

Making Steven Famous

by

Dave Walker

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"One by one, they were all becoming shades. Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age."

-- *Dubliners*, "The Dead"

Prologue

Some people crave the future. They don't seem to really be there, in the moment, because their hearts are already living in that longed-for day when their dreams will become reality.

Some people live in the past. They marinate themselves in fond or terrible memories, reinventing the past until it feels so much more real than the present.

I have it twice as bad as these people do, because I suffer from both problems....

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Picture this: little Donny Love at age 4, blonde brush cut and skinny little chest, barefoot and wearing only his baggy bathing suit. It's a hot August afternoon in Hamilton, and the Love family (including 10 or 12 of the adopted family--fellow Scottish expatriates) is having a loud, jolly barbecue in the backyard.

Wee Donny is atop a turned-over garbage can, a plastic toy guitar in his hands. He strums, he croons and wails in his best Elvis impersonation, he wiggles his skinny little butt and shrills out insistently "Look at me! You guys, look at me!"

No one looks at Donny until his gyrations send him toppling off the garbage can. Then, his 3-year old neighbour toddles over to share her popsicle. As Donny's sobs subside, the family returns to their conversation and steak.

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Picture this: Donny, at 9, is frequently kept after school by Miss Donaldson because of his attempts to "take over the class with his comedy routines". Poor Miss Donaldson, the picture of decorum, is even driven to beat the air around Donny's head one day in her immense frustration. Donny gets the belt at home, but it does not quell his comic spirit.

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Now picture this: Donny Love is 11. He and his buddies, Stevie, Tony, and Vinnie, have formed a club---the Mountain Boys. They ride around on the bikes that they have carefully modified, and their adventures include more than a few of the sort of pranks that I would now whup my own kid for doing, but they are full of the thrill of being alive and young and free. Their busy blue collar parents are not of the generation that micromanages their kids' lives. The result---pure, unadulterated childhood.

Donny, who is now wiry and wears aviator-style eyeglasses, is precariously perched on top of the Marconis' 6-foot wooden fence, several of their plum tree's fruits in his hand. He crows like a rooster, thrilled with his prominence in this dangerous scenario, as old Mr. Marconi rushes angrily toward him from the tool shed, rake in hand. Giddy with laughter and victory, Donny leaps from the fence and he and his buds take off down the road on their "hogs", Donny cheekily yelling back over his shoulder at Mr. Marconi as they flee: "Fottiti!"

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Donny is 13, and he and Stevie are starting a band. They intend to model themselves after the Rolling Stones. They are confident that they have the looks and talent, after just 3 months of guitar lessons at the Eric Goldman Studio of Guitar, to take it to the top. There is some slight tension, however, when they start their first rehearsal; they both want to be the lead singer. Donny is eventually persuaded by Stevie and their friends/future roadies to take on the role of lead guitar, a la Eddie Van Halen. "A guy who can shred guitar like that is a god," Donny agrees. "Just as important as the singer!" It's just as well, because Donny really can't sing, and Stevie has got the beginnings of a really warm tenor.

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Donny is 14 and the band has got its first gig, at Melissa Southward's birthday party. Donny confidently tells everyone he knows that this is the moment that will launch them into rock'n'roll history. They are not getting paid, and they have to cram into a corner of the Southwards' rec room, but they are all high with the thrill of the moment. Donny hears the cheers and clapping of their small but enthusiastic audience as a taste of glories to come. It becomes one of the greatest memories of his life. He messes up a few chords, but he is a god, nonetheless. He even acknowledges that Steve is also a god. Donny's insecurities about their partnership finally vanish. They are going to the top together, like Eddie Van Halen and David Lee Roth, like Jimmy Page and Robert Plant.

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Donny is 17, and the band is falling apart. Too much homework, says Steve. Plus, there are girlfriends now, and they take up a lot of a guy's attention. Donny is deeply disappointed. He calls Steve up frequently, ostensibly to talk about Calculus homework, but he slips in his trademark high-pressure sales tactics, trying to convince Steve to re-form the group. Steve doesn't budge, and the two have their first really angry argument, not speaking to each other for 2 weeks.

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Here's the final picture for you: Donny is 18 and a half, with frizzy hair and slightly cooler glasses than he used to wear. He is wearing a rented tux and is sitting with his friends at Irondale's Graduation Prom. They are all buzzed on the beer they guzzled in the park before the dance, and on the thrill of the unwritten future ahead of them all.

Donny's circle of closest friends these days: Tony Valentini, Norbie Reingruber, John Pappas, and, sometimes, Steve McCartney. Secretly, Donny has not quite forgiven Steve for ending their ride on the Rock Star Express. But he can't bring himself to cut Steve out completely. Steve's just too good---at everything. The guy really has a charisma, and Donny soaks it up, like a moth flinging itself at a bright lamp.

There is a band playing, a real, adult band from the area---these guys are at least 24 or 25--and Donny is mesmerized. He dances like a maniac on the small dance floor, doing handstands, his shiny black shoes flailing dangerously close to couples dancing nearby. He is filled with the joy of the moment and allows himself to imagine his future as a brilliant rocker, his wailing guitar astounding his audiences.

His gymnastics are cut short when he hears a different voice on the mike. Steve. Singing The Beatles 'She was Just Seventeen' like an old pro, as good as any singer out there. The students are going wild, crowding up to the stage, shrieking and whistling and totally hypnotized. Donny feels like his heart has stopped. He can't make himself move forward. He's in a bubble, filled with the sound of Steve's voice, and nothing else. He will later see that he was in a kind of state of shock. He will later know that it was because he had finally seen the truth, a truth that injured him deeply: Steve was great, and Donny was not. Steve had a future in that rock'n'roll dream, and Donny did not.

And then the weirdest part of the whole surreal evening. Steve finished the song, yelled something out to the audience, sprinted backstage, and was never seen again.

Really. None of them ever saw him again. He dropped off the face of the planet.

And what made it worse for Donny was that he had heard what Steve had yelled out over the deafening sounds of the audience.

"Ya just don't get it, do ya?!"

1.

An excerpt from the first "Steven McCartney column":

...and I've never met another man who was more charismatic than Steven. At age 23, he was travelling the Silk Road through Kazakhstan on a motorcycle, one of many dangerous and remarkable treks that he took in his lifetime. As he shot over the side of an embankment, he landed smack in the middle of a hijacking. Opium traffickers were attempting to kidnap the wife and children of a local government official as they travelled by small convoy through the rocky wilderness. There were machine guns and automatic rifles drawn on all sides, with the cracks of the opening round of fire still hanging in the cold air. Steven's bike landed right on top of the trafficker's truck, startling everyone, and killing at least one of the bandits in the process. The official's guards used the distraction to their advantage, taking out three more of the thugs and sending the rest flying.

In the midst of the chaos, Steven had seen the terrified faces of the children in the Jeep window, and had sprung into action, positioning himself between the gunmen and the vehicle.

When he saw that the tides had turned and the children were safe, he tapped gently on the window of the Jeep. The woman cautiously rolled down the window. Steven grinned at the littlest of the boys in the back seat and handed the woman something, gesturing to the lad.

It was his mother's tiny gold crucifix, hanging on a chain. Then, not being one for the limelight, Steven sped off. The pattern of his life.

The president of Kazakhstan publicly declared this mysterious Westerner to be a national hero in the fight against the tyranny of the drug lords.

The locals began to refer to him as "Clint Eastwood". Too many spaghetti westerns in the local theatre, I guess.

But I'll say this: this world sure could use a lot more Clint Eastwoods like my old buddy Steven McCartney...

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Monday, September 8, 2007.

The leaves had just started to turn.

"Donny, Chamberlain wants you in his office right away."

"What?" I said, dazed, looking up from computer screen. I blinked. "Okay."

I'd been deep into writing my column and had been miles away when Meg had spoken to me. Meg Cleroux was standing over me now. My editor Bob, Chamberlain, had hired her as a student placement from McMaster University's Journalism School. She was very bright and had won the Lorne Freedman award for a series she'd written on turf wars in Hamilton between the rival Hell's Angels and The Banditos motorcycle gangs. Meg was really cute and fresh-faced, with a great figure, the kind of girl that I would have been hot for a few decades ago. Now, even in her tight t-shirts, she was just too young for me to get really excited about. I appreciated her the way a guy appreciates the sports car that he'll never be able to buy.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," she said.

"Yeah, a few actually." I shrugged. "Thanks Meg, I'll be right there."

She glided back to her desk just outside Bob's office.

Bob was, well, unique. Something of a throwback. Bob was 58 and gay as a jay, but he came from a generation that still thought that it was shameful to come out. So, Bob expended a great deal of energy and hot air asserting his alter ego : Macho Man. I honestly think that he modeled his work persona around J. Jonah Jameson from the old Spiderman cartoons. And if there was a good-looking woman around, Bob had to make a comment. If there was an arm-wrestling contest or an "open-beer-bottles-with-your-teeth" competition, he had supposedly been there, done that. If a straight guy had acted like that, someone would have pummelled him by now, but we all shrugged off Bob's antics. He really thought that he had us all fooled.

I forced myself toward his office. *Here we go*, I thought. *Chamberlain's going to fire me. He's been threatening to give me the boot for a month now. Says my articles are boring and uninspired, my writing torpid.* "You're not writing with the same pizzazz these days. What's got into you, Love? Problems at home? Mid-life crisis? C'mon, Love, throw me a bone here, would 'ya?"

That had been our conversation two days ago. At the door, Bob had said, in his usual metaphoric style, "Love, start producing professional copy or your ass is grass."

But Bob was right. I'd lost my desire to write, to work at the entertainment writing I'd built my career on. My "In Town" column had begun to sag. For the past three months, I'd grown bored and disinterested in covering concerts and shows. Something had changed inside me. At age forty, my life was nearing a crisis point. A slow paralysis had crept in. Not depression, although that was part of it, but something else, something deeper. If I didn't pull myself

together, I'd be out of job. In the past, I could have handled that--I was younger then, there had been less at stake. I'd pulled the plug on my writing career a few times, had found other jobs, but always managed to bounce back into the writing game when my other career choices had bored me, or disappointed me. But I couldn't afford to do that now, because there was Cathy.

Cathy was pregnant, and in her second trimester. I'd never faced a wall like this before, and the pressure was getting to me.

Bob Chamberlain's office at the Hamilton Gazette sat at the far corner of an otherwise open-concept floor plan. Fifteen other journalists were also busy drinking coffee, hammering away at the keys on their computer keyboards. Ted Slater, the office cynic, was paring a thumbnail, staring at me, his legs crossed at the knees as if he had all the time in the day. A knowing smirk lined his face, but I ignored it. Every office has a cynic, I thought. They criticize everything and everyone: the *office dick*, as I'd come to think of him.

I knocked on Bob's door. It was partially open.

"Come in," he said, without looking up from his newspaper. His face was buried in the sports section of the Toronto Star. Perhaps he wasn't a fan of his own newspaper, I thought. Or perhaps he longed to work for a bigger city rag. But the sports section was definitely a ruse set up for my benefit.

He had the phone stuck to one ear, nodding. "...Different, huh? A new direction for the paper? You've had some interesting response. A few emails and letters? Phonecalls, too? Interesting, very interesting. Definitely more where that came from, Mr. Hill..." He pretended to scan the sports page as he talked. "...Oh yes, I'm quite willing to take it to the next level. My thoughts exactly....."

To the next level? Does that mean he's going to fire me?

Allan Hill was the CEO of Hill Newspapers. He owned the Hamilton Gazette, as well as a bunch of Canadian newspapers and magazines. I'd never met the man. Few had. They must be planning to hire someone to take my place. Someone who would take the paper "to the next level". I was determined to get this over with as soon as possible. I could still freelance, if I had to—oh, yeah, sure, I could use the security of a regular paycheque, but not if it meant sucking up. I would never do that, not at the expense of my integrity.

Go ahead, Bob, give it your best shot.

He pointed at the door, so I closed it. He waved me into the leather chair in front of his huge, battered oak desk. I sat down and took a deep breath.

"Of course, it's all true. Donny Love is a stand-up guy. I'd trust him with my life."

My heart missed a beat.

Bob gave me a cavalier wink. His office decor, arranged by Bob himself, was a quirky mix of Ernest Hemingway and Martha Stewart. He had the walls painted a soft shade of green, with accents of pale yellow and cream around the room. I'd always found it a very pleasant room. Behind him on the walls hung several photos of fishermen with their trophies, photos of him posing with singer Celine Dionne, comedian Steve Smith, musician Tommy Hunter, actor Jim Carrey, and hockey great Paul Henderson. On his tidy desk sat a gumball machine; beside it, a portrait of himself crouching beside a bear he'd supposedly bagged while hunting last summer in British Columbia.

"...Ciao for now."

After he'd hung up the phone, he'd feasted his eyes on one more sports detail then slammed his paper against the desk, making my heart jump into my throat.

Then his expression brightened. "Donny Love, my main man, my number one writer, my goddamn *homey*, we're going all the way on this one." Across the table, he extended a hand the size of a catcher's mitt.

Homey?

My jaw dropped. Nothing came out. I shook his hand. Somehow I'd expected him to hook me in the chin, not offer a congratulatory handshake. "What's this all this about, Bob?"

"Your last column shows promise, Love. Mr. Hill's received some interesting emails and letters. And you don't usually get letters, Love. Looks like people want to know more about this Steven McCartney fella. Mr. Hill likes this Steven guy, too. Likes the Clint Eastwood angle, the lone ranger of mythical proportions. And, as Alan Hill likes to say, "always give the people what they want."

Bob had been an editor with the Gazette for ten years. He was pressing sixty, and last fall he'd bought himself a hair club membership. He power-lifted at Gold's Gym on Locke Street, and was perpetually in spring training mode for high school football. He loved sports, yet had a penchant for the arts, especially Broadway musicals. On weekends, he got his kicks playing touch football, and he had a season pass to the theatre Festival down in Stratford, Ontario, where

he never missed a single Shakespearean play. Bob had the build and demeanour of a steel town grunt, but his brains had given him an edge that had pushed him out of the blue collar arena into the world of academia and newspapers.

"I don't know what to say," I said, stunned by Bob's revelation. I cleared my throat.

"Listen, Love, our readership is down--The Toronto Star's more popular than ever in this town, but I think we've got something here that can put the Gazette on top. I think we can bring the numbers up with this "In Town" column of yours, and start putting money back in the stakeholders' hands. This paper needs an injection, Love, and your column is the serum we're looking for! Are you with me on this, Love?" He was rubbing his fingertips together, intensity building in his eyes.

"Sure, if you think it's legal. I mean, we won't get sued for libel though, will we?"

Bob's face tightened. "Only if you're lying, Love. You're not lying, are you?"

"No, no, of course not," I said, and imagined my nose growing like Pinocchio's.

"Good," he said, exhaling long and hard. He leaned forward, his eyes widening.

"So, tell me more about this Steven guy. He actually did all his stuff? What is he, some kinda superhero?" Bob's tone was half-respectful, half-disbelieving. "You'd better not be making this shit up, Love, or we'll be on the hook for a lawsuit. Are you making this shit up?"

"Do I look like a bullshitter, Bob?" I said, sitting up straight. *I am a bullshitter, but he doesn't have to know that. My friends know that, my wife knows that, but no one else does, and it's none of their damned business, either.*

He narrowed his eyes. "A good bullshitter never looks like one. I oughta know." He paused, rubbing his chin.

I had to get out of there--I needed to get back to my column. But first: "So, who's been calling?"

He chuckled in delight. "Mostly women from his old alma mater. That's always a good sign, eh? Appealing to the LAY-DEES."

