

Coolo California

Fock 6: Frisco Nocturno

So, the Giants-A's game ended – or did I leave early? – and I headed out on foot to return to Blue Man, my base camp. For some stupid reason, I had parked nearly two miles away, and had a half-hour walk to get there.

Somehow, it didn't seem quite as nippy back out on the street, but it was still a long walk. Really made me wonder why the hell I had parked so far away. I guess my Boston upbringing was rearing its head again: you see a parking spot, you grab it because there may not be another one for miles. Of course, there were several more, but since I had basically parked for a bar-hopping walkabout, and the game was a mere subsequent whim, the parking plan had not been properly focused to achieve maximal peripatetic efficiency.

Right.

Anyway, Blue Man looked lonely when I returned. The streets along the Wharf were pretty damn empty by then. Parking spaces abounded, mocking my cavalier oh-I-don't-mind-walking attitude. A sudden urge to nap overtook me, and I curled up in the Belly O' Th' Whale to grab a few z's before stepping out for some SF late-night frolic.

It wasn't a long nap. Flashing beams of yellow light between the gaps in the thick blue corduroy curtains must have awakened me, and I peeked through the gap to discern the source. A golf-cartish vehicle had pulled in behind me, and the yellow revolving light strobed across the "Parking Officer" sign that adorned the roof front.

Recalling the sign on the post that had earlier admonished me that there would be "No Parking After 11 PM," I reasoned that this would be a good time to skedaddle. The Parking Officer was on his feet, beginning to write in his darling little flip-top book, so I slithered forward into the front seat, and in one smooth, quick motion, fired up the ignition, slid into gear, and drove casually off into the San Francisco night, leaving him behind, perplexed, and in mid-penstroke.

Yesssss, off into the night in an unfamiliar city again, and trusting my nose to sniff out an appropriate venue for the night's entertainment. Well, not really my nose, as such, but usually your instincts can tell by the outside if you'll like the inside. It usually works out just fine, though it sometimes takes a little longer than it should.

Like in Calgary, with Ed, on the 1990 Trans-Canada Trek. We had parked on a fairly major street near that city's downtown business area, and set out on foot to find a bar that we would feel good in.

Well, there were few to choose from, and though we wound down some side streets and crossed some eerie railroad tracks, we discovered little. The first place we located was nicely decorated, well lit, with soft bright floral pattern cushions on all the chairs, and potted ferns and such dangling from just about everywhere. We had a quick beer, and an even quicker conversation with the barmaid, and practically fled those far-too-sterile environs.

After an hour of searching, we gave up. Though it was about 9:30 p.m., the mid-summer sun had just set in Alberta's capital, and we had resigned ourselves with a sigh that maybe it just wasn't to be this time.

We remounted Max and pulled away from the curb into the empty street. We drove only about 100 feet toward the next corner where an unlit sign above a dark doorway on our left called out to us. We slowed as we neared it, staring in disbelief that we had been parked just a half-dozen parking spaces from it. "Mad Jack's Saloon" it read. The hook was in. And the hand-written sign under it totally reeled us in: "Live Blues Nightly." We immediately ended our 15-second drive, parked around the corner (actually farther from the door than we had been originally), and ventured in.

It was dark, old, somewhat smelly, and had cheap beer. We were in our element. And the band was good. Steve Pineo and the Groovemakers jammed a few tunes, mostly without vocals, and a crowd slowly dribbled in, until the place was pretty full. We were surprised by how many people still had long hair; it was as if the short-hair-is-in directive had not yet made it across the border. Ed and I were even asked by more than one patron: "Are you guys cops?" and Nam, who had no shortage of war stories asked, "You military guys?" We imbibed freely with these good-natured Calgarians, and congratulated ourselves on finding the underbelly that we had craved.

Then the real show started. Big Miller came to the stage.

Big Miller was indeed big. He was black, just turned 70, and weighed at least 300 pounds, maybe 350. He was Lotsa Poppa and more. And the man could belt out big bad blues from that big bad body. He dwarfed the band. He dwarfed the stage. His voice dwarfed *everything*.

Between songs at one point, some stupid redneck doofus in the crowd bellowed out for some comment about "all this country music." Big took it with a raised eyebrow. "Country??" he responded, shifting his huge bulk for emphasis, "I ain't ridin' no horse!"

