

MILWAUKEE FOOTLIGHTS JANUARY 1998

A Carver of Bears

I had never seen so many bears. On top of fence posts. Balancing on gates. In front of ranch houses... All along that country road in Oregon I had seen them. Bears.

They were made of wood—logs, more exactly. The ponderosa pines, gigantic cypresses and spruce I had seen in the dark, primeval forests we'd been walking in on that mountained coast... That's where these bears had come from. Transformed from tree trunks into sturdy bodies—pale, honey-colored, bark stripped away—and graced by upturned noses, peaks of ears, and daintily clawed feet. Some seven feet tall, some tiny... Who had made these creatures? Why?

With a turn in the road, he came into view: the artist. Wielding a chain saw like one possessed, he was carving... one more bear.

We couldn't help ourselves, we had to stop. My husband and I had been on a sort of busman's holiday; both of us actors, I a playwright, we'd been taking in Oregon's Shakespeare Festival in Ashland. Although we'd interspersed some hiking and exploring between performances, our stay had been dominated by seeing, thinking and talking about actors and plays. About artists and their art.

Dressed in a ripped T-shirt, skin bleached and mottled from the sun, the artist blinked at us and gave us a shy greeting. His smile was missing bottom teeth. The roaring saw still held in one hand (he used no other sort of tool), and a chain-smoked cigarette in the other, he let us engage him in conversation.

Why did he carve? Who had taught him? I wanted to know. The man's fervid energy, his bizarre but brilliant talent arrested me—for his carvings captured the essential beariness of bears. I had to know... What drove this man? Was there something to learn from him? Why did he create?

His answer was not what I had expected.

God had given him a gift, he said. "Seven years ago, I prayed for a vocation. I prayed for a vocation every night and every day... After three weeks, God answered me. I woke up that day, and I could carve. Carved a bear that day—and sold him. Been carving ever since."

So that was it. A calling. A summoning by God.

He shook his head apologetically. "I been on the television coupla times. Once in San Jose. Once in Phoenix." Had he gone down to the big cities to be interviewed? "No. They came here. I wouldn't walk 'cross the street for a television camera... I don't like that—the public part. I wouldn't even be out here in the field today if I didn't have to. But I gotta sell one or two so I can eat. That's all I need. Just enough to eat. My master is Jesus Christ. That's how he says to live." He led us to his trailer shack behind the field, bordered by a straggling vegetable garden. Poverty clearly was his way of life.

He said he'd been many things before he was a carver. A fisherman. A seafood chef.

And years ago he'd lead bear hunts—deep into Upper Michigan. "You gotta understand, a successful bear hunt represented \$1,000 to me in them days. I was ignorant and young. Now I know better. Bears are my spirit animal. I don't kill 'em anymore."

For \$75, we bought one—a perfect three foot bear. "I think she's a female," he said. Then, with mysterious significance, "She's a miniature, not a cub." He paused. "Sometimes they name themselves. Her name... is Brandy."

If we came back, how could we— or others—find him? Patiently, he answered. "Well, I'm outside carvin' here, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. People drive by and people stop." And in the winter? "In the winter, I hide," he said, "I hide deep and hard."

We told him we were artists, too— colleagues, of a sort. He nodded, understanding, and wished us luck. For the rest of our Northwestern travels, Brandy sat peacefully in the back seat of our car. Strapped in by a seat belt, she gave off the odd scent of cypress wood and forest fire (he finished by singeing her with a blowtorch for a final dark brown bear-like coat). Now she makes her home, nose raised, almost sniffing, standing guard in our backyard.

Since our first Midwestern snow has come, settling on Brandy's upturned head, I think of Two Bears. For that, he told us, was his name. I can imagine that by now he is hiding "deep and hard" (doing what, God only knows). Like a bear who stores up energy under the weight of winter's snow, Two Bears stores up inspiration for his fierce calling, which drains him dry and calls on everything he has.

Hide well, Two Bears. Hide deep and hard. Hide so that you may survive next year's spring and summer. Hide so that you may create. Hide so that you may be a totem for the creative spirit in all of us—writer, actor, mother, marketing executive, convenience store clerk. So that we, like you, may honor our vocations and find inspiration for— and from—them. For all our differences, we resemble "Two Bears"... we are creators, carvers, everyone.

- Marie Kohler