A sickening anxiety spread from the center of my being. The office walls closed in on me. I'd done everything in my power to avoid thinking about my days as a student at Irondale Collegiate. I'd left Hamilton seventeen years ago to escape the ghosts and memories and now, since April, I'd found myself back again, trying to start fresh. Revulsion lurched up inside me. Those women calling Steven had wanted nothing to do with me back in the day. But, somehow,

writing about Steven had created a direct link to my past. Funny thing was that those women had wanted nothing to do with Steven then, either. But now that he was in the paper...they wanted both of us.

Thank God Meg Cleroux was fielding the calls, I thought. She was my only line of defense. I knew, with a great sense of relief, that she also had the smarts not to give out my telephone number.

Adrenaline was firing me up. I stood up abruptly. "Got to get back to the column, Bob. Steven's fans are waiting. And you're right, Bob, I think we've got something here."

"We're on fire!" he cried, pounding his desk again.

"On fire, Bob."

"So, when do I get to meet Steven?"

I think that the synapses in my brain actually stopped for a moment there.

"Well, that's impossible, Bob."

"Why?"

I swallowed. "He's dead."

Bob's mouth parted. "Oh, that's bad. Real bad. Oh well, who cares, just keep writing that damn stuff. We're selling newspapers here, so who gives a shit? Forget dead, just write him like he's alive and kicking."

Intense relief flooded through me.

"That works for me."

I left Bob's office.

Well, maybe Steven wasn't dead, I thought, but how else was I supposed to envision someone who'd bailed on me all those years ago?

I looked over my shoulder and saw that Bob had gone back to the sports section as if we'd never had the conversation in the first place. I walked towards my desk, serenaded by the clatter of keyboards and telephones ringing off the hook.

Heads behind computers turned in my direction. Meg was on the phone, waving me towards her, leading me to believe she was fielding another phonecall from one of Steven's fans. She said something into the receiver, and cupped a hand over the mouthpiece. "Do you know a Jennifer Chalmers?"

My blood curdled. The mere uttering of her name sent shockwaves through me--Jennifer had been the snottiest of snotty girls. "Yeah, I went to high school with her," I snapped. Jennifer Chalmers, one of the hottest, richest kids to walk the halls of Irondale, one of many who had held her nose so high it had blocked out the light. I shuddered, thinking of her. I could almost see her and her brood cackling as they hung out in the cafeteria and mocked everybody they deemed unacceptable. I saw them sneering at me, their faces hideous, ugly masks.

"I'm not here," I mouthed, panicking, gesturing with my upturned palms, shaking my hand.

Meg rolled her eyes at me, and pressed her hand against the phone's mouthpiece.

"She's looking for Steven," she said in a hushed tone, "not you."

"Steven, of course," I said, taking my seat. "Who else? No problem there. Excellent. Very good."

I stared at the blank computer screen, not knowing quite what to do next.

Meg hung up the phone. I leaned across the aisle. "Meg, please don't give out my phone number. I don't want people calling my home and bugging Cathy, you know. With the baby coming and all, she's under a lot of stress."

"I'm one step ahead of you, Donny."

"Thanks."

What the hell was I going to do? I wondered. Paranoia flew around inside me like a frightened bird.

I told myself that this would soon blow over, that the phone calls and emails were probably from a few cat-crazy women who were now desperate to hook up with someone from the past who would help them re-live their halcyon days.

The story would stay local at best, and the buzz would soon fizzle out. Not that I cared. It's all I had left inside me to write.

But what if I'm wrong? I wondered.

Separate voices inside my head vied for attention.

Bob hasn't fired you yet, so go for it.

Yeah, but Bob's a whack job. He could suddenly change his mind about me.

Maybe, maybe not.

My wife's pregnant and I have a job. I'm a lucky man. I don't wanna blow it.

But what if Steven is dead? What if he died a long time ago? He hasn't called you. He must be dead. It's not really a problem if you're not actually writing about a real person.

What about libel? I'll be sued for character defamation. You can't make up shit about someone and get away with it.

Who cares? He's dead. Who's gonna sue?

I'd better care, for Cathy's sake, and the baby's sake.

The baby's not born yet. You're not hurting anybody.

But Steven had wanted to be famous, dammit. He was always craving the limelight. And suddenly I realized what it was I'd been doing with that stupid column--I was forcing Fate's hand.

2.

The Steven McCartney Story, Part II

by Donny Love

In a remote mountain region of Afghanistan, in the early 90's, Steven made another daring rescue attempt. He'd been riding on his motorcycle through the Hindu Kush Mountains when the earthquake hit. A small tribe had been camping out beside a small river in the Bololo canyon. A young woman, dressed in a black burka, had been gathering firewood at the foot of the mountain and was struggling to maintain her balance when the shaking ground upended her. Worse, the earth was splitting open. Steven had spied her from his motorcycle and had fought the shaking ground until he found that he couldn't any longer and was thrown from his bike. Undaunted, he scrambled

to his feet and grabbed the woman, just as she was pitching forward into a growing chasm. When he pulled her back to safety, Mother Nature's fury hurled him into the chasm.

When he wakened, he found himself lying on a bed roll by an open fire, under a star-filled night, being nursed back to health by the tribal elders. He saw and heard things in the days and nights that followed. There were guns, a lot of them, and big crates brought in by trucks. These tribesman were secretive, fierce warriors, but they were renowned for their loyalty, and they paid Steven much honour in the time that he was with them.

The girl who had been saved had an uncle who was very grateful to Steven. His name was Osama. Steven told me that it would be better not to ask the man's full name.

When Steven's broken bones were healed, he bowed silently to the men around the fire, and then he disappeared into the cold Afghani darkness on his bike....

3.

"...On my way, honey," I said into the cell phone, clicked it off, and lay it back down on the passenger seat. Tonight was our first birthing class--Cathy hated to be late for anything, so she'd called to make sure I was on the way. Me, well, I'd be late for my own funeral: fact.

Driving up the escarpment in my battered 1992 Ford Tempo, I turned the radio dial to Hamilton's oldies station, CKOC. Marvin Gaye was singing about sexual healing. I loved AM radio; hearing the songs from the sixties transplanted me into the past, and all the streets and buildings came alive with good memories. Now I found myself remembering when Marie Hamson and I used to neck in her parents' basement. The memory tugged uncomfortably at my heart. I happened to check my rear view mirror.

Close on my tail was a black Ford Ltd. *Just a coincidence, Love, don't be so paranoid.* The late afternoon sun glistened in the car's grill. It resembled shark's teeth. *An undercover cop car?* I checked the speedometer to see if I was speeding. *No*, forty-five clicks, no problem there. The car pulled up beside me as if to pass, but it hesitated and slowed down, then it pulled in behind me again. Then, for no apparent reason, it dropped back out of sight behind the thickening traffic. I just wanted to get to Tim Horton's without these screws on my ass.

Today's column had been a fat pile of shit. I felt as if I'd taken my first hit of crack cocaine and couldn't stop--I was hooked, instantly. Every well-crafted lie had spurred me on to write the next one. It was wrong. I hadn't been raised to lie, but I didn't care; in fact, I couldn't help myself. I'd expected to see flames shooting out of my typing fingers.

Of course, I'd done it all for Steven. I was risking my life to save his. Just once, he deserved the sweet taste of fame. At least one of us dreamers deserved to become famous. I know he would have wanted it that way. Even as I told myself this, I felt an uncomfortable twinge of conscience. Unwilling to examine my motives any more closely, I cranked up the radio.

I'd written the column wearing my Walkman, sometimes listening to a CD of the Beatles Number One Hits. When I was twenty-five and first trying to be a writer, I wrote listening to Simple Minds and Kajagoogoo, or the Thompson Twins, or Madonna. In my thirties, I'd listened to SoundGarden and Junkhouse, or even Gordon Lightfoot, if I was trying to get some of his magic Canadiana to rub off on my writing. Nowadays, I listen to softer stuff. Sometimes, if I'm tired, I'll pound back the coffee and eat chocolate while listening to Green Day's 'Dookie', just to pump my adrenaline a little, so I can muster the energy to write. But after awhile the caffeine and sugar wear off, and I can't relate to the message in the songs, so I go back to the age-appropriate music.

What was happening to that other guy I used to be? My confidence had started to wane in middle age.

I'd just turned off the Jolly Cut onto Concession Street, travelling eastbound along the Hamilton Mountain. I passed the park on my left, the leaves beginning to turn on the oak and elm trees. The clouds hung low in the sky like freighters that had floated off their moorings in the Hamilton Bay. When my cell phone rang, I almost jumped out of my skin. My nerves were fried. But I didn't feel like answering it.

Truth was, I wasn't ready for our first birthing class at Henderson Hospital. What could I possibly do to help my wife give birth? In my dad's day, they smoked cigars in the waiting room while their wives screamed their heads off, surrounded by a bunch of strange doctors and nurses. Men today were expected to be different than their dads, and I loved my wife and this was the new millennium and I didn't want to be an asshole about all of this: *so, let's do it, Cathy, breathe, baby, one-two, baby, that's it, keep breathing, great, you're doing great.*

Someone once said that giving birth was like passing a bowling ball through your anus. *That's why you're helping your wife, Love. She's going to go through hell. Get over yourself.*

The cell phone continued its ringing. *Maybe it's Bob*, I thought. *Shit, better pick up.*

I took a deep breath. "Hello?"

"Love, is that you?"

"Yeah. Who is this?"

"Tony Valentini, your old buddy. Remember me, asshole?"

"Tony, oh my God, long time no speak. Yeah, what's up?" I couldn't believe my ears. He must have called my home and Cathy had given him my cell phone number

"What's up? I read your column, buddy, that's what's up. Have you lost your freakin' mind?"

And there it was--the fatal flaw in my Steven columns: people read them. People who *knew* Steven *read* them. I had masterfully deluded myself.

"Yeah, if you want the truth, yes, I have lost my mind."

"Get your ass over to Tim Hortons', 'cross from the Canadian Tire at Gage and Fennel. Now!"

"What? Now? Tony, I can't, Tony I—"

"Now." He hung up abruptly.

“Okay, Tony, yeah, nice to hear your voice, too.” With my thumb I clicked off the phone. I shook my head. *No, I don't think so, Tony. You're a ghost pretending to be Tony Valentini. But you're not him anymore because the old Tony is dead and the new Tony is someone I don't know. And you talk to me that way again and I'll kick your ass.*

You know how it is--sometimes your interior voice is a bit more macho than you could actually deliver.

Of course, everyone I'd once known in Hamilton was a ghost—I'd left this town seventeen years ago, and, to be honest, I never would have believed that I would move back here with my family, six months ago on April 1, of all days, and, no, the irony wasn't lost on me.

I'd moved at the age of twenty-three to escape--a heartbreaking first-love, ex-friends, and friends I could no longer appreciate. Down east, I had earned a journalism degree from Dalhousie University. Music had been my first love, then writing, then comedy. Instead of trying to land a full-time job at a newspaper, I'd tried my hand at writing fiction, playing in bands, and doing stand up at Yuk Yuk's comedy club. There were tons of those across Canada, so you could go to almost any major city center and get up on the stage for amateur night. When I started writing, I'd gone mostly freelance, selling my entertainment pieces to the Toronto Star, the Peterborough Herald, and the Globe and Mail. I'd met Cathy at a dance club, the Grimy Pauper, in Toronto .

Cathy was not my first love, but she became my great love. She was, I suppose, average-looking. Not a knock-out, but definitely not homely. Definitely not. In fact, when she smiled at me with that adoration radiating from her body, well, I was in heaven. When we met, Cathy was a virgin, and she had intended to stay that way until marriage, but she and I were naked and all over each other by the third date. It took me a couple of years to realize that I wanted to marry Cathy, but she told me that she knew that I was the one after the second date. Women always seem to get these things faster than we guys do.

Cathy was like ballast for me---she smoothed out the bumps in the road and settled me a bit, without being controlling or naggy. In fact, Cathy was always my biggest supporter, in whatever I wanted to do. I had found my angel.

Three years ago, we'd married and moved into a small apartment across from the University of Toronto. I'd never felt comfortable in Toronto, but Cathy didn't want to move to

Hamilton, not at first, anyway. With my parents aging and wrestling with various health problems, I was able to talk her into moving back to Hamilton; pregnant, she'd finally agreed.

Ever since we'd moved back here, I'd had a fear of running into people from my past.

But everyone has ghosts, Love, I thought. You dumped friends, and they dumped you. Old band mates dumped you and you dumped them. Get over it. Even aging, sick parents are ghosts. Nothing stays the same.

But if any one person had stayed the same, or almost the same, it might be Tony Valentini. Something in his voice had sounded as it had years ago.

Maybe Tony was the only old friend, other than Steven, that I wouldn't mind getting to know again. Like everyone else from high school, we'd drifted apart. Tony had started adulthood at age twenty, when he and Angela had had a baby boy. I'd been the best man at his wedding, but then they had their second baby and he stopped calling me and I got pissed off at that, so I stopped calling him, figuring I wasn't important to him anymore, and then two years later I thought about calling him, but too much time had passed and I figured it would be really awkward. End of Story.

Had we grown too far apart? Would he think I was that same mangecake who'd moved away to prove himself better than everyone else? That I'd forgotten my roots? He used to say these things to me, smirking, of course: "...too good for us, eh, Love? Gonna make something of yourself, eh? Send us a frickin' postcard, buddy. You wait and see, man. One day you'll come back." I bristled, thinking about that. On the phone Tony had sounded as pissed as he had back in the day when he'd been defending the Canadian Football League against the American Football League in debate.

I was more than a little nervous going to meet Tony. If he gave me a hard time, I'd tell him off and get the hell out in one piece. There was always the possibility of using the birthing class as an excuse to leave--he was a dad, he'd have to understand.

I'd thought about ringing him up months ago, but last June I'd run into an old high school friend, Brent Carlton, at the Price Chopper Food Mart, and I'd wanted to shoot myself in the head, it was so damn uncomfortable. Whatever bond there'd been between us had only existed in Machine Shop 401 classroom. His personality seemed shrunken. Had he always been that dull and quiet, I'd wondered. Had I not noticed? *Run for your life, Donny. Run.* And I had. First, a bogus lie that I had to pick up my son from baseball, then I quickly ducked into the next aisle,

picking up speed once I was out of sight, speed-walking until I was practically running to my car.

You can't go back, a voice had said inside my head. I felt sick inside, like a loser trying to hook up with old friends because no one else had wanted him a lifetime later. Should any of us ever be that desperate? So, after that, calling Tony had been out of the question. After my incident with Brett, I wouldn't have picked up the phone for anybody, even if my life had depended on it.

4.

Get in, get the hell out, and get home in time to take Cathy to the birthing class.

The Tim Horton's sat at the front of the Plenske strip mall. There was a dollar store, a Canadian Tire hardware store and a Blockbuster video store. The mall was housed in shiny brown brick. The sun dipped low in the sky, warming the brick and filling the shop windows with a red and orange glow.

As I stepped out of my car, I noticed a shiny black Ford LTD pull into a parking spot nearby. Two solid-looking men in suits sat in front. I started, thinking back to the drive up the Jolly Cut. *Just a coincidence, Love. They're not following you. You're not that important. Besides, the whole nation is addicted to Tim's coffee.*

I prepared myself mentally to deal with seeing Tony. I had visions of Tony with a big gut hanging over his belt, his face ravaged by time.

Paranoia fluttered in my belly.

I struggled not to turn and run. I had to face up to my past. God knew I'd been running from it long enough.

