

## RALPH

By M.Vidakovich

My name is Ralph. I'm the Ice Cream Man. I'd give you my last name but, well, that could open up a whole big can of worms in some places. Besides, "ralph", in small letters, is the name on all the big time artwork I've done. But, that story comes later.

These days, I cruise up and down suburban streets along the north side of Lexington, Kentucky. The neighborhoods I go through all look like they're dotted in pink and green and purple when those kids are home from school or on summer vacation. I like color and I notice it everywhere I go. Some say I got an eye for it.

Whether they're running or riding along side my truck or if they're takin' a breather from all that playing and jumping and waving from the front yards, you'll see it. There's all those pink bicycles, green bicycle helmets, those crazy lookin' purple croc sandals, magenta tee shirts and froggy green socks. The green and purple running shoes and pink shorts. You can also see it on the pink Tinkerbell book-bags, purple and green Transformer wallets, and tiny, shiny pink plastic purses. Then there's the purple and green

notebooks, Slurpee green raincoats, the Hel-lo Kitty stuff, and the green and purple razor scooters. I'm guessing that a view from the air would make the neighborhood look like a spilled box of Ike n' Mikes candies when I'm driving by. See? People always told me I got an artistic eye.

I'm on my third job since I finally got to shuck that ninety day orange prison tux. It happened through what I guess you'd call the *graciousness* of the courts. But really, it had more to do with the *just savvy enough* skills of my court appointed lawyer. He used to belong to a decent firm, but got cut loose because he went drunk drivin' one night and plowed into some rich family and sent three of them into the hospital. Anyway, long story short, he barely escaped bein' disbarred. And then, there he was, representing me.

The kids love the pictures of the treats that are up there all over the van. This makes me proud. Why? Because I painted all of them. See, the big companies like Good Humor, they just use decals now. But not me, I paint 'em on there myself. You got your Creamsicles side by side, or rather, you've got the orange Creamsicle slightly in front of the raspberry, for, you know, depth. I originally had the raspberry in front but painted over it, because compositionally speaking, it overwhelmed the orange due to

its color depth. Then, there's the nutty bars. Those are arranged sort of in my "coming out of a tunnel" look, you know? "Hyper-perspective" they call it. Those were real fun to paint because you can get like Monet or even Pollack with them; lots of crazy colored swipes and dots and even drips. The rainbow pops were almost too easy. The Popsicles? They could be tricky, if you weren't careful. They could end up looking like weird shaped balloons. I had to repaint the ice cream sandwiches a few times because they looked like something from a mattress warehouse ad you might see in the papers.

You gotta watch it with this stuff.

I even did the lettering. It's all funky lookin', but it's better than usin' stencils, which is what one of my competitors does. His truck don't look like much fun. Mine does. And besides, it makes me proud, or, prouder than me just being an ice cream man, driving someone else's truck.

The kids fall into two camps. One group that orders the same thing every time, and the kids that'll put in a different order on each visit. The girls, I've found, are more adventurous. The boys? They like the same thing all the time. Like Josh and his double chocolate nutty bar. That's his order. Three, sometimes four times a week.

"Aren't all those bars makin' you nutty?" I'd say to him as he'd grab it out of my hand. He never laughed. Shit, I didn't care.

I always hated that clown music that you hear coming out of those trucks as they make their entrance into the neighborhood. It starts out all faint at first. Then, it gets louder and louder as it finally goes by your house. To the kids though, that music was better than their favorite song on the radio. But I'm betting the adults hated that music as much as I did. At least it seemed that way. I'd drive by and some guy cleaning out his garage would turn and shake his head at me as I'd go by. One time, I saw a woman holding her ears. She just stood there and frowned while she waited for her little girl to buy two rainbow pops; one for her and one for her little sister.

"I love that song" the little girl giggled as "Turkey In The Straw" played on the speaker. Next thing I knew, that woman leaned in and grabbed her daughter as she then dragged her in the house and slammed the door.

So I figured I'd try somthin' different. Well not so much different, but.... what do they call it?

Retro.