We ended up being rather popular, it seemed, because we had to more or less excuse our way away from a mildly disheveled man who had taken a shine to us and seemed eager for more of our company. But we shook him with a bathroom feint, and escaped off to the nearest hotel parking lot for some sleepy time time.

Not all of our UQ's (Underbelly Quests) were so successful, of course. Most were, I'd have to say, but nobody bats a thousand. The Jolly Roger in Regina, Saskatchewan, for instance, a dark and surly bar with live music and cheap beer, showed promise, but it must have been an all-locals place – like, yeah, what tourists would flock to this dump? – because we got nothing but dark and surly looks for the short time that we stayed.

And the band was probably getting worse looks than we were. Their selection of music was damn curious for that venue, and I think the crowd was getting antsy to kick some buttock. Since even we agreed that we would make for prime targets, we casually effected an early no-look-over-the-shoulder exit.

So, like I said before, there is a difference between an underbelly bar and just a plain old shitty bar too. That one in Regina was a shitty bar. It was dark and it was cheap, all right, but if Ed and I couldn't feel welcome there, then it was downright shitty.

So, it was *true* underbelly that we always sought. Ed and I scored another successful UQ in Jasper, Alberta, on that same trans-Canada trek, when we stumbled upon the Atha-B – so named, we conjectured, for its proximity to the Athabasca Glacier.

Initially wary of the red awning with the script lettering that hung above the front door, our *is-this-a-classy-restaurant-type-place?* suspicions were immediately allayed as we passed through that decorative portal. The predominant stale odor of years of beer spilled on (and inadequately mopped from) the floors blended with the pungent aroma of hot sauce and chicken, and a slight underlying urinary scent, to spell u-n-d-e-r-b-e-l-l-y even more clearly than all the pickup trucks outside did.

And Atha-B did not disappoint. What a cast of bizarroes in that place! First there was our waiter, Waldo (or whatever he said his name was), who prided himself on being the fastest server in the Great White North. We settled around a stand-up table to listen to the band whose name is lost to the ages, but who caught our immediate approval by opening up with "Sultans of Swing" and "Take Me To The River." We ordered up a pitcher of Labatt's and gave the room a quick once-over. Suddenly – like, zip-boom suddenly -- there was our pitcher, and Waldo waiting to collect. I didn't see how he could have gotten to the bar and back so fast, let alone get a pitcher poured.

"C'mon, Waldo," we said, "you just took that off another table, didn't you?"

"No," he replied, smirking, "I'm just really fast." And he pointed out the fresh head on the pitcher, removing any further doubts.

Satisfied and impressed, we tipped him well. After all, it was that colorful toy money and golden loonies. He was happy with it though, and kept leaping at our every whim throughout the evening.

Then there were the Aryans. Drunk early, they were just about the first to venture onto the dance floor. There may have been a couple of couples gently bobbing around the cleared space before the Aryans hit it, but these guys made an entrance. Arms waving randomly above their heads, the two tall, somewhat overweight, and definitely overserved blond guys, waddled unsteadily out onto the dance floor.

Their entrance seemed to signal the beginning of Bizarre Behavior Time, as the rest of the night just seemed to be one whacko after another. This is a common phenomenon at places that serve alcohol. I noticed it myself in my Key West Winter of '94 when I would start to bounce and bob to the kickin' tunes of Crisspy Critters at Barefoot Bob's. People would see me up front, gyrating like a bag of cats, and figure, "what the hell, I won't look as stupid as *he* does" and start dancing themselves.

At Atha-B, though, Bicycle Man was the whackoest of all. He was a tall, hungry-thin, scruffy and dark-haired man around 30 who accosted Ed in the Men's Room with some out-of-the-blue statements about how he just loved to "get on 'em, and ride, ride, ride" as he held imaginary handlebars and mimicked a pedaling motion with his legs. Ed was not really sure if it was intended as a sexual remark, or

indeed if he was being hit on, so he did what we always tried to do: laugh, and say, “yahhh” and slip away before getting cornered.

My own lasting impression of the Atha-B came from its lavatory as well. However, this was more, well, decorative than interpersonal. On arriving for one of my late sojourns thither, I could not help but discern that all the urinals and much of the floor had been splattered with what looked like gallons of chunky and colorful vomit. Coincidentally, the atmosphere had become rather rank too. I did persevere and complete my quest, though. But it is odd to feel that you are actually cleaning the porcelain as you relieve your bladder on it.