I still couldn't shake my paranoia. The pressure of the two bullshit columns I'd written, plus my wife's pregnancy, were beginning to eat me up inside.

Get in, get out, and get home in time to take Cathy to the birthing class!

Valentini will be a disappointment. You know you can't go back. Do the Brent Carlton Price Chopper shtick and run off before you can say "french cruller".

I opened the door and walked through.

"What the hell you writin' that shit for, Love? It's a bunch of lies and you know it," a male voice muttered, right at my ear. I spun around nearly jumping out of my skin.

"C'mon, I already have us a table."

I followed him, flustered, trying to get my bearings.

He hadn't turned into a bloated old geezer after all; I found myself grinning, embarrassment flushing my cheeks, suddenly glad to be visiting an old friend. I couldn't believe my eyes--Tony looked almost exactly the same, save for a few more wrinkles, and shorter hair. Grayer hair. We moved to a four-seater across from the main serving counter, behind a beige divider, next to a glass display case offering gift certificates, shiny coffee mugs, and bags of coffee. He was still wearing his grey Canadian Tire mechanic's coveralls .

We shook hands and sat down.

"Hey, man, good to see you," I said.

"So, you came crawling back?" he said, a wry grin eating up his face.

"Yeah, yeah, let's not go there, okay?" I shook my head. "I knew you were going to say that."

"You want a coffee?" He had one on the go on the table in front of him.

"No, I'm good, man. Cathy and I are going to a birthing class at six, so I can't stay long." I took a deep breath. "So, how's Angela?"

"She's good, yep."

"And life in general?"

"Same shit, different pile."

I laughed--Tony didn't mince words.

In my mind's eye, I saw Tony's eighteen-year-old self, his long curly hair jiggling on his shoulders like menacing black snakes, his juvenile tough-guy expression screwed tightly onto his face, a DuMaurier cigarette dangling from his mouth, and a cold Export beer in his hand. That was the Tony I remembered.

In a blink of an eye, he was gone. Now, in front of me, sat forty-year-old Tony, wearing coveralls darkened and splotted with oil. I nervously pre-empted the inevitable topic.

"How many kids you got, Tone?"

Tone? He must think you're an idiot. We're not in highschool anymore. Tony, not Tone.

"Four. Three girls, one boy. You?"

"One, well, almost one."

He nodded. "That's a start."

We talked about kids and wives, the usual stuff to break the ice that had grown quite thick and crusty over the years, when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the two businessmen from the black Ford sitting against the far window. One of them seemed to be surreptitiously looking at me.

I looked back to Tony, feeling unnerved.

"Love, you alright? You look like you've seen a ghost?"

"No, I'm cool."

Cool? No, you're not, that's a lie.

Anxiety rose inside me.

Even the grease rimming Tony's fingernails was starting to freak me out.

"Let's cut the bullshit, Love. We go way back, remember? It's good to see you and all, don't get me wrong, but I've been reading your column and I think you're digging yourself a pretty deep shit hole. I also think you're a little frickin' nuts." He punctuated his last statement with a loud slurp of his coffee.

"Yeah, is that what you think?" A mysterious anger rose up inside me and tried to punch its way out. "You think that Steven didn't deserve to be famous?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"You know exactly what I mean. You saw what Steven was capable of back in the day. You saw his potential."

"Potential? What, so the guy did the ventriloquist dummy act at the variety night every year and he deserved to be famous? Yeah, right. Whoop-dee-do." He smirked.

"Hey, I'd forgotten about that. You're right, he was excellent at that, too."

"Okay, he was good at that. So, what high school in Hamilton or anywhere else, for that matter, didn't have some kid who was going to be the next big thing?"

"Yeah, but you remember how good he was at the grad dance that night? He blew us away. Listen, Tony, I've played in bands and I've made studying the music scene my life and I can tell you, Steven had what it takes to make it in music or show biz or whatever the hell he wanted. The guy was pure fucking genius."

I realized he wasn't listening. I'd caught him with his eyes wandering, but he flicked his gaze back to me before I could see where was looking. "Love, you remember that old fifties game show, "This is Your Life"?"

"Yeah?"

He shifted his gaze past my head. "Well, buddy, this is *your* fucking life."

I followed his gaze. Outside, on the way in were what appeared to me at first to be bizarre distortions of the two other friends we'd hung out with in high school.

"You didn't tell me *they* were coming here!"

"Would you have come?"

"Probably not," I muttered, shaking my head. This was all becoming way too much.

Tony leaned across the table and whispered: "Pappas is alright, but Reingruber's gone a little wierder since you knew him. Two years ago, he was charged with arson. Said he didn't do it -- a good lawyer got him off. Reingruber always said that it was mistaken identity. But we don't talk about that, okay? It's an unspoken rule. Obviously, the guy's a fucking nut... but other than that, he's not half bad, same old Norby."

I stared at Tony, stunned by his revelation. My jaw had dropped. *Who are these people? Reingruber's an arsonist? What in God's name am I doing here? What's Pappas? A serial killer?* A shudder ran down my spine. Being here felt wrong. I shouldn't have come. I should have gone straight home. I had to get out of here as fast as possible.

John Pappas approached us first. He extended his hand. His face was still as cherubic as ever, almost pre-pubescent. He looked as if he'd somehow reversed the aging process. "Hey, Donny. Read your Steven article. Outlandish pack of lies, of course, but I do like the feel of it. Welcome back to the Hammer, man." One thing that hadn't changed about John was his smooth voice, like molasses dripping off a spoon, sweet and slow. Somehow he managed to sound both smart and stupid at the same time. A pair of beige slacks, tight at the ankles, hugged his legs, which were long and lean like a dancer's, and under a waist-length black leather coat he wore a black turtle neck. A pair of polished black leather shoes, skinny at the toe, stuck out from his legs. He was an outlandish, bohemian presence. Metrosexual, even.

He slid into a seat at our table.

And there, sitting down right beside me, was Norbert Reingruber, or Eggie, as John had called him back in the day. Norb was a thick-necked guy. He had a big puffy face with a greasy elfin beard, matted at the ends, and he was stroking it to a fine point with his pudgy fingers. I'd expected him to stink of BO, but he didn't. In fact, he smelled quite nice -- some kind of men's cologne. A black leather vest with a Harley Davidson logo on the back hugged his belly, and he wore a faded blue Led Zeppelin t-shirt. I could picture him on the first day of grade three, wearing the lederhosen that his immigrant mama had innocently put him in. I blinked away the image. He had a glazed look in his eyes.

My thoughts naturally took a turn to the cynical. *Good to be back in The Hammer. Back with the losers who never left. A loser back to hang with the losers he left behind. Living in the land of the losers has never felt better. If Tim Horton were alive, he'd be very proud to host this reunion at his donut shop.*

I pasted a smile on my face and we shook hands.

"So Norb, what are you doing these days?"

His tenor voice sounded thick and slurry, as if he'd taken too many hits to the head. "Not much, you know, working part time at Talbot's Trading Card Shop."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, yeah, been working there on and off for ten years, anyway."

He looked at the others for verification.

"Yeah, " said Valentini, "about ten years, Norb."

"Easily ten," said Pappas. "Ten solid years."

"Where you living, Norb?"

"Still living with Mom," he said, "but in the basement. I turned it into an apartment. Got my own entrance now."

"Cool," I said. "I thought you used to work at Dofasco."

Valentini kicked me and gave me a dirty look. I figured not working there anymore had something to do with his arson allegations. "Norb, can I buy you a coffee?"

"Sure, bud. Make'er a 4X4, if you don't mind."

"Large black," said Pappas.

"I'll buy," said Valentini, "Love, what do you want?"

"Large double double."

As Tony went for the coffees, we three sat and stared at each other, smiling, nodding, not quite knowing how to proceed next. *You can't go back*, the voice said inside me.

"Wow, so guys, what the hell's new?" My voice sounded an octave higher than usual to my ears.

They nodded, as if I'd asked a rhetorical question.

"Long time," Pappas said.

"Really long," Reingruber said, staring at me, a greasy smile lighting up his face.

Yikes.

"Now, the last time I saw you guys was at the McDonald's at the corner of Upper Ottawa and Gage, about two months after the Prom. Remember, we hooked up for lunch then went out and drank a twelve pack in my parents' basement?"

Puzzled expressions crossed their faces.

Pappas shrugged. He hadn't gained more than a pound since high school. He was still a handsome man. A little too handsome, maybe.

"Okay, so you guys don't remember that. John, what are you doing these days?"

"Still running the restaurant. It's one hell of an exciting career." He was still as sarcastic as ever, apparently.

"Really, after all these years? Wow, I'm blown away. I haven't held a job longer than a year." Even as I said it, I wished that I hadn't.

"Why not?"

"I dunno," I said, evasively. This conversation was uncomfortable.

"We've got awhile. Spill."

"Some other time."

"Well," said Pappas, "don't feel so bad. At least you're not a loser living in his mom's basement." He snorted appreciatively at his own joke.

"It's an apartment, dickhead," Reingruber said, calmly. "And I pay rent."

Pappas was grinning, obviously loving the fact that he was getting under Norb's skin.

"Still have that comic book collection?" I asked Norbert.

"Ten thousand strong and still rockin'," he stated proudly.

"You're such a fucking loser," Pappas said. "You're forty and you're living with your mom and you collect comic books."

Reingruber knit his eyebrows together. "Yeah, well at least I'm not divorced, pinhead."

"At least I can get laid."

"Keep it cool, boys," Valentini said, returning with a tray of coffees and a box of donuts. "Let's try and give Love here the impression that we did alright with our lives okay?" He set down the four coffees.

"So, you three have been hanging out since high school?" I said. "I mean, I think that's pretty amazing."

"No, it's not, it's fucking pathetic, straight up," said Valentini. "I should have moved out of this shit hole town years ago. All I'm left with now is a sore back and these two knuckleheads." He rolled his eyes and drank some coffee.

"Your article, Donny," Pappas said, drily, "not bad, bud. Very entertaining. But how do you plan to crawl out of that shit heap?"

"With a big spoon," Reingruber said, laughing at his own joke.

Norbert just wasn't the brightest bulb on the porch, never had been, but he'd tagged along with us back in the day, and we all felt a little dumped by the popular clique in high school, so we couldn't quite bring ourselves to do the same to Norbert. He was always there when we needed an extra guy for road hockey. The thing that made him likeable enough was his awesome comic book collection and his illustrations; that part of his brain actually had a brain, if you know what I mean. Truthfully, though, Reingruber did have some smarts; it's just that he always made himself look stupid. That was my theory, anyway.

We're all retarded adolescents, I thought, thinking back to Reingruber's joke. I couldn't hold a job, Pappas acted like he was still chucking spitballs at Reingruber in grade ten History class, Reingruber was living with his mom in her basement, conjuring up arsonist fantasies, and Tony Valentini...well, what about Tony? Where did he fit in on the scale of mental retardation?

Tony, the Grand Inquisitor, stared at me pointedly. "You're a meatball, Donny. It's *you* who wants to be famous; you don't care about making Steven famous. Isn't that right?"

My stomach flipped over and I felt hot blood rushing to my face.

The others looked at me questioningly. A rim of icing sugar lined the top of Reingruber's mouth.

Awkward silence. I decided to deflect this painful conversation.

"C'mon Tony, be honest with yourself. *You* wouldn't mind being famous for a while. You know you'd love the attention, the flashing lights, the dough. Who here wouldn't mind the dough? Pay off your house, maybe. Quit your day job. And after awhile, the fame fades away and you're set for life and the media leaves you alone."

"Well, when you put it that way," Tony said, chomping on a sour cream glazed donut.

"I'd love to be famous," said Reingruber. "Think of all the chicks you could score. They'd be all over you." I had a sudden mental image of Reingruber out on a date with a lovely girl who shared his interest in sunset strolls on the beach, romantic dinners by candlelight, and snuggling up by a big cozy fire, perhaps one Norb had set in an old warehouse, or a dumpster.

Pappas was grinning. "I should've gone to La-La Land. A guy like me could go far in Hollywood. I'm a triple threat, man -- I can sing, act, dance. Gene Kelly in the 21st century!"

"Dancing is for queers, Pappas," Reingruber snorted.

Pappas gazed at him with condescending pity. "You know nothing, Eggie. Women *love* men who dance. It turns them on. Haven't you ever watched salsa dancing or the tango? Man, it's practically sex on the dancefloor."

Reingruber's brain was working hard to re-evaluate this new information. I had another unbidden mental image, this time of Norbert in tight black pants and a white buccaneer's shirt, unbuttoned to the navel, while he salsa danced with some hot Latina. It was alarming.

Pappas turned his attention to Tony. "Well, what about you, Tony? Any burning desire to be famous?"

"A grease-monkey wop from Hamilton? Famous?" Tony paused uncomfortably. "Well, I wouldn't mind being a famous race car driver. But I'd only drive Nascar, that's it. I'm not interested in any of that Hollywood bullshit. Boys, just give me a race car and a shot at the

Indianapolis 500 and I could die at peace, knowing I'd had that one shot." He rapped the table with his knuckles. "Win or lose."

"Well, what about Steven?" I said, balling up my resolve. "Don't you think he deserves to be famous?"

"Steven's dead, Donny," Pappas said.

"That's never been confirmed," Tony jumped in.

"I thought he was dead," Reingruber added.

"Well, of *course* he's dead," I said. "What else? I mean, no phone calls, no letters, no nothing. A guy doesn't just decide to abandon everybody. I mean, he has to be dead." My voice had a hint of a tremor in it. "John, who told you he was dead?"

"Reingruber. Right, Norb, you said you heard it from Dale Richardson over at Cactus Jack's? You said that Dale said that Steven had been killed in a hunting accident up in Smith's Falls."

"Well, I was pretty loaded, but that's what I think I remember."

The journalist in me was getting a bit annoyed with this broken-telephone shtick. "So, did you see his name in the obituary section in the Gazette?"

They all traded glances and shrugged.

I found myself staring at the suited men by the far window. They were stone-faced, staring past us. There was something intelligent and predatory in their demeanour. *Agents*. In front of them sat empty coffee cups. It suddenly pissed me off, seeing them there.

"What 's wrong?" said Reingruber. His bushy eyebrows made me think of a quizzical dog.

I went for it. "I think I'm being followed," I muttered.

I looked back at Tony and motioned with my head towards the men. I leaned across the table. "I'm being followed by agents. Somehow my column has sparked some kind of investigation." Even as I said it, I knew that it was a ridiculous idea. I was a nobody. No one would take my column seriously. It was laughable, really.

Tony looked over at them, smirking, then back at me. His expression had changed. He spoke quietly. "Shit. It sounds crazy, but could swear that I just saw one of them muttering into his sleeve. What the hell kind of trouble have you gotten yourself into, man?" He glanced back at them surreptitiously.

Panicking, I knocked my coffee and it sloshed over the sides onto the table and started dripping onto the floor. "Shit!"

I grabbed some napkins out of the metal dispenser and started wiping up the mess. I noticed the time on my watch, and alarm bells sounded in my ears. "Shit, I'm late for the birthing class! Cathy will freak. I've gotta run. Catch you guys later!" I jumped up and raced for the door. "Thanks for the coffee! Nice to see ya again!"

Get in, get out. Yeah, right. You blew it, Love!

Somehow, during my visit, I'd lost sight of that voice inside my head.

I burst out the door.

The Agents uncoiled and headed out the other door, managing to slide along calmly at an alarming pace.

But those bastards wouldn't get a hold of me. I had a Birthing Class to attend. And an old friend to make famous. Nothing would stop me.

