

By Katie Scarvey

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Meeting my own Mr. Kurtz



When I began to plan a short trip to Wilmington with photographer Jon Lakey, I put the Cape Fear Serpentarium on my list of features to pursue, largely because I was hoping to meet the man behind it.

I'd read a fascinating story about Dean Ripa by a great writer named Wendy Brenner in Oxford American magazine more than a year earlier. Typically, things I read fly in and out of my consciousness at warp speed, since I have what might be described as a significant case of literary amnesia. But I never forgot the profile of Dean, who seemed plucked out of an adventure movie.

I found an e-mail address for him on the Internet and decided to throw out an interview request. Since I have a little Eeyore streak, I didn't think something I wanted so badly would ever work out, so I was shocked when he replied: "Sure."

The ease of it all gave me pause and made me wonder how many other dream interviews could be had by simply requesting them.

When Jon and I approached the serpentarium, I imagined I was heading into the heart of darkness to meet my very own Mr. Kurtz. OK, so it was gentrified downtown Wilmington.

You don't encounter many people who live life completely on their own terms, the way Dean seems to have done from a very young age. Do you like snakes? Go catch some and sneak 'em into your parents' house. Hate high school? Drop out. Want to study in Italy with a painter you admire? Just ask. Want to meet William Burroughs? Write him a letter and send him a draft of your work. Want to travel the world? Marry exotic women? Just do it. And if some venom finds its way into your bloodstream along the way, get over it, and don't hold it against the snakes.

I had fun talking to Dean, who is surprisingly unguarded as an interview subject. I'm not sure how we got on the subject, but we swapped stories about our brushes with criminally crazy people who are now locked up. I told him the story of a kid I used to play with at my grandmother's house named Tommy (now Tammy), who committed an act so outrageous I wouldn't dare describe it here. Dean liked my gory tidbit and matched it with his own, telling me about a guy he knew (with the unlikely name of Scott Pickles) who killed his entire family.

As Dean showed me his creepy -- but masterfully executed -- paintings hanging in his apartment over the serpentarium, I told him they struck me as the sort of art one might expect of the Scott Pickleses of the world. His response: "If Scott Pickles had made art like this, he wouldn't have had to kill anyone." After seeing Dean's paintings, it was hard to reconcile them as coming from the same guy who sings not death metal but Sinatra ballads -- and quite beautifully.

I like the fact that Dean isn't itching to write about his own exploits. In this day and age when so many writers consider every mundane aspect of their lives worthy of sharing, it's refreshing that he considers his own life boring and would rather write fiction.

I wouldn't be surprised if my old playmate Tommy/Tammy showed up as a character in one of Dean's yet-to-be written novels.

When I asked him about the time he thought he was going to die after a particularly nasty bushmaster bite, he surprised me by saying he wasn't prepared. After a lifelong flirtation with death, he lay there regretting plenty of things, he said.

One reason I'd like to read his autobiography, if he can be cajoled into writing it, is to discover what those regrets are.

On the way out of his apartment, I noticed a machete rolled up in a carpet by the door. I think I saw some drops of dried blood, but I'm not sure and I didn't ask.

I hope there's a story behind it that I'll hear another time.

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