We awoke the next morning to the sound of the local garbage truck right next to us. It was gluttonously chugging the contents of the Atha-B’s dumpster, like Popeye throwing back a can of spinach. The Canadian summer sun blazed on our convection van and we laughed heartily as we opened our eyes to find that I had actually parked completely blocking the driveway of the parking lot, yet no other cars remained.

Entertain no illusions, good reader, that we maintained any air of superiority whenever we wallowed in the Underbelliness of it all. We melded with it. We became underbelly, with a small “u.” And we took cocky comfort in the fact that we were so good at it.

However, for us, unlike quite a few of our unfortunate fellow patrons, the idiosyncrasies of underbelly life could be discarded – or at least disguised – as we greeted the morrow’s respectable daylight world.

Because, you see, Underbelly is a nice place to visit...

...and that is just what I sought to do on this San Francisco summer night! So uphill was the way to go. Everything down here by the waterfront was either closed or too nice. But, like most cities, it only took a few turns to get to naughty from nice.

Perhaps it was my own state of inebriation – it was, after all, past midnight and the “faucet had been on”, so to speak, since early afternoon – or maybe it was just too dark and dingy, or maybe this place didn’t even have a sign, but I do not know the name of the bar that I happened upon. But it was good underbelly, all right.

It fit all the criteria: dark, dirty, somewhat odorous, people dressed to unimpress. It was exceptionally ordinary -- if that’s not too oxymoronic for you – and I was very glad that it was. The bars -- if they would stoop to be called something so base – by the Wharf all radiated class, and one would be showered with waves of disapproval if one ventured in without at least an outward appearance of above average decency. I should know. ;)

But this bar had no pretensions. You’re a scruffy scumbag? Hmmm. Got enough money to pay for your drink? OK, come on in then. There were two guys “working” the front door. Or at least they were standing by it; I just strolled on by them and up the stairs. Piercings abounded. A tall, flamboyant drag queen paced the sidewalk talking at them, though they seemed too disinterested, or too numbed, to pay heed.

The upstairs was crowded. The floor seemed to be just cement, but it was hard to tell through the slick smear that made walking to the bar a quiz (it wasn’t quite a test, really, so I guess it was just a quiz).

The beer selection was underbelly bad too. The dance floor was crammed with people. There was a second-floor balcony, and it did feel pretty damn cold out there, especially on emerging from the sweaty and crowded dance/bar room. Maybe it was not specifically a gay bar, but it was hard to tell. Men and women seemed roughly equal in number, but they may well have been with each other instead of with one another. You know what I mean.

Nobody stood out as really bizarre or extreme, though. Clothing was not blah, but not really outrageous either – and it was *on*. Hair and body ornaments were not anything noteworthy. Blue jeans and mostly-plain T-shirts seemed to be the uniform of choice. And I was invisible. Except for my insistence on wearing shorts – it was July, after all -- my attire was equally unremarkable.

I was impressed by how unimpressive it was. Maybe that’s why the name didn’t stick. But it was good. The anticipation was for Weird, and instead there was Ordinary. Drunk, sweaty, underbelly dark and devilish, but nothing that couldn’t have been found in the more mundane cities like Rochester or Providence or Indianapolis.

That had even rung true in L.A., six months before, when I slunk (slinked? slank??) away from the hoity-toity hotel and sought Santa Monica Boulevard ‘belly. I had a mahhhvelous time at those SMB clubs, but, again, the preconceptions were grand – I mean, this was *LA!* – and the images that I had of

the bizarre and the beautiful, the gaudy and the gorgeous, were simply replaced by a bunch of people partying. There was initial disappointment, I reckon, but it was real good to be able to just plain blend in too. Made this ramacker feel a bit more at home...

Hours later, I awoke on a slant in dim daylight. Blue Man was parked awkwardly near a sharp street corner, one rear wheel up on the curb, with the rear bumper mere centimeters away from a tree trunk, and the van angled steeply uphill. As usual, the Morning Moment of Illumination was slow in coming. Maybe even a little slower than usual. But mental clouds began to part, and recollection yielded reality.