Nothing.

5.

“...Breathe, honey, that’s it. You’re doing great. In one, out one. Pfff, Pfff.”

All at once, an older father-to-be beside me, Bill, started coughing. He was a tall man in his early fifties, his wife in her early thirties. What had started out as coughing became strident hacking; on from there, thundering, nerve-wracking horfing sounds. Everyone stopped and watched Bill; expectant fathers sat back on their haunches and wives lying down on black mats watched in full shock at the Bill Show. Bill's face was turning the colour of a juicy red tomato. The veins on his temples bulged. His jerking motions tipped a pack of Export A’ filterless smokes out of his breast pocket.

“Are you okay, Big Bill?” I asked. “Can I get you some water?”

Cathy nudged me--she heard the trace of hilarity in my voice; she knew me all too well.

Bill's wife was as red in the face as her husband. She wasn't sure where to look. She vainly patted him on the back.

Everyone kept staring. The birthing class facilitator, a petite woman in her forties with blonde hair pulled back in a pony tail, had retrieved some Kleenex and was handing it over to Bill. She was a nurse, and she was doing her best to remain calm, despite Bill’s outlandish coughing fit. Some of the women in the room looked nauseated by the phlegmy sounds coming from the poor guy.

After awhile I couldn't help myself and started to laugh. The entire episode struck me as ludicrous. I tried to hide it behind the back of my hand, as if I were trying to wipe off a crumb of food from the corner of my mouth, but Bill was getting worse with each passing second. If this kept up, he was going to have an aneurism, or someone would have to plant their lips on him and give him mouth-to-mouth.

Cathy sat up on her mat. She fixed her eyes on me in warning and muttered angrily, "You made us late, dammit. You're always late. Why can't you take anything seriously, Donny? When will you grow up?"

I glanced nervously at the others, to see if they had overheard her. Thankfully, they were too taken up with Bill's drama.

I thought: how can you take a man with a huge head hacking his lungs out seriously? Especially at a birthing class. It was funny. I mean, this was supposed to be a serious class, and I was trying to do the right thing and be supportive, but not with Bill hacking his liver out of his maw. I couldn't just pretend not to find things like that funny. I suppose the proper thing to do would have been to laugh about it afterwards in the car with Cathy. Anyway, at that point, I knew that the best thing to do was to shut my mouth.

With slow, stiff movements, his wife moved onto her feet. She was at least six months pregnant, about the same amount as Cathy. She helped Bill to his feet. His face was turning purple.

“I think it was the spices in the chicken wings,” she said apologetically over her shoulder, as she took the tissue box that the facilitator gave her. “We ate suicide wings before we came here.”

We all nodded to show our support, because that’s what you're supposed to do when you’re attending a birthing class: show empathy. Or, in my case, try to discover it. I mean, you couldn't be expecting a baby and not be empathetic, right? So obviously I needed to get on board

with the empathy deal. But I'd laughed at Bill: unforgiveable. I made a pathetic attempt to redeem myself.

“Bill, can I help you in any way?”

He shook his head as he left the room. His internal organs were apparently still internal, so that was good.

I felt I could really get good at the empathy thing. Then I felt Cathy's piercing gaze. *She* wasn't fooled.

There was an awkward silence.

“Okay,” our facilitator said, all chirpy again. “Everyone back to their positions. “Breeeath. In and out. C'mon now, that's it....”

Pfff, pfff... ”

6.

The Steven McCartney Story, Part III by Donny Love

"...Steven was nineteen when he found himself in Mesa Verda National Park, in Colorado, a place both spiritually and physically connected to Chaco, New Mexico. He'd been booting up more than 7000 feet of desert on his vintage brown ACE motorcycle, when, from a distance, he spotted an archeologist giving a guided tour to a group of hot and tired hikers. He leaned his bike against a rock and caught up with the tour group. Steven had always been fascinated by ancient peoples and he quickly fell in with the group. As they stood on one of the ruin walls, admiring the ancient masonry work and the stone towers of the ancient Anasazi, Steven began to chat with a man by the name of Michael. Blake was taking photographs of the ruins. Steven, sensing that this man was somehow different, asked what he did for a living. Michael Blake was a well-known writer who'd turned out novels and screenplays in Hollywood. He'd written a book called, 'Dances With Wolves'. Whether it was the hot sun beating down on his head, or the ancient Indian spirits working through him, a story idea blazed through Steven's head. He quickly jotted down the plot idea and handed it to a bewildered Michael Blake, and was soon disappearing on his Ace....

7.

Tuesday, Sept. 9

10:00 p.m..

I'd called Valentini and asked him to round up the troops and bring them to Tim Hortons. He'd made a fuss about the time of night and having to get up for work and all, but he said he'd make the effort. I'd lied to him and said that I had an important announcement to make. He said that the only important announcement he'd ever heard in his life had been when the Edmonton Oilers announced they were trading Wayne Gretzky to the New York Rangers.

We found a table next to the one we'd sat at two days earlier.

I licked my lips and started right in. "I need your help, guys."

"Yeah?" said Tony, folding his thick fingers on his stomach. He was dressed in his civies now, jeans and plain blue t-shirt. A big, sarcastic grin lifted the corners of his mouth. "What kind of help, Donny?"

I leaned forward and cradled my coffee cup. I heard Cathy's disapproval ringing in my ears: *"you're late, you're always late, you'll be late for your own funeral, why are you always late?"*

"I can't make Steven famous alone," I said, "I'm going to need everyone's help."

A chilly calm settled over me. I had chosen my path at the fork in the road, and all that was left now was to follow it.

"Help?" said Pappas. "After that article you wrote in today's paper you'll need a lawyer's help, buddy. Steven gave Michael Blake his story idea, eh?" He chortled.

"I'd give him ten years hard time," said Reingruber, laughing through a mouthful of sour cream donut. He had a healthy appetite, Norb did.

I'd give you a hundred years, you freaky bastard arsonist boy.

"Listen," I said, forging ahead desperately, "forget what I wrote. Let's do it for Steven. Whatever it takes, let's make him famous. Dead or alive, let's do it for Steven. He was the most talented guy we've ever met, or will meet again, and, trust me, I've met tons of showbiz people over the years (*half-lie*) and he puts most of them to shame."

"I'm not going to make shit up about Steven and end up in jail," Tony said. "Anyway, I still think this is really all about *you*, man."

"Who said anything about going to jail?" I said, ignoring his last comment.

"Well, you'll be going, that's for sure," he said, laughing, darkly. "Character defamation, slander, and I'm sure we'll add impersonation, as well, once you start dressing and acting like Steven so you can become famous, you obsessive idiot." He shook his head at me.

"Don't worry about me."

"I read your story today," said Reinbruber. His high, reedy voice reminded me of The Godfather, "That's old news, bud. I myself witnessed Steven performing at Yuk Yuk's back in the day. Well, almost."

"No, you didn't, did you?"

A sheepish grin spread across Reingruber's face. "I used to follow him around and take pictures of him."

"What the fuck?" said Tony, staring in disbelief "Reingruber, you really are a freakin' wierdo!"

Norbert nodded as if he'd just been complimented on his geeky taste in comic book T-shirts.

My stomach sank. *Who are these freaks? And, for the thousandth time, what am I doing here?*

Norbert stroked his beard, grinning, staring down at the table. "Well, I was jealous of Steven then, you know, because he was so funny and talented, and I was pretty much a fat nobody, and I thought if I could follow him, I'd figure out how he did his thing and maybe I could get a piece of that." He sighed heavily, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a handful of photographs. He dropped them on the table.

"Woah," Papas said, laughing with the same mocking tone he'd used against Reingruber in high school. "You're such a freak, Eggie. I can't believe you stalked Steven."

"Don't call me Eggie," Reingruber said, through gritted teeth, uncharacteristically angry. "I'll fucking drive you the next time you say that."

"Un-freaking-believable," Tony said, stiffening in his chair.

I snatched up the photos, and spread them open like old hockey cards. "Jesus, there he is," I whispered.

There were photos of Steven getting into his old beige Mercury Bobcat, backing out of his parents' driveway, walking out of Mike's Submarines carrying a sub and a chocolate milk, and one of him entering the front door of Yuk Yuk's comedy club on downtown John Street. Another showed Steven up on the stage, the crowd in their seats buckled over with laughter.

That was the portal to celebrity that Steven had referred to once, and there it was, on celluloid, Steven walking into the mouth of the portal, and succeeding. He wasn't someone whose talents and potential I'd let my mind exaggerate over time. Steven had been that comic genius, and the proof was in that last picture! He had not missed his once-in-a-lifetime chance to go through that portal to greatness.

Shivers ran up and down my back, filtered into the backs of my thighs. I felt as if I'd just held the Holy Grail. I looked up and noticed that Pappas and Valentini were just as in awe as I was.

Norbert looked sad.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"I miss Steven."

I thought he was going to cry.

We fell into a deep silence, dissolving into the past.

A blinding flash of light stunned me. Movement. A machine-gun fire of photographer's flashes from some guy who'd been drinking coffee only a few tables away. He shot a few more of me, backing away as he did, then turned and fled.

"Who the fuck are you?" Valentini yelled, getting to his feet.

"Hey, what the hell do you think you're doing?" I said, simultaneously.

Valentini lunged, but the guy dodged his advance and flew past him out the far exit door, his green trench coat flapping against the closing door.

"That was weird," said Norb, calmly.

We were on our feet, staring at the guy, who was now crossing Fennel Avenue and hopping into his car at the 24-hour supermarket across the street. Even at that late hour, the parking lot was busy with cars and he disappeared behind the building.

Slowly, we took our seats again. The Tim Hortons ladies behind the counter were staring at us nervously.

A smirk grew on Pappas' face. "*Making Donny Famous*. Ever considered naming your column *that*?"

"Very funny, Papsmeat."

Momentarily, I'd regressed back to high school.

"Oooh, good one, Donny, good one. Nice and juvenile."

"Sorry, John, that *was* a juvenile thing to say." But there was no contrition in my tone.

At first, Pappas had kept that part of himself hidden, and so had I, but underneath he was still the same sarcastic bastard he'd always been, and so was I. At that moment, I didn't know whether to hug him or hate him.

"Why would someone be taking my picture?" I said, shifting my gaze around the room, suddenly remembering two men watching me the day before.

But I knew the answer as soon as I'd said it; it had something to do with my columns. Either someone I'd lied about had read it and was building a lawsuit against me, or some mysterious government agency had decided that my stories hit a little too close to home. Maybe I was to be eliminated! I shuddered, then shook myself back to reality. That stack of suspense thrillers on my beside table had apparently infected my brain!

I sighed.

"How do you know that wasn't Steven taking the pictures?" Valentini asked, half-jokingly. "He was like that, you know. He was always one step ahead of the punch line. I wouldn't put it past him."

"I hope it was him," I said. "At least I could trust *him* with the pictures."

"He did have excellent comedic timing," Pappas said.

"Fucking right it's him," Norb, said, chomping down on another donut. "It was as if he came back to take pictures of me to get back at me taking pictures of him." The light in his eyes flickered, then died out. He saw us staring at him. "Whatever, man." And he went back to eating his donut.

Seeing Reingruber like that, I didn't know whether to laugh at him or cry for him, but what I did know was that my life was changing in ways I never could have predicted.

8.

And my columns were changing in ways I couldn't have predicted, too. I found myself writing increasingly far-fetched stories about Steven.

Column Four featured Steven rescuing several dogs from a California home during a famous rash of wild fires. I never actually came out and said that it was Pam Anderson's home, but I think that my reference to a "platinum blonde Canadian bombshell with world famous breasts" may have been enough.

Column Five featured our hero Steven single-handedly foiling a pre-911 terrorist attack targeting the Golden Gate Bridge. Apparently Steven had acquired remarkable bomb dismantling skills during his many travels over the years in the Middle East.

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised that our local news media took note. CKOC radio began station identification jingles that sang out "Home of Steven McCartney!" Our local television news station, CHCH, ran a short but excited entertainment news piece about the mysterious Steven at the end of one broadcast.

I guess I shouldn't have been surprised.

But I was.

Dumb ass.

9.

Friday, September 12

Ten thirty p.m..

Offices of the world's biggest Hollywood entertainment news show, "Hollywood Tonight".

The haggard faces around the table said it all. This production meeting had gone on for hours, and no one had had any good ideas. Producer Lou Goldberg looked like he was about to eat one of his assistants' livers with a nice Chianti.

"...I fuckin' pay you assholes to come up with some goddamned decent story ideas! I swear I'm gonna' fire the whole fucking lot of you if you don't come up with a story in the next three minutes!"

From the far end of the table, came a meek Cindy-Lou-Who voice. The newest assistant producer, one of a long and rapidly changing series of employees, was grabbing the bull by the horns. She cleared her throat nervously.

"Excuse me, sir, but my room mate from Canada has been talking non-stop about this mysterious, handsome hero from Hamilton, Ontario. They're saying that he befriended Osama Bin Laden and even stopped a terrorist attack on the Golden Gate Bridge."

"What the fuck kind of shit is this? Who the hell watches an entertainment show for political shit like that?" Lou Goldberg's recently inserted plugs were increasingly obvious as his face grew redder with annoyance.

"Also, apparently he rescued Pam Anderson's dogs from a wild fire," she said hopefully.

Goldberg's bushy eyebrows practically went up onto his big bald head.

"Why the fuck didn't you say so? Pam Anderson is hot these days. Let's go with this, people. I want to see the romance angle--Pammy's mysterious new boyfriend. And, let's get some photos. But if he's an ugly bastard, I want Editing to do a major photoshop on this fucker."

There was a gentle sigh of relief from the beleaguered assistants around the table.

Their asses were safe for another day.

10.

Monday, September 15.

"I'm not going to live like this anymore," Cathy said.

Dread spread out from my inner core. I'd just returned with milk from the convenience store, and there she was, standing in the hallway, wearing her housecoat, her arms folded across her chest. I'd dropped her off at the house after our latest birthing class--she hadn't spoken to me since leaving the class. The damp wood smell of our walls permeated my nose.

"Live like what?"

"Do you know how much you have embarrassed me at these classes?"

"I'm sorry, you're right." I tried to give her a hug, but she stepped back, her gaze angry and resolute.

"You treat the whole thing like a big joke," she said. "Like it's all about you, the Donny Love Show, starring the one and only Donny Love."

I'd never seen her so intense before.

"I can't help it, Cathy. Like that smoke guy last week; he was way too funny! Didn't you find the situation funny?" I said, hanging up my coat in the closet by the door.

"You're forty, Donny. It's time you learned to control yourself, if not for your own sake, then for mine." Her face was creased with anger and concern.

I felt defeated. "It's late, Cath. Let's get some sleep, and talk about this in the morning."

"There's no time for sleep, Donny. There are twenty-nine voice mails and the phone keeps ringing off the hook. Apparently, everyone from old girlfriends to Hollywood reporters wants to talk to you, now that you're famous, Donny. You're basically down at that newspaper re-writing your own life script, and it's selling. Your big lies! What a laugh! For years you've sent your stories and manuscripts to every publisher and agent in the publishing and film business with absolutely no success, but now you're making it big, without an agent, or movie, or payment. But you're going to end up in jail for character defamation, and we'll lose the house, and this time, make it move number eight, I'll have to move out by myself because you'll be in prison, you damned fool!" She fought back the bitterness that had risen in her voice.

