

CULLENE BRYANT

## The Exhibition

### *Grenville House*

THE NURSING HOME TRIES to offer its residents a home-like atmosphere. The administration holds to what is called the Gentle Care philosophy in order to combat institutionalism. For instance, on Friday afternoons in the kitchenette on the second floor, the ladies are invited to take afternoon tea in fine china cups. There are two cats on the premises. They sleep on the chesterfield in the TV room and, whether or not they are wanted, wander in and out of the bedrooms. In the summer months, on the patio, each of the residents plants and tends his or her own flower box. You can see their proud photos hanging beside the monthly announcements of birthdays on the bulletin board in the foyer. The pictures show the gardeners standing beside their red geraniums or purple petunias. Last year, one of the residents grew tomato plants and traded his little harvest, one at a time, for cigarettes. For all the effort staff extends to create a comfortable and hospitable setting, a prison mentality hangs over the home.

Don is one of those who escaped. He suffers from organic brain syndrome, probably brought on by alcohol abuse, and has severe bouts of depression accompanied by nightmares and sleeplessness. He had only been in Grenville House six months, when he ran away for the last time. He returned to the east side of Vancouver, at the beginning of the summer, just as the street people from as far away as Ontario and even Newfoundland arrived to lay their sleeping bags under Lions Gate Bridge, and pitch their tents in Stanley Park. There were open sores on the soles of his feet when the police brought him back.

### *Dr. Smythe's Office*

Don waited until Dr. Smythe, the psychiatrist, had settled himself firmly in the chair. Then he told him how he had run away from his home in West Vancouver. "When I graduated from high school, I asked my par-

ents if I could attend the Vancouver School of Art. My father said that I should be a lawyer like him, not a hippie. I told him I could paint murals on the walls of banks and law courts just like Chagall, but he never believed me.”

“Did you ever resolve the conflict?”

“Too many problems at home.” Don shook his head and continued his story.

After each nasty argument, Don retreated to his bedroom and drew pictures of monsters with soft bellies and spittle that flew out of their mouths. While he flipped through art books he got from the library, he’d hear his parents fight.

“Why can’t I go with you? Do you have to take Alice?”

Don had only met Alice, his father’s administrative assistant, once. She was a young, unmarried woman with blonde streaks in her hair and red polish on false nails. Doug knew from his parents fights that she accompanied his dad whenever he went on business trips to Paris or London.

“Next time, darling.” His father used his most consoling voice.

But he didn’t take Don’s mother the next time or the next. She always stayed home and cleaned the silver tea service and ordered her seats for the opera.

Though in the privacy of the bedroom, Don drew his father’s face with crossed eyes and a jagged grimace, it was a different story in the school yard. He almost swaggered when he said to his friends, “No, my dad can’t give us a lift. He’s off to Berlin this week.” One day, I’ll be an important artist and fly off to art galleries in Paris and New York. He pictured his celebrated wall-painting adorning the foyer of a museum in, say, Amsterdam, and himself drinking champagne at the opening of his exhibition.

“You were proud of your dad, then,” Dr. Smythe said.

“I’m just as smart as him.”

### *Robson High School*

Miss McCarthy, the art teacher, discovered Don’s only talent. “If you can draw circles, straight lines and dots, you can do art,” she said. With her encouragement, he learned that he could do much more than render simple geometric patterns. He had an eye for flamboyant colour, rounded shapes and perspective. Under her guidance, Don discovered the whimsy of Chagall: lovers floating through space, an orange and a yellow bird flying over the rooftops, a blue cow holding a pink sunshade under the warm glow of the sun. None of this seemed surreal to Don, but instead the way the world should be: a vivid, voluptuous, dream.

Perhaps he felt a certain kinship for Miss McCarthy. “She has just about as much bad luck as I do.” He remembered how he put a dent in his dad’s convertible and failed to make the soccer team. The school had a Friday-night club, a sock hop that Don attended, not because he was a particularly good dancer, but because he liked to look at the girls as their skirts swung high above their saddle shoes when they twirled under their partners’ arms. One Friday Miss McCarthy showed up with a man, just before the evening ended, and they danced cheek-to-cheek. Her haircut was called an Italian Boy, short and brushed straight back. She had buck teeth that slightly parted her lips when she smiled so that, as she pressed her face against her partner’s, drool appeared and slid down the left side of her chin. She was drunk. The next morning, when the children passed her in the halls, they hiccupped loudly. But Don looked her straight in the eye and smiled, just to let her know, you’re okay with me. All that year she continued to coach and encourage him, but the next September, when school began, she was gone.

### *The Art Therapy Room*

It was Dana who started Don back on his artistic career. They had known each other on the streets. She took him in a few times when the shelters were full and he was drenched in the winter rain. If she had given a guy a blow job that afternoon and made fifty bucks, they could order up a pizza and a couple of bottles of wine.

“Who taught you to draw?” she asked.

“Miss McCarthy, my art teacher in high school. It was the only thing I was good at.”

“Do you paint nudes? If you need a model, I don’t mind.” Her hair fell over her face as she spoke.

“Landscapes, still-life. I do it all.” He noticed, as if for the first time, her arms were as thin as the silver sugar tongs the ladies used on Friday afternoons and her shoulders rounded and fragile as the china teacups they fondled.

They got Jack, the resident who makes animal sounds when he gets excited, to jimmy the lock of the art room door. “You’re a rat tonight,” said Don. “You can only scratch. No other noise.”

