

By JEFF DAY

The world will end like this island, not with a whimper or a bang, but with a thousand mosquitos and a hundred thorns.

Back at home, the mail is piling up. "Join the Malden Rand Diners Club," it says. "Why are the library books overdue," and "listen, Jack, where's the car payment, anyway?" The world could not possibly end in time.

There is no night sky on the island and no stars — only the day-glo pink of nearby street lights to make the world safe for democracy.

And friends are leaving. Goodbye to them. Be careful.

And if, further downstream, towards Trenton, the islands are more hospitable, it is through no fault of their own. They are too small to be wild.

BUT NOT Rotary Island. There are 33 acres, here, abandoned, bridgeless, forgotten. The north end crowds the Reading Railroad Bridge, near the Trenton Country Club. The south end, half an undeveloped mile later, crowds nothing, only riffles, water and trees.

1 p.m. Five Great Blue Heron sweep from the island's tree tops, silently, powerfully. They glide for the Pennsylvania shore, looking for a tree big enough to hold them. But they only circle, without landing, and move on.

3:30 p.m. Deer tracks at the east end of the island. No other sign of deer.

7:30 p.m. Six Great Egrets at the north end. They are large white birds — herons — with long legs for wading. They take off in unison, startled by a noise in the woods and fly in large slow circles above hundreds of ducks, geese and gulls.

And then it is evening. For the first time in months, things are good again. The air is cool; the sun is setting red to the north and west. The rest of the world watches neon: their blue jeans fade back to nature.

You could see the others from here, only a few yards across the river, driving down River Road.

It would rain later on, and they would be driving back, returning from dinners, movies and bars. The tires would whine on wet cement and they would be listening to the radio, and wondering if it was too late to start all over again.

And then sleep brings a dream of John McPhee, author and outdoorsman, who visits the island.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demands.

Relax, John, it is only a dream.

A DREAM: 33 acres of land, sitting in the city of Trenton, 2,800 feet long, and 500 feet wide at its broadest. There are no buildings, and no access, except by boat. The only hint of other dreams is at the southernmost end, below the spot where the river cuts the island in two: A rope swing, and a makeshift tree house.

Rotary Island, 1889. The Park Island Canoe Association bought the island, and its members began to put up cottages. There was a spot on one

side of the island called "The slums," where the bachelors put up their tents. And there was a big stone house in the center of the island, which served as a club house.

It had been farm land before that, and the stone house had been built by the island's first owners, the Keelers. They all moved out with time, all except George, the last of them to live on the island. He didn't like people much, and stayed to himself, a hermit on an island, watching the birds and animals.

He was probably right. People are not to be trusted.

Even the Canoe Island Association lost interest in the island, after about 25 years. It was 1918, and canoes were no longer the big thing. Cars were.

They sold the island to the Rotary, which according to the deed, got not only the land but "the music of water rippling over the rocks, the gorgeous sunsets, the beautiful moonlights, the mulberries and apples nearby, the ever cool summer nights, the shade of the big trees and all the pleasure appertaining and belonging to camp life on the island."

The sale price: One rose. And \$10,000.

There would be other dreams, too. Summer camps for kids. Skyscrapers. City Parks. Resorts.

ALL OF THEM are gone now. The summer camp was actually built, only to be washed away in the flood

of 1955. The final building — a picnic pavilion — was burned down by kids on a camping trip in 1962.

Others dreams never made it. When flood took the buildings, the Rotary offered it to the City of Trenton \$33,750, for use as a city park.

Then a group of investors offered \$40,000 and announced plans for a \$5.5 million development, which would include high rise apartments, a marina and a bridge.

Even the state highway department had plans for the island. In need of fill dirt for the Route 29 extension, they offered to tear the island down.

Then a group of investors bought it at a price of \$67,600, renamed it Northwind Island and announced plans to build a resort there.

But the island always prevailed.

The "Northwind" people could never interest anyone in developing the island. The skyscraper investors couldn't get the city to put in sewage lines. And the city decided they didn't want to pay \$33,000 for a chunk of land in the middle of the river. They offered to take it for nothing.

The land finally went to the state, under the Green Acres Program, and became part of Washington Crossing State Park.

So the herons started returning, and the egrets. And the flowers started growing. Blue Eyed Marys and Beggars Ticks. Grape vines clogged the island, climbing maples and clogging the few pathways that remained.

And the north end of the island filled with flotsam and jetsam, witness to the floods that still cover this end of the island, and to the campers who have yet to learn common decency to nature.

A WHIPPED cream can. A tarp. The ashes of a camp fire. A metal pitcher, shot with bullet holes. And beer cans. Always empty beer cans.

At the south end, there are still a few remains of a summer camp for children, which was run on the island when the Rotary owned it. There is a stone pyramid, the base for a cable ferry that once connected the camp to the mainland. There are even a few paths, but they lead nowhere and end quickly.

But mostly, there are only the herons and the egrets.

Back home, the mail continues to arrive. Friends continue to leave.

Only the Island stays. The boat drifts back toward shore, to home, and traffic, and noise, and the telephone.

Alexander Graham Bell missed his big chance. "Go away Watson," he should have said.

"Who needs it?"



Island of dreams



Photos by Greg Gendall