"Twenty-nine voice mails?" *That's too many. This is moving way too fast.*

"Who cares how many?" she said, moving closer to me. She gently poked her finger into my chest. "You've got a problem, Donny. You need help. We keep moving because you don't feel any city or town is right for you. You say you came here to help your parents, but you really came here for more than just that, Donny Love. You're trying to find something real and meaningful that you couldn't find outside of Hamilton, even after almost twenty years of searching." She took me by the hands. "Donny, the past is dead, all *those* good times are over, but there's still a future, a *good* one. We'll have it, together." Her tone was pleading.

"I know," I said. "I know." But I didn't, not really.

The phone started to ring. I made for the kitchen, but she held me back. "NO!" She looked frightened; she was obviously afraid this mayhem I'd created was going to destroy us.

"You're right, I have to get a grip on myself."

She lowered her voice. "Look around you, Donny. There are packing boxes still unopened. You've been promising to unpack them now for six months. Deep down, are you already planning your next move, your next job? Your next shot at fame and fortune? What are you afraid of, Donny? What is going on?" She'd settled her hands on my chest. Burning guilt filled my gut.

I really wasn't sure, but I did know that something *was* wrong with me, something deep inside of me that needed to be exorcised: a gibbering demon.

I gathered myself together for Cathy's sake. Her soft face looked so pained. "Listen Cathy, I know I've changed jobs a lot, and I've been searching for something since we met, but I've always landed us back on our feet. Look, we live in a nice house, finally. We're having a baby. And I promise I won't laugh out loud at the next birthing class. And I won't be late."

She offered a weak smile. "I wish I could believe you."

I put my hands on her shoulders. "I promise we won't move again. I'll stay with the Gazette, and I'll put an end to those Steven articles. Right now."

"Where did those articles come from, Donny? It's so strange. I mean, you hardly ever mentioned Steve McCartney before these columns started."

"I know, but he was a good friend of mine. And when I came here I started thinking about him again. He was the most talented person I've ever met, you know?"

I thought things were beginning to look good between us when Cathy took me completely off guard. She clamped her gaze on me, a sad and pleading gaze. "Donny, I want you to see a psychologist."

"A psychologist? You're kidding, right?"

"I think it's time we figured out why you keep moving running from job to job, city to city."

I opened my mouth to respond but she cut me off. "I won't run with you anymore, Donny. I'm run out."

"This is about me writing, isn't it?" I pulled away from her.

"Of course it isn't. It's about *why* you write, *why* you can't settle anywhere before you get bored and depressed. Not everyone who writes has the talent to get published, Donny. I'm sorry. I know that's a bitter pill for you to swallow." She looked apologetic.

"Okay, okay, true enough. But maybe I like to write."

"I'm glad you do, honey, but this is the first full-time job you've accepted and we have a baby on the way and I can't take much more upheaval." She took a deep, shaky breath. "Like I said, if you leave Hamilton, I'm not going with you." Tears had welled up in her eyes.

"You sure you want me to see a psychologist?" I said, staring at a point on the living room floor. A dark depression filled me, and I wondered what the hell was truly wrong with me. The only thing I knew for sure was that I'd always had a bad case of dreameritis.

11.

Tuesday, September 16.

Driving to work the next morning was a horror show.

In fact, the show hadn't stopped since Cathy had confronted me the night before. After she'd gone to bed, I'd listened to *all* the voice messages. It had taken me two hours. Seven of them had been from old high school friends, 'likeables' as I'd thought of them, asking how I was doing, what-ever-happened-to Steven type stuff, and did I want to get together for a beer some time? The Principal of Irondale wondering if Steven would speak at the upcoming graduation ceremony? Charlene Green, Steven's high school fantasy girl, had called, asking where Steven lived and could I call her back and give her his phone number? A producer, Jerry Simon, from Hollywood Tonight had called wanting to interview me. It had been the worst sleep of my life-- Cathy had been crying in the bed beside me, tossing and turning, and the messages had fired me

with such fear and adrenalin that I couldn't come down far enough to sleep. I felt as if I'd been bingeing on crack all night.

But when I opened the front door to head out to the car, my stomach hit the floor.

Apparently, the Men in Black had come to pay me a visit.

"Mr. Love, my name is Agent Smith," (*You've got to be fucking kidding!*) "and this is also Agent Smith." (*I'm not kidding, these were really their names*).

"We are agents of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service. I'm going to have to ask you to accompany me to answer some questions. We have already contacted your employer to let him know that you'll be a little late for work today."

I was stunned. I stood there paralyzed with fear and disbelief. The words that came out of my mouth surprised me. "Bye honey, have a nice day," I called back behind me.

Cathy's muffled voice called out from the bathroom. "Shove it!"

It was going to be a wonderful day.

12.

You wouldn't believe where CSIS had its secret Hamilton offices.

The local marijuana emporium, Up in Smoke, was constantly being closed and re-opened as a result of court battles over Canada's jellyfish marijuana laws. The grubby stoned patrons out on King Street in front of the store barely batted an eyelash as the hulking agents escorted me up the narrow stairs to the offices above the dope shop.

The building was an old turn of the century brick apartment with a lot of character-- creaky floors, poorly insulated, and with ornate iron heating grates that let a substantial quantity of dope smoke up into the office.

I found myself surprisingly relaxed during the interview.

In fact, it was all pretty funny.

The agents sat facing me across a steel table. One bright light dangled above. The garbage can was filled with the remnants of Tim Hortons donut boxes, 7-11 chili dog wrappers, and numerous candy bar wrappers.

Agent Smith (I'm not sure which one) spoke first. "Mr. Love, for how long have you known Steven McCartney?"

"Since grade school."

"When did you last hear from Mr. McCartney?"

"At our high school graduation prom."

He looked up from his notes and levelled a piercing gaze at me. "How can that be, Mr. Love, when your columns reveal a detailed knowledge of Mr. McCartney's activities in the last twenty years?"

Hot shame flooded my body. Suddenly my mind was clear. I knew what I had to do. I had to end this.

I swallowed nervously. My mouth felt pasty. "The thing is, none of this is true. The columns, I mean. I made it all up. I haven't talked to Steven since Grad. He might even be dead. I just wanted to....I mean, he...you know?"

I looked pleadingly at the Agents Smith. Surely they would understand. I felt a great sense of relief that I had finally come clean and this nightmare was coming to an end.

But they stared at me unblinking and impassive.

"Mr. Love, we expected you to deny your involvement with a suspected terrorist. But I think it's time that you understand the consequences of non-cooperation. Agent Smith?"

The other Agent Smith slid a manilla folder across the table towards me.

Paranoia rose up inside me. A terrorist? What could these granite-faced grim reapers have on me?

With a shaking hand, I opened the folder. It was worse than I thought.

Four yellow parking violations, unpaid since 1985, stared up at me accusingly.

"Mr. Love, do you know what happens to people who don't pay their parking violations?" The shadow of an evil smile played at the corners of Agent Smith's mouth.

The question hung in the air, like the dope smoke floating out of the floor vent.

Suddenly, it occurred to me that I didn't know. Why didn't I know? Did they go to jail? Did they "disappear" like Steven had disappeared?

"I'm sorry, I must have forgotten about them! H-how much do I owe you?" I started to reach for my wallet.

Agent Smith put up his hand. "That won't be necessary, Mr. Love. In fact, I think that you will find there are many *benefits* to cooperating with CSIS."

Across the steel table, he slid a Boston Creme donut on a Tim Horton's napkin.

We all eyed the donut, its icing glistening under the lamp.

It was now obvious to me that I had no choice. I had started this lie, and I was going to have to continue it because they wouldn't believe the truth.

The sad thing was that I was kind of looking forward to it.

13.

"Would you like some tea, son?" Dad asked, from the kitchen.

"Sure," I said. "Do you need a hand?"

After my interrogation, I couldn't face work, the questions, and the lies that I'd have to make up. Instead, I headed home on the HSR bus to my parents' house. I just needed to return to old comforts.

"What?" Dad's hearing was going.

"I said, do you need a hand making the tea?"

"I'm making tea, son, not an atom bomb. It's not complicated."

"Right."

"Stop your mumbling, son."

"I said "Right" ".

"I heard you the first time, I'm not deaf, you know."

I sighed in disappointment. I'd been kidding myself, thinking that my parents were going to make everything okay. They were true Scots--they'd do anything for you, but touchy-feely was not in their genes.

"So, how's your knee, Mum?" I asked her from the recliner I'd plunked myself down in. A month earlier she'd had both knees replaced, and Cathy and I had brought my old childhood bed down from upstairs and positioned it in the middle of the living room so Mum could watch television and be close to the bathroom. The sheer curtains that covered the living room sliding

doors were badly yellowed from years of cigarette smoke. Mum sat up in bed, her pink, cotton-candy hair flattened a bit from lying down.

"Achh, not too good. You know, Donny, getting old's no fun."

"Can't be easy."

She shook her head. This latest pink hair made her look like Dame Edna.

"What are you writin' that rubbish for?" Dad asked, approaching from the kitchen, his brogue thicker than the last time he spoke. Most people had no clue what my dad was saying. While my mom's accent was crisp and exact, my Dad's always sounded like he was half way into a bottle of Drambuie.

He handed me my cup of tea.

"It's complicated, Dad."

Dad scowled. "What a rubbish heap. The bin of filthy words. The nest of lies. You're writin' out your arsehole on this one, Donny. You'll be out of a job and a career if you keep it up."

"And what does Cathy think of this?" Mum piped in her sweet lilting voice. "There's a name for people who lie. Do you know what it is, Donny?"

"Mum, don't say it."

"Donny, do you know the name for people like you? Say it out loud."

"Aw, Mum, c'mon. Please."

"Donny?"

"Okay. A bletherin' fibber."

"Aye, Donny, that's it. Now, you haven't changed much, have you?"

It occurred to me that she was right. It wasn't a very nice feeling.

Dad set his cup down on a side table, then sat in the matching recliner beside me. Big, sputtering coughs rolled out of his mouth, and I half-expected his one remaining, cancer-free lung to hurl out of his mouth.

Mum rolled her eyes, and said, for the millionth time, "That'll be the death of you, Archie. Bad enough you're missing one lung and you're still smoking, you daft idiot." Her knee spasmed and she clutched it, groaning. I got up from my seat to offer some help, but she waved me down. She dragged an ice pack onto her knee and leaned back into her pillow, half-propped up. Typical Scots--they'd perform surgery on themselves if they could, rather than let someone help them.

Dad reached over to the side table, removed a pack of Export A cigs, and lit one up, mid-cough. "I'll not take orders from a woman with dolly hair!"

One of the reasons Cathy and I had moved back to Hamilton was to help my aging parents. What the hell were we thinking?

"Next thing you'll have cancer of the throat and you'll bein' smoking a fag through a bloody hole in your neck!" Mom said, her voice rising in pitch.

"Whisht, woman, you're haverin'! I've told you, I'll die the way I choose, not the way you want me to. If you can't have a smoke at my age, then when can ya?"

"Well, I won't be far behind you, not wi' all that second-hand smoke you've forced on me!"

"Move out then, lassy. But you'll have to be carried out the door by the bletherin' fibber, wi' the shape your knees are in."

"Ahhhh," she said. "Take a hike."

I picked up the television remote, or the "flicker" as my parents called it, and turned on the television. Some things never change. As a kid, their constant arguing used to upset me, but now I just found it comical.

"How's your tea?" Dad asked, exhaling a massive cloud of smoke.

"Great," I said.

"Is that Norbert Reingruber?" Mom said, disbelievingly, pointing towards the television, her face scrunched up.

"Ochh, you're haverin', woman. That hair dye has damaged your brain." Dad said. "Are you referring to that wee egg-headed boy that used to play wi' oor Donny?"

"Oh my God!" I said, spilling some hot tea over the rim, burning my fingers.

I couldn't believe it. On Channel Eleven news, a reporter was interviewing Norbert Reingruber. He was sitting in his mom's basement. Norbert was in a time warp -- taped to the panelled walls was the same Ted Nugent Double Live Gonzo poster he'd bought when he was sixteen, as well as the Rush 2112 and Led Zeppelin Zofu posters that had been there since I'd known him. The famous Raquel Welch poster was still there, too. For a Grade Eight boy, that poster had been a little piece of porno heaven.

Norbert was dressed to the hilt. He'd feathered his hair like he'd worn it in the seventies. His gut hung over a pair of tight jeans, his flab squeezed out of a Kiss Army t-shirt, and he wore a brand new pair of vintage ROM Adidas running shoes. He was plunked down in an orange bean bag chair, happy as a boy of eight, or an arsonist pushing forty.

"Oh yes, Steven and I were very close. In fact, of all his friends I was the closest."

My jaw dropped. "Bullshit!"

My Dad growled, "Hey, watch your tongue now, Donny! I'm not too old to tan your fuckin' hide, and don't you forget that."

The Channel 11 news reporter's microphone was visible at the edge of the camera.

"Had you always known Steven would be famous?"

Reingruber sounded professorial. *"I knew it as far back as Grade Three. He was always the class clown, with the comedic timing of a young Gene Wilder, perhaps. The teachers never disciplined him. They were far too amused by his jokes. In Grade Nine, he played Poncho in Man of LaBamba, Grade Ten, a character in Sweet Charity, Grade Eleven, Boo Whatsisname in To Kill a Blackbird, and Grade Twelve he was Jesus in Godspell."*

The interviewer hesitated for a moment, clearly thrown off by Norbert's stupidity. Norbert had steepled his fingers thoughtfully.

"He must have been quite a talented actor, even in high school."

My dad hissed in disgust. "He's full of shite, that one. Livin' in his parents basement. Time that lad's mother kicked him to the curb. He'll no become a man rotting in that basement. Maybe a laggard or a wastrel, but never a man."

"Too late," Mum crisply added. "He's stunted for life, that one."

"Look at the fat on him," Dad said, pointing at the television. "He's the size of a zeppelin."

"...Grade Thirteen was Steven's zenith, that's when he became aware that he would ascend the heights of greatness, no matter what he did. He also put a band together with a very old friend of ours." He stroked his greasy beard.

"You must be referring to Hamilton's own Donny Love."

"Yeah, yeah, Donny. Anyway," he said, shifting in his chair, *"here is my archive of photographs chronicling this important stage in Steven's rise to fame."* The camera scanned as

Norbert flipped through his photo album, revealing images of Steven from grade school up to the shots of Steven entering and leaving comedy clubs, plus photos of Steven's old writer's digs down on Barton Street. Even a Peeping Tom shot through Steven's window, showing him banging out his screenplay on his old Royal typewriter.

"*I played drums in all of Steven's bands,*" Norbert said, dropping the photo album in the bean bag chair. He hurried over and sat behind a massive drum set that would've made Neil Peart from Rush jealous. He almost fell off, he was so excited.

"*Remember John Bonham's solo in Black Dog? I can play it pound for pound, man.*" He started hammering the skins. One of his drumsticks flew out of his hand and landed at the feet of his mother, who was smiling at the camera from the foot of the stairs. In her hands she carried a tray of milk and cookies.

The reporter turned to face the camera to wrap it up. He looked alarmed at the racket going on behind him. He had to raise his voice to a yell. "*This is Jamie Dawson reporting on the Steven McCartney phenomenon right here in the basement of Steven McCartney's best childhood friend, Norbert Reingruber!*"

"Best childhood friend? I can't take anymore of this crap!" I said, jabbing at the power button.

"There was always something not right about that boy," Mom said sweetly.

"Aye, he's for the looney bin, that one," Dad said.

I had to get out.

"Well, we've got another birthing class tonight at seven," I said, walking towards the door. "If I'm late, Cathy will have my head. Thanks for the tea. I'll drop by again on the weekend."