It's nice watching the pieces fall into place. First, there is the Eyes Open stage. That hinges totally on what odd body twist last occurred during sleep. It's a timid stage. The recognition of awakedness creeps into the fogged mind. Experience has been a good teacher, though, and the eyes don't open yet. Pain memories imbed deep, and there have been too many searing stabs of morning sunlight hitting the ill-prepared and feebly defended retinas. [A lot like leaving Lewis' late on a July afternoon.]

It is inherently understood that I am in my van. And the mind slowly stirs. It probes the body for position, condition, and orientation. Am I cold? Don't seem to be. Or am I hot? Nah, not hot either. Face up? Uhhh, no. Face down? Nope. On my side? Yeah. Fetal? Semi. Am I comfortable? Very. Or do I need to shift off of some unseen protrusion that has poked its way into my dimmed consciousness? Nope, no such perturbations. Am I under blankets? Kinda half. Or not? Kinda half. Am I dressed? Not really. To what degree? Hanes briefs, navy blue. Do I have to answer Nature's call? As always, the answer to that one, unfortunately, is Yes. Have I woken of my own accord? Think so. Or has somebody or something violated my sleep? No, all seems quiet. For that matter, am I alone? Hmmm. Gonna have to roll over to determine that one.

Nothing as complicated as *Where Am I?* can be dealt with yet. Too soon. The basics aren't all covered yet.

One hand drifts towards my eyes, as a shield, and one eyelid creaks open. The contrast of shadows is evaluated, the iris constricts appropriately, and the hand is slowly pulled away.

Yes, I'm alone. (Of course, sigh.) It's daylight, but very dim. It's either before sunrise, or it's a crappy day out. It was one of those skies that keep you from having any idea what time it is. Often, the angle of the sun's rays streaming in through the van's skylights give a hint about the hour. Or sometimes the bright spot behind the corduroy gives it away – though that could be a lawman's flashlight, or a motorcycle headlight too.

There were no such rays or bright spots this a.m. though. We were under a thick blah layer of rising Frisco fog, and it would be quite a while before any sun would be burning through that.

The head won't be allowed to make any sudden moves yet. The systems check is still running. I'm looking at a wall of blue curtains, and a ceiling of light blue plush something-or-other, so I must be facing toward the back of the van. The three pillows under my head and back feel soooooo good, and the nine layers of blankets, sheets, and comforters underneath me have nestled my body into a delightful numbness. It must be cool out, because my favorite blue blanket is not overheating me.

The comfort is exquisite. No bed I have ever owned can out-nestle the Belly O' Th' Whale. The urge to slip back into contented sleep is strong. But, to my dismay, there is one urge that is stronger. And Blue Man, for all his fine qualities and amenities, has no bathroom. Gotta get up. I reckon that's why I woke up, after all.

As cool as it can be to park'n'sleep right in the middle of an urban area, it does have its drawbacks. Noise can be one. Risk of being hit can be one. But those pale in comparison to Need Bladder Relief (NBR). At rest areas along the Interstate, or in most hotel parking lots (if the previous night's arrival had been properly scoped), such need is trivial. If parking angle, shade and cover are all OK, it's not even necessary to get dressed.

In a city, though, NBR takes on a different complexion. It has been addressed many ways, usually rather risky approaches necessitated by desperate conditions. Without a doubt, the most absurd one was in a dead-stop traffic jam on the Massachusetts Turnpike one summer afternoon. We had no container of any kind to use, and we were traffic-locked in the middle lane, in the middle of a bridge. Discretion was preferred, but there were no bushes, and no cover, no place to hide ... except one.

Putting Max in park, I stepped out, went flat to the pavement, and slithered underneath, as if some unseen repair was needed. Gauging the crown in the road, I rolled on my side, unfurled my

waistband, and ... *ahhhhhhhhh*. A telltale stream trickling out across the inside lane was the only clue, and, who knows, maybe that was from the A/C or something, eh?

That wasn't necessary on this hill in SF on this foggy morn, though. A simple curbsit between parked cars worked fine. That's pretty standard. The whole troop of us used it on Bourbon Street in Nawlins in '92. If you're wearing shorts with boxers (or commando), then it's a piece of cake: just sit and hang.