I got some old fashioned bells that I attached to the

top of the windshield on the outside, just like the old Good Humor trucks. The grown-ups still gave me shitty looks, but they stopped covering their ears, at least. Problem was, the kids didn't respond real well to the bells. So, I put the damn clown music back on.

Shit man, I didn't care.

So, like I said, I used to make artwork. Like, real artwork, I guess. I had my own studio up in New York. I kid you not. I grew up in Northeast Kentucky. I was never much fit for anything else aside from fixin' lawn mowers n' snow blowers, or doing minor repairs on cars. Who's that dude in the movies? Slingblade? Yeah. That's me. But hell, we gotta lot of Slingblades out where I come from. So, after awhile, during down time, if there wasn't any repair money comin' in, I'd paint, draw pictures. I don't know. It just happened. After awhile, I just sorta felt this tingling in my fingers if I sat around too long, like my hands were tellin' me they gotta do something. I'd also make stuff out of cans, lots of wood, tin, balsa, sheet metal, washers, car bondo, tree bark, plastic, horse tail hair a lot of other shit. I always had a ton of weird-ass junk layin' around. I'd come up with stuff like a fat, crazy looking woman pushing a stroller, or a guy sittin' on a porch drinkin' out

of a paper bag. You know, stuff I'd see there in my world, I guess. I did this one piece that was made outta wood, wire, cloth, a tin can for the head, and real damn human hair. It was this good lookin' teenage cashier at Wal-Mart I'd see once in awhile. I even gave it to her, though nothing ever came out of it like I hoped. One of my favorites was of a guy getting handcuffed by two cops as he stood, chin down on the roof of a Kentucky State cruiser. Those were all my 3-D pieces. Or as they said in the catalog, "*Found object assemblage.*"

Shit, I didn't care. Call 'em what you want. Just show me the fuckin' money. Am I right, or am I right?

The paintings I did were these pictures that I made on scrap wood. I used any kind of hardware store paint that I had layin' around the shed. They were pictures of people talking with lots of words around them. Sometimes, the words would end up swirling around the picture like a wound up rope if the person had a lot to say. Or I guess, if I had a lot to say. Some chick up in New York said something about the words lookin' like they were comin' "*out of a roiling, personal vortex*", whatever the hell that means. I told her I just needed to find a way to fit all that thinkin' into the picture. She didn't believe me. Sometimes, the people in

the pictures would be talking to each other. Other times, they'd be lookin' right at you as they talked. They'd talk about things on their minds, or strange nightmares, religious stuff. I'd use people I knew, like this minister up from the holler. But with the words though, I'd just sort of let my mind go. I guess I'd just use it as an excuse to talk off the top of my head like I do when I got some whiskey or beer in me.

Some man from New York City came out a few years ago. Seems as though some woman writer he knew was driving through the south looking for what I guess are "folk artists" they call 'em. He saw some of my stuff propped up on the small front porch. He was just smiling as he looked around and then he said he'd heard about guys like me down here in the Kentucky hills, and Tennessee, or down in Alabama. He called us "Folk" artists. I didn't know what the hell he was talking about. This guy went on to say that me and him could make lots of money together. So, he talked me into giving him a bunch of my stuff for some cash and a few cases of decent whiskey, sort of as an up front payment.

"Shit man, take 'em," I said as I stacked all that Jim Beam inside. I didn't care.

And I'll be damned if he didn't sell all of 'em. I made

something like ninety five thousand bucks! Well, one thing led to another, and he told me that if I went up there to New York, I could make more. Lots more. He said that I'd have access to things that'd make me a better artist, maybe even go to Art School. Shit, I'm crazy, been told so many times, so, off I went.

Since the divorce, I've been pretty much alone anyway. Hell, I at least got to keep the trailer. Kim hated livin' there, which never surprised me. Maybe if she saw that porch I added with all my stuff on it, she'd think different. Kim, as you could probably guess, is my ex-wife. We grew up together. We'd known each other since kindergarten. But as time went on, she started to go her way and I'd go mine.

You know, up in our heads?