I'd only made it half-way across the living room when, beyond the large window, the scene on the street outside froze me in my tracks.

A Channel 11 News Truck pulled up against the curb, followed closely by City Pulse, and the CBC.

14.

Fifteen minutes later, it was Barnum and Bailey's out on the front lawn.

"It's bloody madness out there!" Dad said, pacing in front of the living room window. His face flushed with anger. Madness shone brightly in his eyes. He punctuated the air with his cup, sloshing tea onto the carpet. "They're mucking up my lawn the bastards."

"Archie," Mom said, angrily, "you're spilling tea over my good carpet." She'd clamped her hands against the side of her face, shaking her head.

"Forget the carpet Esme, it's the lawn I'm concerned about. I spent a fortune on it and those television people are bloody well ruining it. I've a mind to sue the bastards." Tea was dripping off his wrist now.

Mom was straining in her bed to see what was happening. "They're coming for you, son," she said, as if announcing an alien invasion. "They're coming!"

"Move your arse out there," Dad said, "and face the paparazzi. They're ruining our grass."

"Aye, the grass," Mom said. "We spent a fortune on it."

I sighed heavily. My dad was right. I'd created this monster and I had to face it. I felt like the little boy who'd once lived here and was being told to go to school and apologize for talking back to the teacher.

I bolted for the door. Panic ate me up. What was I going to say? Anger stung me. What right did these pricks have to invade my privacy like this? *Like the way you invaded everyone's privacy in your columns?*

This is it, I thought. Everyone from my past will know the true me, the lying idiot who ran away from Hamilton and came back with his tail between legs-- no trophy, no best-seller novel, no hit records. All the people in high school who ignored me will now have more reason to, and they'll think even less of me than they did then.

And I was out the door onto my parent's porch, flashbulbs blinding my eyes, a throng of reporters flooding the lawn and sticking cameras and microphones in my face. Behind them, a number of kids on bikes and skateboards had followed the trucks and were hanging out on the sidewalk, pointing, thrilled with all the excitement. The black unmarked car was parked down the road. I could see that CSIS wasn't going to be rescuing me from this.

"Can we have a few words with you, Mr. Love?" said a hip reporter from City-TV; he looked to be all of twenty.

"Yeah, I guess so." The wall of reporters had blocked my route down the concrete walkway.

Run, run while you can!

But I couldn't. Lead had filled my legs. The wind dragged a heavy sulphurous stink across my lawn, courtesy of Dofasco, Hamilton's steel factory.

"Are you still in contact with your old buddy Steven McCartney?"

Feeling sick inside, I knew that the truth just wouldn't do. It was just like the CSIS interrogation. I'd done such a good job of lying about Steven that now the truth would sound like a lie.

I knew I had to be very careful with this lie. "I'm in frequent contact with Steven, but on his terms and not through the usual channels."

The reporters jumped excitedly on that. The CBC reporter's resonant voice cut through.

"Are you saying, sir, that it is too dangerous for McCartney to use phones and email? Just what is it that Mr. McCartney is doing now that puts him at such risk?" Leave it to the CBC to cut to the chase so quickly.

My heart thumped loudly. I had to be careful now that CSIS was involved.

"Actually, last time I talked to Steven, he was working on some music, stuff like that. Nothing dangerous." I tried to sound convincing.

City TV piped up again. "What kind of music?" This was right up their alley, with their young urban audience.

"Well, Steven was always a fabulous singer. Just ask anyone from our high school, Irondale Collegiate. He had, I mean, *has* a fantastic pop voice. And he can mimic any one's voice, note for note. He was-- *is* the most talented guy I've ever met. As far as I'm concerned, he's a superstar." For a moment, I'd forgotten all about the press on my parents' front lawn. I was back in my heyday, with my buddy Steven and the full potential of life ahead of us.

The excited buzz brought me back to the present. The questions came from all directions.

"What kind of music is McCartney writing?"

"Will we be seeing a CD release soon?"

"Who's producing his release?"

"Any concert dates in the area?"

"Any chance he'll be including a date at his old alma mater for their fiftieth anniversary coming up later this month?"

To be honest, I don't know how I answered the questions. I know I said yes to a couple of them, but I'm not sure which ones. And I'm not sure the reporters knew, either. All I know is that the next morning the Hamilton Gazette reported on its front page that super pop legend Steven McCartney was planning to make a stop on his world tour in his old home town of Hamilton. Irondale Collegiate would be proud to host his hometown debut at their Fiftieth Anniversary Concert on Thanksgiving Weekend, Saturday, October 11.

I had three weeks to find my potentially dead friend, turn him into a pop star, and present him to the world.

Three weeks.

15.

"What the hell are you doing, Donny Love?"

I was standing in the front hall, panting from trying to outmanoeuvre the paparazzi standing on my front lawn. Cathy looked like Judgement Day.

"What do you mean? I just dropped in to visit my parents." I swallowed nervously as I feigned my innocence.

"How can you keep lying to me? I've been watching you on television for the past half-hour. There are clips of you on practically every station. So Steven's going to headline a big concert, is he? Steven, who might be dead. Steven, who you haven't spoken to or heard from in twenty years. You are pathetic, Donny! If you were made of wood, your nose would be twenty feet long right now!"

Cathy stormed off into the kitchen.

I felt sick to my stomach. I had visions of her leaving, carrying suitcases out the front door, and never returning.

What could I say to her?

She was right. I was pathetic.

And now there was no way I could tell her about CSIS.

16.

Cathy and I sat in the basement watching television.

We were watching the news, a depressing bit about the war in Iraq. The lasagne dinner smell was still in the air. Chocolate cake crumbs sat on the empty plates on the coffee table. Cathy had said very little to me all night after her blow-up. I couldn't blame her.

The paparazzi had clung to the sidewalk in front of our house. I'd paced back and forth in the living room while Cathy made the dinner, occasionally peering through the crack in the drapes, but every time seeing them still there. I'd called the police radio room and they'd sent around a cruiser. They'd dispersed for awhile, then returned in twos and threes until they'd amassed in original number.

I'd found myself thinking about my aging parents, wondering how life would turn out for them in the following years. I wondered what would happen to Cathy and I, wondered if, on my own, I could put a stop to my writing compulsion.

"...You promised you'd paint the baby's room a week ago," Cathy said, in a grim voice.

"You're right. I'll do it tomorrow," I said, changing the channel on the remote.

"Not Ultimate Fighting. It's too violent. Uh-uh."

I changed the channel. "What do you want to watch? "Seinfeld" or "Sex in The City?"

Cathy didn't answer. I glanced at her profile. Her eyes had teared up.

I longed to move closer to comfort her, but I didn't dare.

A flash of light through the crack in the basement room drapes startled me and I got up and peered through. Just headlights from the neighbour's car as he pulled out of the driveway. I scanned the street for signs of the CSIS dudes, but the street was deserted. After leaving my parents' house, they'd followed me to my house, then had driven away for some reason.

Cathy turned to gaze at me earnestly. "You're a nervous wreck, Donny. I want you to stop all of this. Tomorrow I want you to tell your boss the truth."

"He'll fire me, Cathy," I said, returning to the couch.

"I don't care. I just can't take the pressure, anymore. What if I miscarry?" She choked on her last word, but gained control of herself.

"It's okay -- you won't miscarry. Everything will work out." It made me sick even to imagine that that could happen.

"The baby's due in six weeks, you haven't painted the baby's room, you haven't even tried to get in to talk to the psychologist, these entertainment people will sue you for all the lies you're telling about them, maybe you'll even end up in jail, and then you won't even know your child, and the media's stalking our house because you don't care about the baby or me." She drew in a trembling breath.

"Of course I care--"

She stared at the floor, shaking her head. A big tear dropped onto her cheek.

My mouth parted. I felt helpless to find anything to say. Numbness spread inside me. She was right. I was all talk, all lies. I was out of control. We must have sat there for a good hour, saying nothing, each passing second our marriage sinking deeper and deeper into quicksand. After awhile, desperate to break the tension, I flipped the channels until I happened on Channel Eleven.

My mouth unhinged all the way. On the screen was the last person I'd ever expect to see gracing the local news. He was being mobbed by reporters outside of the Canadian Tire as he rolled the giant automotive bay door shut and headed for his car in the parking lot.

Cathy said, "Isn't that your friend Tony?"

"Holy shit," I said.

"...Steven was awesome," Valentini said. There was a weird look on his face. "We used to dream of running a Nascar racing team one day. After high school we were going to get sponsors and Steven was going to do the promotion end of things and get the dough and I was going to start training as a driver on my uncle's dirt track out in Cayuga. He owned the thing, and

I could drive on it any time I wanted. I had the talent with cars, and Steven had the brains and the chutzpah. We could have taken the racing world by storm."

"You lying bastard!" I said. "They never discussed Nascar. Ever. Never." I stared at his face. Now I could see what that funny look was about: guilt. Tony had been bitten by the bug and he knew it!

"How do you know they never had plans like that?" Cathy said.

"Because I just know, that's all." Jealousy rose up inside of me. My ears burned. First Reingruber, now Valentini. Steven had liked me the best, and that was that.

Cathy gave me a piercing glance. "Maybe you weren't as special to your old friend as you'd like to think," she said carefully.

"That's a load of rubbish," I said, sounding just like my old man.

Cathy's silence spoke volumes.

"You just couldn't understand the relationship between me and my old bud," I said. I crossed my arms and slumped deeper into the couch. A big, sulky kid.

I couldn't believe Tony was spilling like this. Not once had he ever shown any desire for the spotlight. In fact, he had no use for famous people, so I'd thought. I knew then, more than ever, that everyone desires to be famous, even if just a tiny bit.

The scene on the screen changed to Pappas' restaurant. *No frickin' way! I can't handle this!* John was standing there with his arms crossed, dressed in black pants, a crisp white shirt, and a thin black tie, very eighties and waiterly. He posed the same way he had in the school halls between classes. A cocky grin ate up his face. He spoke into the reporter's microphone. "Sure, I knew Steven back in the day. We used to chill together."

"Did you have any idea Steven would become famous?" the reporter asked.

Pappas scratched his chin. "Of course, I did. Truthfully, though, any one of our group could have been famous if we'd taken the risk." His voice had taken on a funny tone. "It takes a special kind of person to do that---you know, just throw it all away, walk away from everyone who loves you, all your responsibilities to people..." His voice trailed off and I saw sadness in Pappas' eyes.

The reporter apparently didn't like the way the energy was draining out of the interview, so he jumped in with the next question. "When was the last time you spoke to Steven?"

Pappas suddenly turned back on. "I had a few chances myself, you know, to have a career in the biz. I used to be able to dance like nobody's business." He saw the camera woman starting to make the wrap-it-up gesture to the reporter. "Wait, wait, check this out!" Pappas said, and he slipped into a tap dance routine straight out of *That's Entertainment*. It was surreal. The camera angle widened so that we could see John's fancy footwork. He was good, actually, but the crazed look in his eyes kind of ruined the effect.

"Oh-my-God," Cathy said in disbelief. "He's dancing on television! The grown man's actually dancing on the news. That's...so pathetic. Your friends are...." She groped for the word.

"You moved us back here to be with these bizarros?"

We both stared, mesmerized.

"I could have been famous," Pappas gasped, his dance routine done, "but hey, I had a family business to run. Had to help out my dad. He suffered a stroke when I was eighteen. My chances were ruined."

"His dad never had a stroke -- he still comes in to the restaurant to manage the place every day!" I spluttered indignantly.

Cathy was starting to breathe heavily through her nose. It was not a good sign, kind of like when a bull is getting ready to use you as target practice. "You came back to Hamilton for *this*," Cathy said, her voice raised. "You and your friends are acting like a bunch of attention-seeking children!"

"No, they're not usually like this! It's the damn camera, it makes them act out. I've never seen them act that way, even back in high school. And I didn't come back just to hang out with these guys -- I came back to help out my parents."

Cathy stared at me, incredulous. "You're lying to yourself again, Donny. Don't you hear yourself?"

Yes, I am. So what?

The news broadcast had moved to another segment about the war in Afghanistan. I'd sat down to watch television to escape my problems, and they'd fought their way out of the television screen to taunt me. I couldn't remember ever having so many battles to wage at one time.

I hit the remote control. The television died.

Cathy stood up. "I've had enough for today. I'm going to bed. If I wake up in the morning, feel free to shoot me."

"Not if I shoot myself first."

I sighed deeply, and sank back a thousand miles into the sofa, thinking of nothing and everything.

17.

Wednesday, September 17.

10:15 a.m.

I sat in the waiting room at the Albany St. Medical Clinic. The walls were painted an institutional green. On one wall hung a print of a painting of generic-looking flowers. I wondered what impulse would possess a person who could actually paint to do a picture of something so uninteresting. A sidetable was host to Time magazines dating back to the late nineties. The place was packed. Kids were crying, adults sneezing, some with bags under their eyes, everyone looking sad and depressed, worried, used up, unhappy. *Is that how these people see me?* I wondered. I surreptitiously caught my reflection in the tinted window. *Ouch.*

I was here because Cathy had suggested it. After an otherwise dismal breakfast, I had decided to see a doctor and get some help. She was right, she was always right. So there I sat, waiting to see a doctor so he'd refer me to a psychologist to dissect my brain and discover my fatal flaw.

I adjusted my legs under my laptop computer. I'd told myself I'd write the next instalment of my column while waiting. My promise to Cathy to end the columns nagged away at me, ignored but not forgotten. I'd left a message on Bob's voice mail that I had an appointment and would be in later that morning. I didn't have a regular doctor yet--Cathy had us on a few waiting lists in town, but Steel City was no different than Toronto in that sense: doctors were hard to come by. I knew we were lucky to have the walk-in clinics.

"...So how long have you been lying?" said Dr. Klus, a female doctor in her late thirties. She had a round face with piercing blue eyes, and her feminine hands were in contrast to her strong shoulders.

We'd finished all the medical history preliminaries. I had awkwardly tried to explain my reason for seeking counselling.

I took a deep breath and inhaled. "As far back as I can remember. But not always, just once in awhile. It's not compulsive."

"And why do you lie?"

"I dunno. Mostly I lie to myself."

She nodded understandingly. "We all do that, Mr. Love."

"Yeah, but it makes me do crazy things, like pick up and move, or see the past for what it's not, then make decisions based on the past that are based on illusion, or skewed. I mean, I know I'm lying to myself, but I can't help it." I heard my own voice say it.

"So you feel that your lying to yourself is causing you to lose control of your life?"

"Yeah, something like that." After my initial squeamishness about unloading my private emotions for an audience, I could feel myself really getting into this. "I get scared and my gut's telling me not to do the things I do, but I do them anyway. I'm a liar, and I hate liars, but I lie to myself over and over again and I hate myself for it. Round and round, over and over." I felt the misery dripping from every word.

"I can book you into see someone, but I have to warn you, there's a huge waiting list." She looked regretful.

This was getting nowhere. I had to do something, something desperate. I was going to lose my wife. How else could I get immediate action? I blurted: "I think about killing myself all the time. The other day, I was so depressed I tried to hang myself with a, with a (I cast about desperately for an idea) clothes hanger. I need help or I'm going to cut my freakin' heart out. I can't take it anymore. " *Liar, liar, liar!*

She quickly became quite intense. "Okay, Mr. Love," she said, turning to the chart on her computer, "I'll do everything I can to fast track you. I can also provide you with a list of private practitioners. You can see them within a few weeks, but they're not cheap."

"Okay, um," I said, edging off the examination table. Suddenly I was feeling panicky. How many more lies was I going to tell? I was frightening myself. "I'll pay for services if I feel any more desperate."