Of course, once that morning duty was done, another challenge followed: figuring out just where the heck I was, so I could figure out how to get the heck out of there and get the heck to Sacramento (!!). That's the trouble with winging it by night; those random lefts and rights justified as following-your-nose can get you mighty lost.

However, San Francisco has a built-in advantage: hills. A few peeks – not peaks -- between buildings, and the bridges were spotted. San Fran a peninsula, so bridges mean egress.

With minimum difficulty, Blue Man took me to I-80, the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge, which would point me to California's capital. Skies were still totally gray. The dense overcast gave no hint about the sun's location. It was a very depressing morning on the West Coast.

The Day Time Stood Still had been exactly like that. That was in Canada, at Algonquin. Dash, Ban, Cliff and I had reached our final campsite of Canoe Week 1 (well, #1 for me, anyway), and had a scheduled Day Off. We did that twice within the week: paddle and portage like demons for two days, then stake out a nice campsite and spend a day kickin' back.

On this trip, we had a self-imposed No Timepiece Edict in effect. Wanting to be real outdoorsmen, we forsook mechanisms and determined to live by the sky and not by numerical time. That's where Elmo came in. Fucking Elmo.

It was the very first day of the excursion, and we were fresh and happy as we paddled along the Petawawa River. Almost immediately we had come across a bull moose standing ankle deep in the water. It simply watched us from a few feet away and urinated as we glided by. Ahh, life in the wild.

The temperature was mild, and the sky was mostly cloudy, and my initial fear about the canoe's instability was fading fast. My only prior canoeing experiences had all involved flippings and dumpings.

There was the "white water" excursion down the Kennebeck River in Maine years before, where the only white water we encountered was that weird foam that you see on the edge of many lakes and rivers, and where we simply tied our three canoes together to make a raft, hung a paddle off the back as a rudder, set up a propane grill on the cooler in the middle canoe and cooked up doggies for ourselves and for other passing canoeists as we drifted on downstream. Even that placid little riverdance eventually led to soaked clothing and tents due to some bad balancing.

The worst one, though, had to be the Charles River Dunk. Richie, Bowie, Danny Mac and I decided on a hot and sunny Sunday to rent two canoes at the big dock where the mighty Charles – made famous by The Standells in their song "Dirty Water" [Down by the river / Down by the banks of the River Charles /... Oh, I love that dirty water / Ohhhhhhh, Boston you're my home] – passes under the Mass. Pike (I-90). There were signs all around the boathouse clearly stating "No Alcohol Allowed. \$50 Fine", so we knew better than to bring our cooler with us when we signed out the canoes.

Instead, we procured our vessels, and paddled directly across to the parking lot, clambered out, grabbed our hefty Coleman, full to the brim with 48 twelve-ounce cans of Molson Golden and Budweiser, and a healthy layer of ice, plunked it into my canoe, and aimed upstream. We paddled nearly a half-mile, if that, before we pulled over among some lily pads and cracked open the first round.

A few hours, 44 beers or so, and several puffy clouds later (wink, wink), we were a buzzy mess, and still among those same lily pads. The sun had roasted us to a fine crispy pink, and the booze had made us all rather loud and foolish, as it usually does.

Recognizing our depleted supplies, we decided we had had enough off this canoeing stuff, and shoved off for home. We got a little competitive, as runners often do (especially drunk runners), and kinda raced, kinda demo-derbied on the way back. We maneuvered our battleships in a furious ballet of paddle thrusts, slaps, splashes, hollers, and war cries. All, of course, in plain sight of the docks, about 100 yards away.

Danny Mac and I were cutting hard to port, but Richie had us lined up good. With the perfect angle of attack, he saw his opportunity and dug his paddle deep into the brownish water to gather a mother of a dousing. We braced for the deluge.

But then, a very funny thing happened. At least, Danny Mac and I thought it was funny. Bowie sure didn't.

Richie had dug so deep, and leaned so far, that when he pulled on his paddle, instead of bringing up water, his low leverage pulled the canoe down. His eyes got as big as baseballs, and the “Oh shit” expression on his face was priceless. And over went the canoe, bringing shirts, sunglasses, running shoes, four unopened beers and two startled drunks with it.

Down they sank into that dirty water. I was howling. But my howling was cut short when, to my horror, Danny Mac -- never one to shrink from extreme behavior -- rose to his feet and leaped screaming from our canoe into the drink. I barely had time to stabilize the canoe to keep myself dry.