That kind of problem?

Just not talking or even knowin' each other anymore? Maybe all that talkin' in those paintings is shit I should have said to Kim. Or her to me.

I don't know.

Anyway, this New York guy, named Soren, sets me up in a run down place he owns, right above his gallery. The gallery's all clean and everything. But my space has a lot of roaches and flies. He'd say;



"Hey, this is New York, could be a lot worse."

But, shit, I'm from the Kentucky hills, so I didn't much care, you know? I had a muskrat somehow get up in my bed one nights so a few rats and bugs ain't shit. I started scavenging the streets, like Soren suggested. I'd go up to Brooklyn and the... Bronx?... I think they call it? Lot's of good junk in both places, almost as good as Kentucky. Bronx was a little better overall. I rode those subways for the first time with my pull cart. Hell, if I didn't fit right in 'cause this place is all just a bunch of characters runnin' around. It's like Kentucky without the mud and the snakes.

So I put together about twenty five or thirty paintings and "whatnots", which is what I'd call the "assemblage" pieces. I put 'em together pretty quick. I mean, it was easy when you got the money and you're not struggling every day just to stay alive. Plus, there's just junk everywhere around here. So now, I'm pretty excited. I figured I'm looking at maybe another ninety five thousand bucks! I go down and tell Soren about my stuff being all done and he says that I gotta make an appointment. He says he'll "pencil me in" for that Friday. Soren comes in Friday about six PM, and he's walking around real quick. Then, he'd slow down, looking at each piece two or three times. He's muttering

under his breath and shaking his head, and I can't tell if he's happy or pissed.

"Mmmm....mmm.....mmmmmmm." He keeps saying with his hands in his pockets. He must have circled that room, steppin' over beer cans and everything, about four times, maybe five. "C'mon man," I'm thinkin', "Let's make some hay up in here."

Finally, he unfolds his arms and from across the room, he says, "I'm sorry, these are....just not the same."

"Same as what?" I asked, sucking down another beer.

"I'm just not feeling these, you know?, like I did with the work I saw in Kentucky."

"Work??" I sort of snorted. "You call doin' this shit work?" This sort of set him back.

"Well,..yes" he said.

I walked a few steps forward.

"Look at me Jack. I'm half in the bag, have been since I been up here an' you call this workin'?" I sort of shook my head as I stepped back.

"Well, in any event, he says, "I just..."

Then he looks around one more time.

"I just can't do business with these. These... just won't do, I'm sorry."

I polished off the beer, tossed the can across the room and started to walk toward him.

"Cause you ain't .....*feelin' it*, right?" I sort of let the "feelin'" part drag out.

"Yes, that's right." he said.

"So, that means..... I stay here, and you give me money to make more stuff. Somethin' you'll like, right?" He stands stock still, looking at me.

"No. No, that's not what I mean at all." I go to crack open another beer and then I slowly walk toward him.

"So, what? You puttin' me out on the street now, is that it?" I'm hoping the sight of a drunk, pissed off hillbilly will get him to think again, but he just stands in one place. Real still.

"Look, I don't know where you think you are, but it sure as hell isn't East Kentucky, and things work differently up here." Soren said. "This is strictly business and "Putting you out on the street" sounds a little harsh, but, yes, you're going to have to leave."

I take a final long drag off of my cigarette and flick it on the dirty floor and say, "You're gonna have to make me leave." He stared for a long while as I just smiled right at him. Then he left.

So, days went on which then turned into weeks. Hell, I still had a lot of money left from all those sales this guy made. But I'd pretty much had it with the whole "workin'" at art part of it.

Up here anyway.

So I just decided to enjoy the "Big Apple" while I waited for this pussy to throw me out. I could have easily paid to stay. But Soren didn't want me there and that pissed me off. Besides, that "critique" of my "work" as he called it, got me riled enough to where I'd had it with him too. So I figured I'd mess with him good. Yeah man, I started having these "bum parties". Y'know? I'd invite all my like minded New York friends from the street. Seemed we had a lot in common. Turns out there's not much difference between a holler in East Kentucky and an alley in the Bronx or an underground hideaway in Brooklyn.

