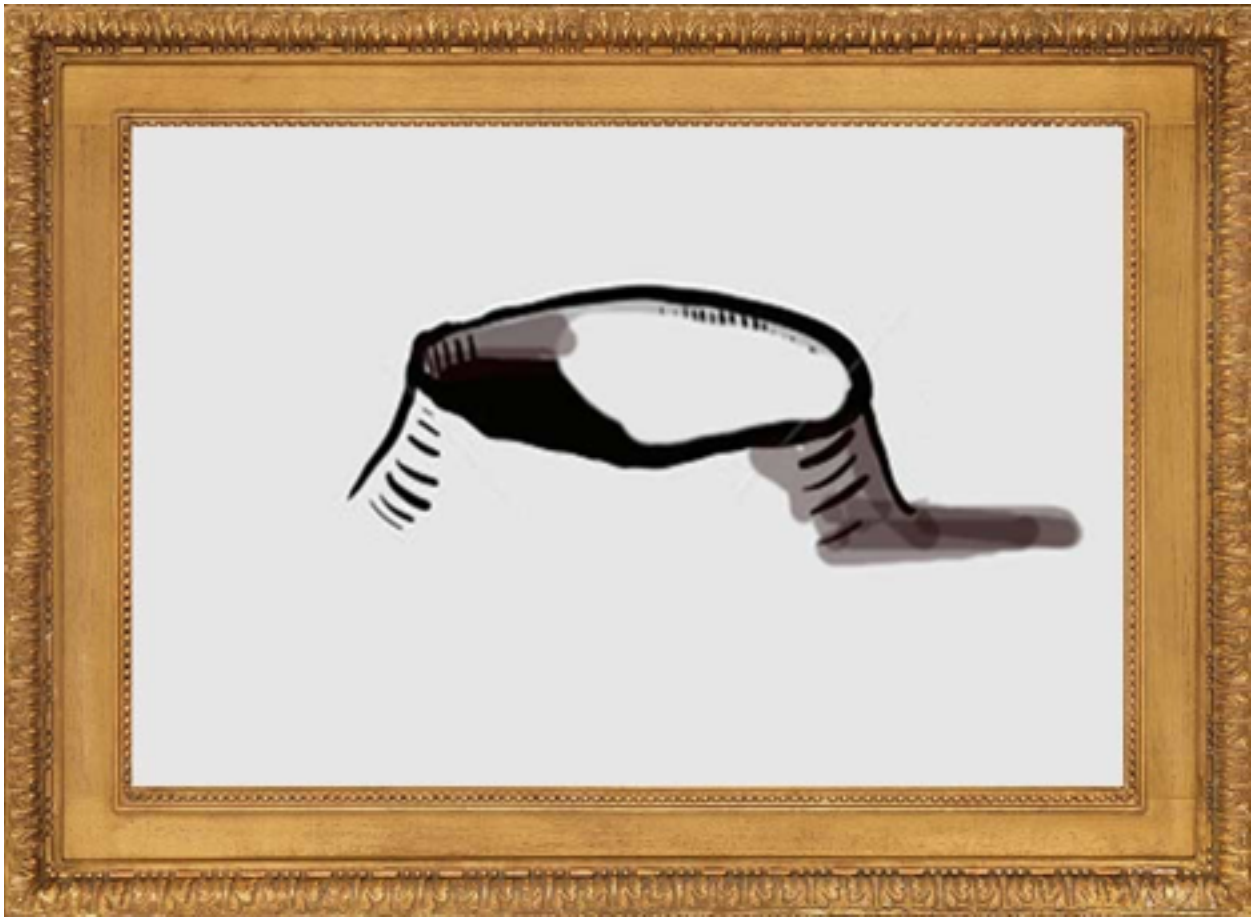
A phone call from New York City

Gill walked over to my wood shop to tell me I had a phone call from the *New York Times*. I ran to the office to talk with an editor of the Sunday book review, my ticket to success if they covered my book, *The Gunter Papers*. The reviewer asked me if I had a beard. This was a dilemma. I did sport a seventies mustache but was

clean-shaven on the rest of my face. My future as a successful writer seemed to depend on my answer. “I try to grow one,” I answered. “But it doesn’t grow well on the cheeks.”

The conversation ran downhill after that. For the next six months, I plunked down three bucks every Sunday to see if the Times had covered my science book, knowing my fortunes would improve whether the paper liked the book or hated it. I’ve since chalked it up to a circulation ploy. Still anonymous, I returned to the classroom.