Dana undressed without ceremony and wrapped an old blue bath towel around her thighs. She lowered her head and allowed him only the profile of her figure. Don spent two nights working by the light of the moon, frantically transforming the woman into his version of Venus de Milo. Her head, disconnected from her body, floated near the moon and her hair streamed out nearly covering her breasts that looked like twin suns

rising. When he was finished, he presented her with the painting. A smile flickered across her face as she carefully held the corners of the paper away from her body so that the colours would not smear. In that moment, he knew what he must do. He began painting feverishly. He used up all the oil paints and acrylics and all the art paper stored in the supplies closet.

“Don, we have a limited budget,” the art therapist said. She gave him blocks of wood and cardboard to work on and he was reduced to pastels and finally crayons. But he kept up the frenzy of creation.

### *The Chapel*

Chaplain D’Arcy, a retired Anglican priest, brought Communion to the residents. A jovial man with a ruddy complexion, he had worked with the Inuit and taught part time at the Vancouver School of Theology. The residents gathered in a group and intoned the old hymns: “Jesus Loves Me” or “Amazing Grace” as he strummed his guitar. If a particularly cheerful mood struck one of them, they sang out Christmas carols. Don would stop pacing and stand at the edge of the circle for a few moments. If Dana was there he would remind her that she had left her coffee behind on the shelf of the kitchenette, or on top of the TV. He waited until she had swallowed the wafer and then the two of them would wander off, leaving the other residents to pray or sing.

As part of the philosophy of Gentle Care, staff was encouraged to share personal moments with their “family at the home.” At the Christmas party some of the staff brought their children. Many of the residents were cut off from their relatives because of past behaviour or perhaps because of the stigma of mental illness. They delighted in the toddlers who would consent to sit on their laps while the magician performed, or play tag around the chairs and tables. No one seemed to care if they upset the cookie tray or spilled a cup of hot chocolate over the white table cloth. So it was when Chaplain D’Arcy’s daughter, Jocelyn, flew out from Newfoundland with her husband to have her baby, Laura, baptized by her own grandfather; it seemed perfectly natural to invite his little family to meet the residents.

Chaplain D’Arcy introduced the young parents as they joined the circle of residents. “On Sunday, Laura was baptized and I thought today you might like to give her your blessing.” To Don, Laura looked like those little china dolls he had seen in antique shops. The priest cradled her in his arms, as he passed her in front of each of the residents. One by one they reached out their hands and touched her brow or her shoulder.

“May she remain pure and clean,” said Dana.

“Health and happiness,” Jack said from his wheel chair. Then he barked like a seal.

Don broke into the circle. “May she be a great success.” He raised his right hand over her, not daring to touch the soft little skull. He was thinking of his father, who travelled the world with a pretty woman on his arm. Then suddenly, he changed his mind and raised his left hand over her and said, “May she grow up to be beautiful and create beauty wherever she goes.” The chaplain passed on to the next person. Abruptly, Don left the group, ran to the elevator and pressed the button. Built to accommodate walkers and wheel chairs, it moved slowly; Don wished he could take the stairs, but the stairwells were locked to keep the residents in. At last the elevator rumbled down, and he stepped through the slowly opening door and pressed the button. Then he rushed to the art room. His latest painting had been a picture of a bunny rabbit jumping over a half moon. A teddy bear with reindeer horns on the top of his head watched while he ate a strawberry ice cream cone. Don tucked his creation under his arm and arrived just at the end of the hour, as the priest and his congregation finished the Lord’s Prayer.

“I want to present this to Laura,” Don said. He hurried awkwardly into the middle of the circle. “From all of us.”

Jocelyn took the painting from him, “Oh it’s the cow . . . er, I mean the rabbit, jumping over the moon.” With a squeal of delight, Laura reached out to touch the picture.

“Look at that,” said Jocelyn. “She loves it.”

Don beamed and took Laura’s little hand and kissed it.

### *The Foyer*

A week or so later, a thank you note arrived in the mail from Jocelyn, with a picture enclosed. Laura, still in her christening gown, is held in her mother’s lap and her father stands protectively beside his wife, a hand on her shoulder. Above them hangs the painting. Don pinned the letter and the picture of the little family on to the bulletin board beside the birthday announcements and photos of potted plants.

Everyone, even the Recreation Director, was pleased. She commissioned Don to make another for the home. “Why don’t you display some of your other pieces, too? You know, the charcoal sketches and the pastels?”

The tableau was hung on the day of a fundraiser. A yellow field of sunflowers lifts its face to a purple sky where an eagle or some sort of large bird flies. Is it a vulture? Its shadow darkens one corner of the scene and turns the flowers to orange and tan. Yet, even though the bird suggests foreboding, it is a flamboyant green. It was hung just as the board members, relatives and friends, and a few politicians made their way from the parking lot to the foyer. Don watched them file past the refreshment stand

and the statue of Lord Grenville and pause for a moment to look at his masterpiece. Somewhere in the crowd, he noticed a felt green hat, the one that Miss McCarthy wore every September when school started, and the frost carpeted the grass. He went to move towards her and call her name, and then the hat seemed to melt into the medley of coloured dresses and business suits. Still, he felt she was there, somewhere in the milieu and the cacophony of clicking high-heeled shoes and chattering voices.

“Smile.” Dana’s camera flashed.

Don posed beside his colourful canvas and raised a glass of grape juice, as if responding to a toast.