"Mr. Love, let's talk through some of this now. I can't let you leave feeling this way. I am trained to counsel patients who are feeling depressed or anxious."

"I just really have to go now," I said hastily, stepping toward the door.

She hurried in front of me, pulled a brochure from the wall rack, and gave it to me. "Mr. Love, if you feel desperate at any time, don't hesitate to call any of these numbers. There are lots of help lines when you're going through a bad patch. You don't need to hurt yourself."

I felt so guilty about worrying this nice woman. "Is there a Liar's Anonymous listed here?"

She smiled regretfully. "No, sorry. Don't think that one exists yet."

"It bloody well should."

She nodded. "You won't stay and talk to me?"

"Sorry. No. But thanks for everything."

And I was out, hustling past the sickos in the waiting room and then out the front door, realizing I'd tried to take the first step towards dealing with my insidious lying -- by lying.

Great. I was definitely on the road to recovery.

18.

While waiting in the doctor's office, I'd dashed off the next Steven McCartney instalment. It was a screeching big lie, all of it, but I'd loved writing every last letter of it. It was the easiest, smoothest, fastest column I'd written so far. It had almost made me feel pure inside.

There was a Tim Horton's a few doors down, so I bought myself a care package and returned to the car, scarfing down a chocolate dip donut as I listened to the Beatles singing "Yesterday" on CKOC. Still one of the most heart-breaking songs I've heard or will ever hear in this lifetime. Last night's news footage reeled through my heated brain. Pappas, Valentini, and Reingruber. The Three Stooges. Since I'd left the Hammer I hadn't really found any new long-term friends. Work friends, sure, but none that stuck; I never felt connected to any of them in a deep or meaningful way. Beers after work, or a social barbecue--that was about it. Since leaving Hamilton, I'd worn my past around my neck like a string of worry beads. Had Fate turned me around and sent me back to Hamilton to start over with these old friends? I wasn't so sure I wanted it that way--I still felt pretty disconnected from them.

Cathy was right: what kind of losers started aping for the camera like twelve-year-olds starved for attention? Were we all just a bunch of class clowns who felt ripped off that *we* hadn't grown up to be the center of attention? *Was* I really trying to make Steven famous so *I* could be in the limelight?

After seeing them on television I'd felt a mix of revulsion and shock. Revulsion because they all seemed so desperate; shock because I realized I didn't know these old friends, not really, nor had I ever really known them. I wasn't sure if I hated them or loved them.

I stared at my cell phone lying on the dashboard. I wondered if the guys would call me, or if their sixty seconds of fame had gone to their heads and they wouldn't need me anymore. Truth was, any one of us who made it big wouldn't give a rat's ass about the others and would surf that fame wave for as long as he could.

You don't know that for sure, asshole. Maybe you're the only one who'd do that. Maybe you're the only real jerk here.

Tim Horton's was hopping. People left in droves, carrying trays of coffee and donuts. It seemed that wherever I went in life I saw someone who reminded me of someone I'd once known from high school. My brain seemed to be going into meltdown.

I dumped my coffee out the window and screeched out of the parking lot, feeling like some half-baked pilot. My car was practically flying. I felt free and chased and chasing, and wondered what the hell was happening to me. I'd just seen a doctor and was telling her I was suicidal and was waiting for the loony doctor to buzz me up for an appointment. *Oh My God what the hell is happening to you?*

The only thing I knew at that moment was this: I was becoming unhinged, and I was digging it in a dark and wild way.

19.

Lou Goldberg was a happy man. This segment on the Canuck hero was a real asskicker. The whole Pam Anderson angle was fabulous -- it allowed them to haul out some very juicy photos of Pamalot's humungous cans, which always sold lots of air time. Sponsors loved that stuff. Of course, they were keeping this segment very clean, because, after all, it *was* a family show, but there was no reason that there couldn't be a few sly references to sweaty thank-you sex from Pam to her doggies' rescuer.

And, if there was good viewer response, they could dig up this guy, Clint McCartney or whatever the hell his name was, and get a bit of interview tape. They could use their newest host, Lyra -- she had great boobs and would wear anything they told her to. If they gave her the script well enough in advance, she would probably be able to pronounce most of the words.

Yes, after tonight's show, the ratings would be way up.

20.

It was a hell of a show.

My dad later remarked that he never realized that Steven had been such a good-looking young lad in his day. The photos that Hollywood Tonight had dug up from old yearbooks, Reingruber's scrapbook, and God knows where else had all been touched up a bit.

Steven at 18 had an uncanny resemblance to a young Brad Pitt.

The footage of Pam Anderson's breasts was just revealing enough to escape the censors' judgement, while bringing in a record number of viewers.

The video of Pam cuddling her little doggies up to her gargantuan mammaries was both titillating and touching.

Steven's selfless act of heroism, as he ran through the blazing inferno of a California brush fire, apparently caught the imagination of the world. Or, at least, that part of the world that got its news from Hollywood Tonight.

And the best part was that they included me in the segment.

They made Donny Love famous.

21.

Thursday, September 19.

"And since when are you an "internationally recognized journalist?" Where did that one come from?" Cathy was steaming mad. After a sleepless and anxiety-filled night, we were both still reeling from the impact of the show.

CTV had apparently sold their footage of my impromptu interview on my parents' lawn. Thanks to cunning editing, I came across like a mega concert promoter: Steve McCartney was a

superstar, even though no one had ever heard of him before, his world tour had hit every major city, even though no arena would ever find records of those concerts, and Hamilton, Ontario was about to experience the biggest, most life-changing event in its history.

Even I would have believed it. Those damn editors were that good.

As I sat staring at my soggy Bran Flakes, Cathy's angry drone in the background, something happened inside of me. It occurred to me that I felt calm. My paralyzing weeks of terror had suddenly morphed into a new sensation.

I was going to do something about all this.

22.

I decided not to call Sharon on the phone. What I had to tell her had to be said face-to-face.

Sharon Munn was now a full-time concert booking agent who worked out of her home in Hamilton's west end. She'd gotten into the business in her mid-twenties when most people from the day were quitting their musical dreams in favour of more stable work. She was the only old friend I knew of in the music business. Although we hadn't kept in touch, my career writing concert reviews had kept me up to date on her progress. She'd become remarkably successful, despite her decision to remain in Canada and in the Hammer, of all places.

Sharon had always struck me as something of a genius--bitter and edgy, but definitely miles ahead of everybody else. To tell the truth, I was nervous about asking for her help. She had never suffered fools lightly, and I had been the victim of one of her vicious tongue-lashings on more than one occasion. Despite that, I had always kind of thought of her as a friend. I wasn't so sure she thought about me that way, if at all.

As I pulled up to the house, I had to laugh. Always the rebel, Sharon had metaphorically given the conservative, monied neighbourhood the middle finger by painting a fluorescent mural of the Ramones on her garage door.

The sound of the door bell triggered massive chaos inside the house. Something that sounded like a small dragon thundered towards the door, bellowing and apparently intending to claw the way through the wood with its talons. I prepared to defend myself with my best Bruce Lee dragon fist.

A massive struggle was being enacted behind the door. Between the muttered invectives and thumping noises, my heart rate was through the roof.

The door was flung open. I was still frozen in my kung fu pose.

"Well, get the fuck in here, Love. I can't hold on to Madonna all day. She weighs one-hundred eighty pounds, for Chrissake!"

23.

Friday, September 20.

We were sitting in Sharon's sunny little kitchen, eating cinnamon buns and catching up on each other's news. Sort of.

"You're an idiot, Donny."

Still feeling a bit intimidated, I nodded my head. Madonna, a huge brindled Great Dane, was licking my sticky fingers with a tongue the size of my shoe sole.

"Fortunately for you, cleaning up after idiots is my specialty. The way I see it, you have two choices: you can hire somebody to impersonate Steven McCartney on world television, or you can go looking for the real Steven." She sighed heavily. "Frankly, if you choose Door Number Two, you're beyond demented."

"Can you find somebody who would pass as Steven? I mean, there are a lot of people in this town who knew him really well. They'd pick up on a phoney right away."

"Not with the right make-up and lights. Look, Donny, I'm really good at what I do. I'm not trying to brag. I just want you to understand that, if you need people to think they've seen God himself on stage, I can do it."

Suddenly, I was feeling a whole lot better.

24.

Suddenly, I was feeling a whole lot worse.

Sharon and I had been hammering out the details later that day over the phone. And it looked like the details were going to bankrupt me.

"The sound and lights booked. Studio musicians hired. "She chuckled, a sound that made me oddly uneasy. "Actually, those guys are gonna be interesting."

I felt my stomach churning acid. This was becoming bigger than I'd ever imagined.

"Promotion we talked about--I've already placed an ad in the Gazette and I've sent emails to everyone on the media list, but it would be a lot better if we could take out a full page ad in the Toronto Star as well." She paused for a moment. "Did you get the figures I emailed you?"

My heart jumped up. "When did you email those?"

"Just a few minutes ago. Don't you have your Blackberry with you?"

"I can't afford a Blackberry." My mind was racing ahead.

"Pffffff. Amateurs."

I was in the kitchen.

Cathy was downstairs. On the computer.

This was not good.

"I'll call you right back," I whispered.

I stood frozen to the spot for a moment, waiting for it. My feet wouldn't move.

There was a strange sound downstairs, like the air being sucked into an atomic explosion a beat before the incineration.

In my own personal horror movie, I found myself creeping down the stairs towards my certain doom. I hoped Cathy didn't have a chainsaw. She was sitting with her back to me. I was afraid to see her face. It was the sound of her voice that was the most terrible. She spoke quietly, in her short sentences.

"What have you done, Donny?"

"Cathy, it looks bad but I haven't done anything yet."

"You were going to take out a fifty thousand dollar loan. We would lose everything. We would be bankrupt. With a newborn baby."

A knifing pain tore through my chest.

"I won't do it, Cathy. I promise--"

Suddenly, Cathy's rage flared. She whirled around to face me, something resembling hatred in her expression. It chilled me to the bone.

"You always promise! And you always let me down! But I won't take it anymore. If you break this promise to me, our marriage is over."

She pushed past me and thumped up the stairs, sobbing angrily.

I found myself staring at the computer screen.

You can probably guess what I did next.

25.

September 21

Saturday.

8:45 a.m..

I found myself sitting at Tim Horton's, drinking a jumbo coffee. Across from me sat Nascar Valentini. He'd taken a break from the Canadian Tire pit stop. His coveralls were greasier than usual.

"Okay," Tony muttered, embarrassed, staring down at his coffee. "Sweet Jesus, it was stupid." He looked up. "That camera took hold of me," he said, clenching and unclenching his fist. "I guess," he mumbled, "I guess I just wanted people to think that I'm more than just a mechanic, that I did something special with my life, you know...." He shook his head, avoiding my gaze.

"I completely understand, Tony. I get it. I mean, look who you're talking to--- the number one Attention Seeker in the world."

"Can't argue with that," he said, smirking and raising an eyebrow.

"I'm the one who's the real fuck-up here."

"Aw, you're not as bad as you think, Donny. You've done some really stupid things lately. But you're still a good guy. You love your wife. You're gonna love your baby, and you're not going to risk it all for this crazy scheme."

Oh my God, I have to tell him.

"Tony, I just spent fifty thousand dollars that I don't have to finance Steven's show at Irondale. Cathy doesn't know, and she can't know, because she's going to leave me once and for all if she finds out."

Tony stared at me, his eyes expressionless. He worked his mouth as if he were chewing a tire tread. I dreaded the words that were going to come out of his mouth.

"You know, man, Angela is no supermodel, and God knows we've had our share of knock-down, drag-out arguments, but there's no fucking way I would ever risk losing her. My marriage and my kids are the center of my existence and they should be yours, too." He sighed heavily, never taking his eyes off me. "I think you need someone to teach you how to grow up. I'm going to help you. We're going to finish what you started. And then you are going to be the best goddam husband and father the world has ever seen. Cause if you don't, I'm gonna kill you."

26.

Monday, September 23.

9:30 a.m.

Even if I had temporarily forgotten about Agents Smith and Smith, they had not forgotten about me. As I was soon to discover, CSIS had enthusiastically pursued its investigations into Steven McCartney, and I continued to be their biggest potential source.

As I was about to back up out of my parking spot at Tim Hortons, the now-familiar black sedan pulled up in front of my car, just like in the movies. The front passenger window rolled down dramatically, and Agent Smith lowered his sunglasses to peer at me like an annoyed schoolmarm.

"Mr. Love, we've been worried that you lost our phone number."

I felt annoyed with myself for my knee-jerk reaction of fear at the sight of the agents, so I was a bit cheeky. "No, no, I haven't."

Agent Smith narrowed his eyes. "Have you forgotten about our arrangement, sir?"

I have to admit that I did feel my stomach lurch at that one. "Well, I don't think that we had an 'arrangement', per se," I said slowly.

"Yes, we did, Mr. Love."

"No, I don't think we did. I mean, it's possible that the, uh, air quality of the room may have affected my memory of our meeting, but I don't believe that I agreed to anything, Agent Smith."

At the sound of his name being uttered aloud in a public place, Agent Smith recoiled back and the window slid up. The next thing I knew, I was sitting in the back of their sedan in the farthest corner of the parking lot, beside a dumpster that stank to high heaven. Agent Smith behind the wheel sat ramrod stiff, facing away from me. I got the distinct impression that he was disgusted with me.

In the passenger seat, Agent Smith was clearly not happy. "You ate our donut," he said carefully. The accusation hung in the air between us.

I stammered back, "But that's not an agreement. That's just a snack, you know, a trans fat-laden treat. That's all." I carefully watched the 2 agents for any sign of backing down.

Agent Smith the driver suddenly lost his composure, twisting angrily to face me. His words were clipped and stinging. "In *this* country, Mr. Love, that is a binding contract. I don't know what they do in *Scotland*, but your parents surely taught you a few things about the *Canadian* honour system. In *this* country, sir, a donut isn't *just* a donut."

As he turned away from me to face the front once more, I thought I heard him mutter something that sounded like "Damn immigrants".

His partner took a deep breath and made an effort to speak calmly and evenly. "Mr. Love, we have been very patient with you, but if you do not give us the information about Mr. McCartney that you have been withholding from us, we *will* play hardball."

As scared as I was, the hilarity of this scene hit me. I did something that Cathy had always hated, a kind of nervous reaction to the bad moments of my life: I burst into shrill laughter, right in poor Agent Smith's stern face. The man's expression twisted in confusion for a second, and then the righteous anger of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service kicked in.

He triumphantly held up a piece of paper. "Do you know what this is, sir?"
Gasping for air, I tried to swallow down the hysterical giggles. I peered shakily at the sheet. "It--it looks like an Air Miles statement."

"Do you see the name at the top?" There was a trace of a smirk at the corners of his mouth.

I looked, and suddenly the laughter was gone. "That's me. That's my name."

Now Agent Smith issued the coup de grace. "Do you see the number at the top, Mr. Love?"

It was a zero.

"Y--You guys can't do that! That's illegal." I swallowed. "Isn't it?" Cathy and I had saved up those points for 3 years. We had planned to get a night in a nice hotel room with those!

Both agents shared a small smile with each other. Clearly, this was the part of the job that made it all worthwhile.

Agent Smith put it simply, so that I, a poor, naive civilian, could really understand.

"Mr. Love," he said, "we can do whatever we want to you. We are here to protect you from yourself. Now," he said briskly, pulling a laptop computer out of nowhere, "which question will you answer first?"

27.

I felt dirty. I felt used. I was a rat, a fink, a narc.