The dawn of my painting career



Ron dragged his knuckles over to my desk one day and said, “Jack, show me how to draw a crater.” He was talking to a science teacher, pretending to be a wood-shop instructor, who could draw.

“Why?” I asked, always eager to drag out a point of interest to pin some teaching on it.

“I got a new album, Pink Floyd, *Dark side of the Moon*,” Ron said. “And I want to get stoned, you know, and look at a crater while I listen.”

Despite the fact that all of the staff smoked pot and many had played with psychoactive experiences, we were solid in our ant-drug stance with the students. These kids, already labeled as undesirables, needed all their brain cells at full throttle to soak up as much as we could fill them with to give them a chance in a world in which they already had two strikes against them.

“You shouldn’t smoke marijuana,” I answered. “But I’ll be happy to show you how to draw a crater.”

“Wow,” he said. The other five classmates lurched over.

“We want to make a crater too,” they said.

Reaching into a locker, I extracted a tattered cardboard box holding tubes of acrylic paint and brushes, an artifact from a previous teacher. “I can teach you how to paint craters,” I announced. “I can teach you how to paint anything. You interested?”

Six nods.

“I’ll teach you guys how to paint if I get no more swear words spoken in my shop and you treat me with more respect.”

To my surprise, they all agreed.

Educational breakthroughs with this population were rare. I remembered a story I'd recently heard about two hunters, running down a hill being chased by a hungry bear.

"We'll never out run the bear," one runner said.

The other replied, "I can't outrun the bear; I only have to outrun you." (I get courage from this anecdote, even today.)

I realized in the moment I started the Westminster Mini School Art Program that I didn't know how to paint, but I could stay ahead of these jamokes.

A new world opened when I began to teach art. With the gas station somewhat under control and Rudi helping Danny sand a block of wood into dust, I had time to branch out from wood shop to help students copy album covers, paintings that brought wide acclaim from their fellow stoners. We began a photography class. Gill, the office secretary and a weaver herself, volunteered to help. Gulp.

Gill was trim and had Elizabeth Taylor eyes. She wore form-filling shirts over braless cupcakes, and her nipples could cut glass. She brightened the room.

I created a dark room and ordered photo developer chemicals, an enlarger, and 35 mm cameras for the students to borrow for weekends. Students who hated their lots in life and hated where they lived were encouraged to take the expensive, film-loaded SLRs home to photograph their neighborhoods. I'd give assignments like *photograph lines in nature*, or *circles*, or *rectangles*. They had the delight of seeing their negatives morph into images in the chemical trays. We rolled our own Plus X from bulk rolls, and the negatives were cheap. I found a strobe light process to take long exposures enhanced with a penlight flashlight with the shutter open in a dark-

ened room. This resulted into stop-motion images of teachers with thought clouds glowing above their heads.

We made stop action ping pong ball contests and managed to capture a softball hitting a cup of water as it exploded. Drug dealers with cameras. It was working.

One morning after a late staff party, I showed up in class in the previous day's clothes. As I reached over my desk in photography class, a rolled joint fell from my shirt pocket onto the desk. The whole class of junior felons noticed at once. "Man,

you're busted," they said *en masse*. "You tell us not to do drugs and a joint falls from your pocket. We're going to the mayor."

“I’m glad you saw this,” I said, straightening to an accusatory stance.

“You’re busted,” they repeated.

“Do you know where I found this?”

Silence.

“In the darkroom. A place with students inside that cannot be entered until the fixer’s done. Is this where you deal your drugs?”

Silence.

“I’ve been in a quandary since I found it there this morning,” I lied authoritatively. “If I take this,” I picked it up the *spliff* like it was infected with herpes, “to Peter, the headmaster, do you know what he will say?”

Silence.

“You’re right. He’ll say, ‘Shut down the photography program. Take those cameras back from the students. Shut down the dark room. It’s a den of drug dealing.’”

Summoning false bravado, I said, “I want the student who left this, *this drug*, in the dark room to admit the crime and confess.” I waited.

No response, but I believe all in the room were wondering which of them did it and wondering why they hadn’t thought of it before.

“If I get a promise this will never happen again, I will break this drug stick into pieces in the wastebasket, keep my mouth shut about what I found, and we will never speak about it again.”

> Once more, my career was saved by bullshit lie.