



Neverland

*Sometimes it's hard
To be a boatman....*

by Earl Perry
drawing by Ellen Tibbetts

It was a microkid river trip, and the toddlers were mobbing me. Swarms of toddlers. I felt like a male lowland gorilla with offspring draped all over him. Up in the camp, away from the beach area, were the single mommies: judges and attorneys, doctors, executives, engineers. Power women. In my delusion I thought they had sent their young down to the beach to get them out of the way while they broke camp. But the single mommies knew their business. The flood of the toddlers was to soften me up.

It worked. Draped with leis and lianas and garlands of kids, orchids and bromeliads of kids, feeling the way a tree does when the painted buntings hold a conventicle in it, I had a surge of sentiment. It was as if a Rakshasa had suddenly mastered me; I was dumbfounded to find my mouth open, and hear the fatal words slip out:

You know, sometimes I feel like having a long-term committed relationship.

It didn't seem very loud, but then it didn't need to *be* very loud.

The toddlers continued:

Westle Ian. Big westle now!

Shoulder-wide. Kaila-wild-couch-bouncer wide on shoulders, Ur-rul!

Url. Horsey-ride. Horsey.

Earth Creature! Earth Creature. Roar! Get the Earth Creature!

The toddlers continued, but the single mommies did not. In an instant, their ears had pricked up. They milled about for only a moment. Soon they headed my way.

Hell, I thought, hoisting a squealing toddler upside down by her ankle, *I can Einstein them easily enough*. I braced myself for the recoil,

and called, *I'm sorry. I just don't feel the way I used to. I need more time. I need more space. I need more space-and-time.*

One of the younger single mommies flared off. But imagine my horror when the older, more experienced single mommies kept coming. Eyes wide, ears flapped forward, they were screaming,

Long-term committed relationship!

For the first time, I felt a spasm of ... unease. Almost, of fright. Einsteining had never failed to stop them before. I parted the screen of toddlers and called,

Actually, my feelings have changed. Friendship. I'm really only interested in Friendship.

That ought to stop them, I told myself, *Right in their tracks*. But I was wrong, very wrong. On they came. Part of our sandcastle was collapsing from the vibrations set up by the thunder of their feet. *Friendship*, I shouted desperately. *Platonic Friendship*.

On they came, trumpeting,

Long-term committed relationship!

It was appalling, but beautiful; so must it be when the waters of the bay recede, and the tsunami gathers itself out in the open ocean, and rolls in toward the unravaged shore.

I knew terror.

My god! Friendship didn't work. O my god!

I fell back a few steps, wading through the clinging mass of toddlers adhering to my shins and thighs. Too late I realized it was a La Brea Tar Pit of toddlers. Flight was impossible.

I reloaded and screamed,

Sex. Meaningless, impersonal sex. That's all I want. That's all I care about. I'm too shallow for you. Back furies, back harridans, back viragos, back succubae, back potential committed life-partners willing to hold space for one another's soul quests. Nothing but meaningless sex.

Most of them dropped. But incredibly, two came on, screaming their battle cry:

He'll change, I know he'll change, once he realizes how much he loves me.

The blood froze in my veins, and where my hair isn't tried to stand on end. They were almost on top of me. They were so close I could see their breasts heaving. One last chance: panic-stricken, I loaded and locked on my last round.

I screamed,

Meaningless, impersonal sex, and I won't use condoms. Never have!

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The last two were down. The one within arm's reach was my favorite. I had talked with her a lot; she was humorous and direct. She did yoga and rode a mountain bike. I saw the breasts welling tautly from the sleek bathing suit. I saw the long singing curves of her thighs, leading upward....

I sat down, shaking from adrenaline and the backwash of terror. There was sadness.

I could touch her, I thought. She's that close. Just sort of reach out. I mean, it's a trap, an obvious trap, any fool can see that. It Looks like a trap. It Smells like a trap. It smells ... good. It's just that I wonder, how does this kind of trap Feel?

I steeled myself. I turned to the toddlers and said,

Tiger hunting. Hana, you're the mahout.

I set her on my neck and shoulders, explained that a well-trained elephant was guided by the pressure of the knees only, and emplaced a whole row of heavily-armed toddlers in the howdah on my back. I lumbered off on all fours into the tamarisk jungles of the Colorado River, trying to keep the toddlers balanced, hunting the shadowy and elusive chasm tiger, *Felis tigris abyssus*.

Boy, I told myself as I left the single mommies behind, You're gettin' half a step slow for this kind of work. Don't never try that move again. I looked back. I saw my favorite of the single mommies, again. She looked ... good. She looked ... very good. I caught myself wondering, How does this kind of trap ... Taste? but then the jungle of the river swallowed me.