Richie came up sputtering and cursing. Bowie took a moment longer, but when he came up, he was holding the four beers in their plastic collar. He always was a man with good instincts. Danny Mac was just laughing at them both.

Of course, we *tried* to do that “crossed-T” thing where you put the capsized canoe across the upright one to let the water out, and then roll it empty back into the water, but our coordination and focus were poor (duhhh), and we just couldn’t make it sing.

We weren’t that far from shore, so we dragged the drowned vessel to the banks, where I watched the three of them sink almost knee deep in slimy brown ooze as they righted the canoe.

We paddled the remaining hundred yards, trying to, as Bowie said “act casual” as we pulled up to the docks. Of course there were people there. Of course they had witnessed our whole blundering comedy. And, of course, we forgot to bring the cooler back to car first.

So, we smirkingly tied up our canoes, unloaded our sopping belongings, and strolled calmly in to retrieve our deposit. Wary of those “No Alcohol Allowed. \$50 Fine” signs, we made a lame attempt at choirboy behavior. Not easy to do when you’re dripping on the floor.

Richie and Danny Mac were at the counter, explaining to the boathouse guy, “Yeah, we tried that T-thing, but couldn’t get the hang of it...”, I was standing in my dry clothes behind them, and Bowie was in the doorway, holding the cooler.

It was a good cooler. I had had it for years. Sturdy handles on both sides, and a nice secure latch to keep the lid closed. Since it was no longer weighed down by four-and-a-half gallons of beer and ten pounds of ice, Bowie was holding it by one side handle and letting it hang to the ground.

The counter process seemed to be going quietly OK, and I looked at Bowie with a smug shrug. As he went to return the shrug, his weight shifted, and as it did, so did the cooler.

I saw it about to happen, and I knew it would not be good. At the moment, it was like slow motion, but there was nothing I could do to stop it. Bowie was oblivious to the imminent catastrophe.

The lid of the cooler was not latched. With the slight shift, the lid began to open. It only opened about an inch or less at first, and I began to take a breath to gather enough speech to warn Bowie, but then the lid flopped open totally and a rush of 44 empty aluminum beer cans cascaded out in a cacophony of metal-on-wood. Had Bowie been standing in an ordinary doorway, this would have been bad enough, but he was standing in the doorway that led immediately down the wooden ramp to the dock, and, in what looked like a frantic escape attempt, or a crazed herd of aluminum lemmings, the cans bounced and clanged in a comical stampede down the ramp and towards the river.

Of course there were people there. Of course they were stunned. Richie and Danny Mac whirled and stood speechless. Boathouse Bob stood speechless. For a split second nobody moved.

Bowie looked calmly down at the vacated cooler, then up at us, and said in his typical calm, dry voice “That’ll be \$50, please.”

So much for good behavior. We all burst out laughing, and went out to fetch the wayward cans. We retrieved them all, got our deposit back, didn’t get fined, and never stopped laughing till we were well on our way home.

So, that was the type of frolic and disaster that I had equated with canoeing. No work, and you end up wet.

Well, the Algonquin trips were far from that. Portaging had yet to really sink in to me yet when we met Elmo. We had paddled for maybe an hour or so, and had only walked one trivial portage. I was taken aback by that. [“You mean you have to get out and *carry* the canoe?? WTF??”]

We were just about to settle back in our canoes and resume our excellent adventure, when a somewhat bent and thoroughly grumpy codger pulled up to shore. It was obvious that he was a many-time veteran of such outings. One of us greeted him jovially, and he grunted in reply. We commented on his being solo, and he snorted some brief retort, obviously viewing us with disdain as uninitiated dweebs. As one final gesture of cordiality, we asked him if he had the time.

*Do you mean that out of the four of you, you don't have a **watch**??*

We began to explain our watch-less week plan, but he cut us off in mid-sentence.

*Might I suggest that's a good way to get yerself **KILLED**??*

We couldn't help but laugh at his joke, but to Elmo, this was no joke.

You wait and see! You think it's all nothin'. You'll be out there figurin' you can make one more lake, and then the storm comes up, and you're done for.

He was practically snarling when he finished, and his eyes radiated hatred. We thought it best just to get in our canoes, and put some distance between us and this wilderness-crazed whacko.