The women were a *hell* of a lot finer up here too, let me tell you. And the best thing? These guys were a lot smarter than I thought; at least about knowin' their rights.

"Don't give him no rent Ralphie. That dude. They ain't nothin' he can do 'bout makin you go, for at least three

months, whether y'all pay or not." my friend Ajay told me.

"I don't care," I said as I picked up one of my three dimensional Whatnots and threw it full force into the heavy concrete wall, smashin' the hell out of it.

"This hillbilly ain't goin *no-whares!*" I yelled. Ajay and his girl Geneva and the rest of my "crew" as Ajay called them, started laughing their asses off. Then Kendra, the gal I'd been seeing, picked one up and gave it a good toss herself, smashing the shit out of it, as we all laughed even harder. This really got the party rockin'. We were just getting started too, being that it was only about six pm.

So I gave Demitrius three twenties and had him go get enough liquor for round two. "*We gonna light this shit up tonight!*" I yelled as everybody made whoop-whoop sounds, shaking their fists in the air as I flipped on that Bose Wave player I bought the week before reeeel loud. The liquor store was just downstairs so Demetrius was back in no time. We all used the fire escape door that Soren gave me a key to so his clientele wouldn't have to see me come in and out of his gallery. And the key still worked 'cause like Ajay said, he can't change the locks until we're legally evicted; one hundred and twenty days or something like that. So there we were, all dancing to the music. It sounded like

that Porto Reekan shit. Hell,...I didn't care. I had Kendra around the ass as she was pouring Jim Beam down my throat like we just won the Super Bowl or somethin'.

Finally, around eight or so, there was a loud banging at the metal door. Kendra stepped aside as Soren walked in wearing his long coat, holding a briefcase. Everybody got a little quiet, and a few even went to go down the fire escape, until I said;

"Naw, naw, git back here y'all, party's still on."

Soren slowly looked around at the bottles, the stubbed out cigarette butts, and the fast food cartons. He smelled the dope, putting his nose even further up in the air than usual. Then, Ajay covered his mouth from laughin' while Soren stared at a thong panty layin' by my big mattress. And then.... he saw all the smashed artwork in pieces on the floor.

"This...." he said waving his hand toward the smashed artwork, "Is my property that you're throwing around and vandalizing." I just snorted as I held the Jim Beam and said, "Like shit it is."

He walks closer and stares me right in the eye. He is pissed now, I gotta give that to him.

"You are here ill-egally! YOU have NO rights. I OWN you

Ralph."

"OOOOhhhhhh" and other fake like fearsome reactions starts coming up from the others as we all look at each other, laughin' our fool asses off. Finally, I look at him and say, "Well then...why don't you just come over here and claim what you own muthafucka"

"Yeeeeauh,, go git his ass!" I'm hearing from the crowd. Then I look at Soren and I say,

"Naw, you know, what? I'm gonna deliver my ass; the one that you so rightly own, straight to you. How's that sound?" The crowd goes nuts now as I walk toward Soren with about a third of one of the now busted "whatnots" in my hand. I'm going right at him. I got him on the floor as I'm holding the piece over him.

"Awhile back, you looked at this an' said you wasn't "feelin' it. Right"?, Let's see if you're feelin' it now."

ONE YEAR LATER..

Court costs took up quite a chunk of what I had left. But like I said, that lawyer at least somehow got me out of paying any of Soren's hospital bills. Hell, the guy's rich; just me gettin' out of his building and out of New York smoothed things over a bit; smoothed things over a lot,

actually. Shit, believe me, he don't wanna see me again for any reason, we both knew that. So, I was left with enough money to get back down south and outta that Kentucky holler and get me a manufactured home here outside Lexington a mile or so.

And now, I got this Ice Cream truck too. And looking at the Cremesicles and Blow Pops and Sandwiches there in 3-D perspective on the truck, hell, I got some talent. I'm a pretty good artist.... for a dumb ol' redneck..... so long as you don't push me.

THE END