It didn't matter that everything that I'd told them was a gigantic figment of my imagination. Nor did it matter that none of it was going to lead to anything or anyone. Their investigation would continue to yield no fruit.

What mattered was that I, Donny Love, had succumbed. They had found my weakest point, the chink in my armour, my Achilles heel. I felt shaky.

This must be how torture victims feel afterwards, I remember thinking. I know, I know, there's no comparison, of course, but I think that I was in shock or something.

They had agreed to restore my points, along with "a few extra, as a thank you from the Canadian people", but I didn't want to use them now. They were tainted. It would be like Judas going out and spending the thirty pieces of silver. And we all know what Judas decided to do instead.

As the final kicker, when I got home, Cathy was gone. She'd taken only one suitcase, which was hopeful, but the note carefully taped to the kitchen table was not:

Donny:

I guess that you forgot that I know how to check the e-mail. You couldn't resist for even a few hours, could you? Bet you sent that OK to Sharon before I even got to the top of the stairs! (I felt a sick jerk of recognition at that accusation)

I don't want to talk to you for a few days. I'm going to stay in a hotel, so don't call my parents or my friends. No one knows that I've left you, and that's the way that I want it to stay, for now. (That one gave me faint sense of hope---if she hadn't told anyone, maybe she wasn't sure that it was permanent!)

Time for us both to make some decisions.

Cathy

She hadn't started the letter with "Dear" and she hadn't ended it with "Love". In all the years that I had loved Cathy, she had never left me an angry note. Actually, she had never left me, period. Cathy had been loyal and supportive through every crazy scheme, every risky move. She had voiced her concerns, and those more frequently in recent years, but she had almost always been careful not to hurt my feelings.

So a note with no "Love" in it was brutal.

I didn't cry, and I know that you'll think that I was a real bastard for that, but you have to understand that I didn't really *know* that she was gone. My brain, designed by evolution and/or God to ameliorate suffering as much as possible, understood that Cathy was not feeling love for me, and that, for tonight, she was not going to be beside me in the bed, warm and familiar and chatty.

So, I didn't cry. Instead, I sat down with a beer in front of the computer and did what I seemed to do best. I fucked up my life and the lives of those around me a little bit more.

28.

Tuesday, September 24.

11:30 a.m..

"You look like crap, Donny. What the hell's wrong?" Tony and I were sitting at what was now starting to feel like "our" table at Tim Hortons. I wouldn't have made even a mediocre spy; CSIS need only sit and wait for me each day at the coffee shop.

"Hangover. I drank a few last night. I'm drowning in my own lies." I took a shaky breath. "Cathy left me. Last night."

"Shit!" He bolted upright in his chair, flames in his eyes, passion boiling his blood. I remembered the old Tony, the angry Tony, his long black hair jiggling on his shoulders like menacing snakes.

It was starting to rain outside, and a dark grey pall pressed through the windows. I felt an incredible sadness fill me up. There's nothing like seeing someone else react to your bad news to make you realize just how bad it really is.

I sat in a trance for a moment, half-listening to Tony's angry, distressed rant. Then I pulled myself out of it.

"Listen, Tony, we've gotta find Steven. I-I'm thinking that we could hire a private detective. Or we could investigate his...criminal record, or something." My idea sounded pathetic, even to my ears. I wasn't equipped for this stuff---too much "Magnum PI" and other bad detective shows during my formative years or something.

Tony, who had suddenly calmed down, looked at me with disgust. "He didn't have a criminal record, you knob."

"Well, maybe he has one by now?"

Tony's mouth curved down in consternation at that one.

Suddenly Reingruber's reedy voice cut in. He was standing beside our table, his big stomach almost blocking my view of Tony. "You should try Directory Assistance. Hey, I didn't

get a call that we were going to have a meeting this morning. Does Pappas know? I could give him a call."

Tony was staring at him. "Reingruber, you're a bloody genius."

Norbert looked suspiciously at us, scanning us for signs of sarcasm.

Tony shook his head at me. "What a couple of idiots, Love. How does anyone find anyone these days? 411. Goddam genius."

Reingruber was already on his cell phone to Pappas. Apparently I couldn't meet one without meeting the other two. It was just like being 11 again. *The politics of friendship*, I thought cynically.

Tony caught my eye and smiled conspiratorially. "One for all and all for one, man." I felt a pang of shame that I would immediately interpret what was clearly Reingruber's act of friendship as some kind of jealous kid trick. It struck me once again that I didn't want my old friends as much as they seemed to want me. Tony, Reingruber, and Pappas were still buds, and they'd changed together, and they seemed quite willing to add me to their circle. I knew that I was using them. If I hadn't gotten my life into such a mess, I probably wouldn't have given them the time of day. *Real nice, Donny. You'd make a terrific father, wouldn't you? Bet you'd teach your child to be an excellent friend to others.* I was suddenly afraid to meet Tony's eyes, and he knew why, I think. That made me feel worse.

So, to compensate, I went into generalissimo mode. By the time Pappas arrived, we were a well-oiled machine, ready to solve the dilemma at hand. Reingruber had been given the honours, since it had been his idea in the first place. With a face like a 6-year-old on Christmas morning, he carefully dialled 411.

"Nothing? What about under a different spelling, like M-a-c-K-? Oh. Are you able to check everywhere, like, in the world? Sorry, this is my first time calling--- OK. Thanks anyway."

Peripherally, I could see everyone at the table sag.

Then Brilliant Idea #2 came from an unexpected source. Pappas suddenly said, "Wait just a doggone minute. My Auntie Kiki researches our family tree all the time. She's located a bunch of relatives that we never even knew we had! Shit! I gotta ask her how she does that." He was on his cellphone in a flash. Auntie Kiki turned out to be a big talker. We heard far more than we wanted to know about Johnny's dad, the restaurant, his plantar warts, his lack of love life, etc. as he responded to her grilling. But it was all worth it. She was thrilled when she discovered that her nephew wanted to learn the joys of genealogical research.

"Just a little trip to the public library, my friends, and the quest is done," he proudly announced.

We were all elated. In retrospect, we should have known that nothing is ever that simple. Auntie Kiki should have warned us.

29.

Life back at the Gazette had become quite bizarre. Bob Chamberlain regularly smacked me on the back as he passed my desk, and he seemed to pass it a lot more frequently now. I had taken to wincing in advance. Meg Cleroux jokingly asked me if I had developed a tic or something.

I had stopped checking e-mail, voice-mail --any mail, really, even at home. There was just too damn much of it. I pretended to be on top of it all when Bob asked, but in reality I was the guy who stops running away from Godzilla and just stands there screaming endlessly, waiting for the big foot to squash me.

So, it came as no surprise, then, that amongst the hundreds of unanswered e-mails was a series of communications from Hollywood Tonight producers offering me a chance to comment on the interesting content of several segments that they were planning to air later that week. Hell, it didn't even matter that I didn't respond: they'd always been intending to write what *they* wanted about Steven anyway. Bunch of liars.

I had thrown all caution to the winds by this point. For Saturday's column I wrote about Steven's wild night with Victoria "Posh Spice" Beckham behind the soccer great's back. Apparently, Steven was a great lover, a man of many ancient sexual secrets, the ultimate pleasurer of women. He'd also made love to Catherine Zeta-Jones (before her marriage, because I liked her), Sheryl Crow, and the daughters of a number of international leaders. His trademark exit from these trysts was a fragrant white gardenia left on the sated woman's pillow and a manly nod from the doorway. He was damn good. Maybe better than Clint Eastwood.

Fan response was huge, from all quarters. Men liked his rugged heroism (and the sexual conquests, of course), women loved his rugged heroism and contradictory tender attentions to women, and the teens were on fire to hear his music. Meg announced that a friend of hers had downloaded a pirated recording of a Steven McCartney hit from Europe. We all crowded around her computer to check out the site on the net. I was quite curious to hear what my creation had been up to; I hadn't actually thought about what kind of musical sound he would go for.

The racket that we heard sounded like Boris Yeltsin singing The Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen", except that none of us could really make out any words. We disgustingly concluded, quite rightly, that this recording was just a hoax---there was no way that a pop superstar from Hamilton would have a Russian accent.

Where it had taken me many hours to write a column before all of this, now they were pouring out of me like green vomit from "The Exorcist". I had already written Monday's and Tuesday's columns. They were submitted and ready to go. Bob rubbed his hands with glee.

"This stuff is golden, Love! Monday's bit about stealing intel from the North Koreans is genius time. God, I love the newspaper business." He fairly danced away, humming the theme from the James Bond movies under his breath. If he remembered at all that Steven was "dead" and that all of this was just a big pile of shite, he didn't make mention of it.

On the Saturday night news, I saw a piece about a raid by US Forces on an Al Qaeda hideout in Iraq. They had recovered many sophisticated weapons, along with detailed plans and contact lists for several acts of terror to be carried out against Canadian targets. The General who addressed the media at the White House credited the "invaluable information provided by an undercover Canadian source embedded in Iraq"; well, of course, we all knew that it had to be Steven McCartney. He had saved his country from devastating bombings.

Hollywood Tonight and its competitors all fought to provide the most outrageous Steven news. A major problem was the lack of film footage or recent photos. Hollywood Tonight sidestepped the issue by filming "re-enactments" of important moments using "actors". In this way, we were all treated to the sight of Steven McCartney's spectacular pecs and abs as he shirtlessly rescued Pam Anderson's dogs. He looked really good for a guy our age, I must say.

30.

On Wednesday morning, the rain battered the windshield as I drove aimlessly around the Hammer. I went past old haunts, down the escarpment to the city core, and then back up, thinking about the gulf that I'd let grow between myself and my old friends, realizing that it had been that same expanding gulf that had made it easy for me to leave the Hammer and chase my dreams of becoming a published writer.

Okay, but I had come back here, and the reason had to be more than just wanting to see my old friends. Hamilton had lots going for it; it was a blue collar city-town, economically a mixed bag, a place where the rich and the poor pounded the same sidewalks and cheered for the Tiger-Cats, where you could go to the mall and bump into your neighbour. I mean, I'd been around--Toronto, Orillia, Bancroft, Halifax, Vancouver, Port Elgin, Los Angeles—I'd never felt at home in any of those places.

I pulled over to the side of the road beside the CIBC bank at the corner of King and James Street. 'These Eyes', a cool Guess Who tune, was on CKOC. I cranked it up, fed off it, the same way I had as a kid in the back of my old man's white Chrysler Newport. I sat for awhile, the realization dawning in me that I had made a good choice, after all, showing my face back in the Hammer. This place had formed me. I got this place. I understood it. I'd never truly understood anyplace else.

The cell phone rang. *Cathy, it had to be Cathy!*

"Cathy," I practically shouted into the phone.

"No, man," he said, wheezing, "it's me, Reingruber. Listen, man. I scored four tickets for the MegaFreak show at Copps Coliseum tonight. It's on me, bud. Fifteenth row, floors. Totally fucking aaaawesummm! Are you in, Love?"

MegaFreak? When we were 13, MegaFreak was it, the ultimate metal band. We screeched our air guitars to "BigAss Woman" and plastered our bedroom walls with their posters---especially the rather pornographic one of a hot chick wearing only whipped cream and licking her own fingers. What were my parents thinking, letting me put that up? *My kid isn't going to get away with any shit---I'm going to have eyes in the back of my head*, I caught myself thinking.

It was ridiculous, a man my age going to a MegaFreak concert. The timing couldn't be worse. And with Cathy gone, I wasn't sure that I was even capable of having a good time. Still, it would be a night out with friends, drinkin' in our old downtown watering hole, and I hadn't had that pleasure in years. It was an offer that I couldn't refuse.

"Yeah, I'm in. I don't know if I'll be very good company, Norb, but I'm in. And the first few rounds of drinks are on me, OK?" I pulled the phone away from my ear a bit until Reingruber's phlegmy cheering subsided. We arranged to meet the others at the Red Ingot at 7:30.

I was feeling hopeful already. Me and the buds. Just like old times! First, I'd make things right with Cathy, then I'd go partying. I charged the car away from the bank and headed home to get my big ass woman back, before bowing to the gods that were MegaFreak.

31.

I tried Cathy's cell phone but it just kept ringing. I was determined to get a hold of her. We'd talk, I'd tell her how much I loved her, she'd cry and maybe still nurse her anger toward me, but she loved me, too, and there was our child to help mend our pain. I didn't have any specific changes to tell her about; I still owed mega thousands of dollars (we owed, more accurately), and my lies were still going full tilt. Actually, as you can see, I hadn't thought about this reunion from Cathy's perspective. I was just running on sheer, deluded hopefulness.

As I waited for a Lean Cuisine dinner to cook in the microwave, I foolishly decided that I could tackle some of my voice mail. Among the more disturbing were messages from:

1. Victoria Beckham's lawyer asking me to call him immediately regarding legal action that his client was prepared to take against Steven McCartney and me,
2. Sheryl Crow's personal assistant Debee, who asked me to call her right away with contact info for Steven, as Ms. Crow would like to renew their acquaintance,
3. the legal counsel for the President of the Republic of Something-or-other, indicating that His Worship would be making a telephone call to my home at exactly 3:00 pm our time on Monday to discuss his daughter's recent indiscretion, and
4. four lawyers suggesting I engage their services, as I undoubtedly was facing litigation of a serious and expensive nature.

I listened to a few more, hoping the next message would stamp out the fear and paranoia I was feeling from listening to the previous messages.

Barry Depaulo had called from the North West Territories. After high school, he'd become an RCMP officer, another guy I'd known who knew what he'd wanted at an early age and had never looked back. He left me his number and asked me to call him. Ted 'Wilky' Wilkinson had also called and left a message. Ted had been a buddy of mine throughout high school. He had the head the size of a watermelon, and had played second string fullback for the Irondale Jets. He wasn't the most popular kid, but he also wasn't an outcast. Off the field, Ted was an inbetweener, like me.

I listened to a few more messages, then hung up. I was on overload.

All I knew was that my life was crumbling to pieces.

The microwave bell chimed, waking me from my dark reverie. I removed my dinner, hands shaking a bit, and sat down at the kitchen table. As I peeled back a corner of the plastic to let the steam escape, it burned my hand. Through the window, the shadows had lengthened across the lawn. Soon, the clocks would go ahead an hour. It would be dark by six o'clock. All of the hopefulness that had buoyed me earlier was gone. I felt increasingly sad.

I love you Cathy. I'm sorry for everything. It's my fault. I'll make it up to you, I promise.
Even I was sick of my unkept promises.

32.

I waited on the front porch for the cab to arrive. Pappas and I were sharing the cab down to The Ingot. Twilight was upon the street. I dialed Cathy's cell phone and this time she had switched the voice mail on. I left a brief message telling her that I loved her.

Riding in the cab with Pappas actually uplifted me. I'd had any number of experiences with John back in the day: planted trees down in Flamborough with the Boy Scouts 86th Troupe, saw our first Rush concert at Hamilton Place, played weekend football at the Irondale football field, played road hockey in front of his house, went to each other's birthday parties, got hammered drinking Baby Duck wine over the side of the Hamilton Mountain, played euchre in the high school cafeteria for four years running, and shared a loyalty to the Montreal Canadiens. But I'd been a dreamer and had flown the coop so to speak, and John had stayed, content to run the family business in the town he'd grown up in.

"Well, it's good to see you're not above hanging out with us dirty Hamiltonians," John said, beaming.

"It's all good," I said. "Yeah, MegaFreak rules!" I'd made a half-hearted attempt at sounding enthusiastic.

John passed me a flask of rum. It burned on its way down.