He grabbed his stuff, too, and stomped off up the trail. As we shoved off, our shock at being so harshly rebuked wore off and we began to express our more characteristic vitriol. Dash, always quick with appropriate terms and labels, immediately nicknamed him Elmo, just because it seemed like such a fitting name for such a cranky coot. We began to get a little louder as we left shore. Soon, we were practically shouting barbs at him through the forest:

"No wonder you're out here alone, Elmo, an *asshole* like you can't possibly have any *friends*!!"

"How is a *watch* going to keep a *storm* away, you *idiot*!!"

And other such cheery exclamations.

But Elmo, thankfully, was nothing but an oft-derided memory by The Day That Time Stood Still. When we awoke that day, the sky was a blank, slate gray. No definition to any of the clouds, and no change in brightness from east to west. I might have been the last to arise. Sunrise was probably about 6:30 or so, so we deduced it was after that, but it could have been noon too.

Other canoeists paddled past our site after we had been up for a while. We waved at them, figuring we would get a hint from their reply as to the time of day. "Hi!" they responded, and paddled on. No "Good morning!" or "Good afternoon!" to betray the hour.

At some point or another, naps were had by all. Yet, there was no telling how long we had napped either. Could have been two hours, could have been fifteen minutes. And we were no help to one another in that either:

How long was I just asleep?

I didn't know you were gone.

It was a totally lazy day. We didn't even speak a whole lot. Every time we would awake from a nap, somebody would open up a one-hitter, and the mental clouds would match the overhead ones. There was no wind, and the glass-like lake just reflected the gray sky and the dim shore.

We judged meal time by consensus hunger: if we were all hungry, it's lunchtime. Cribbage passed the time, as did the classic time-killer of long-lost childhood years, batting rocks into the lake with a stick (in this case, the Luckless Log – yet another use!). I bet I hit 200 small stones into that lake. Surprised it didn't fill up.

The day snailed on, and eventually the sky began to get dusky. We took that as supper time, and got industrious enough to cook the last of our food, then went to sleep.

We rose the next day to more of the same, broke camp, and paddled and portaged the final leg of our expedition. Dash and I got a bit ahead of Cliff and Ban, and we had already set off across the final lake with our crosshairs firmly on the bunkhouse at the Brent Outpost, where we had beer waiting for us in the refrigerator.

"Hey, wait for us!" Ban and Cliff called out.

"OK," we agreed, and hesitated for nearly half a second before dipping those paddles again and bee-lining for the beer. It was amazing motivation. We had been without it for a week, and it didn't bother us, but now that it was just a few thrusts away, we became consumed with consuming it. We hit shore and dashed to the bunkhouse. Sure enough, good old Jake, the keeper of the outpost, had been true to his word, and had remembered to put our brews on ice for us the night before.

We toasted our successful ordeal, and noticed by the clock on the wall that it was only 9:00 a.m. We had been up for at least three hours. And we were already drinking. Funny how much you can get done when you live by the sun, and not by nightlife.

Soooooooooooo, it was that kind of gray day as Blue Man drove me out of San Francisco. But this time I had a watch, and a clock, and a radio. And *plenty* of company on the road! Thankfully, 90% of it was heading *into* the city while I was heading out. But, my God, after prairies, and desserts, and canyons, and farmlands and slow winding coastal roads, it was amazing to see the absolute flood of

vehicles that were totally suffocating the four-lane highway on the way into the city. There was a merge of roads, and all I could see from the incoming ramp was a solid line of three-abreast cars that strung back over an overpass, and a couple of miles back. It was already 9:00, so I had to figure that a whole lot of folks were gonna be late for work that morning.

But, like I said, Frisco is a peninsula, and unless you come in from due south, you have only the bridges available to you -- no clever alternate routes, no local in-the-know side streets, just the choked bridges.

I enjoyed sailing along unencumbered by such crowds. An SF FM radio station was putting up some good tunes as we hit the bridge and outbound. An announcer reading a promo for an upcoming rock festival or something was tossing out names of bands that would be playing. Two of them struck me as especially cool band names: *Me First and the Gimme-Gimme's*, and *Noggin Bongin*.

So we – Blue Man and I – set out, at long last, for Sacramento! And, just like on Day One, nearly a fortnight before, we headed east. But, this time, it was a bit north too.