

the matt zander journals

by gary denne

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It was so much nicer there. I never wanted to leave. But I was told to go back. I was told I had something left to do...

St. Michael's Hospital, Downtown Toronto

February 6, about 9 a.m.

I remember waking. I spent several minutes in semi-consciousness, not knowing where I was. My eyelids were heavy. I kept them shut and just laid there, frozen. I knew I was in a bed, I could feel the fresh sheets on my body and a big squishy pillow propped up behind me. I tried to move but struggled with the weight of my body. Compared with the weightlessness during my near-death experience, I felt so heavy and anchored down. I knew I was back...

Being in my body again felt like ... I dunno ... like a *prison* ... something I'd never felt before. I was stuck in the damn thing. For the first time in my life, lying there, I realized just how restrictive a physical body really was. The weirdest feeling. It's like ... you know when you sit in a bath for ages and then get out? Your body is heavy, right? It's an effort to climb out, and you know you're in your body cos' you've got that density to you. *That's* what I felt lying there. Exactly that. But being outside your body? No *way*. That was just freaking insane ... in a way I could never have imagined. I mean, when you die, not only are 'you' still 'you' outside your body, you're introduced to feelings and senses you never knew existed or even thought possible. Does that make sense? No ... maybe not. I can see I'm gonna have to think about it a little more before I try explaining this kind of stuff as it's almost to the point of there being no words in the English language to describe what it's like in the afterlife. My goal right now in putting pen to paper is to detail everything that happened during my near-death experience. Hopefully,

when I get to all of that in the following pages, I'll have found some words that come close to describing what really is the indescribable.

As I came to, I heard footsteps getting closer and quickly felt another soul enter the room. I say 'felt' deliberately. My eyes were still shut, the room was dark, and forgetting the noise of footsteps, I still knew someone was close to me. I certainly can't explain it and I don't know how, but ... I could feel other souls now (more on that later).

'Please don't open the curtains. Please don't open the curtains. Please don't open the curtains...', I thought to myself.

I opened my eyes. Daylight suddenly burst into the room. The scraping sound of curtains opening snapped me into full consciousness. I could see the back of a nurse gazing outside to the city as she fastened them. She was a large, black woman, the size of a house, dressed in white (what else?).

I looked down at myself and saw two tubes coming out my chest, one on each side. A reddish/brown colored fluid trickled down them, draining from me (that's one sign you've been in some serious shit--having tubes coming out your body like they were a normal part of you).

On my arm, there was an IV drip and down further I'd been tagged around the wrist by admissions:

Zander, Matt / 6.12.1979

St. Michael's Hospital

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So ... I knew who I was, knew where I was, and knew I was alive. Everything still appeared to be working ... (well, brain-wise that is, my body was another story). Not that I had amnesia or anything. No. Quite the opposite. Everything that had happened during my NDE (near-death experience is *waaaay* too long to write every time) was still crystal clear in my mind--the tunnel, the bright light, flashback valley, the gateway and Keller. Keller was the guy on the other side who told me I'd start to forget it all the minute I came back. That's why I have to get this down on paper ... before I lose it *and* any clue as to what it is I have left to do here.

The nurse turned from the window to see my eyes open. Her face revealed the hint of a smile.

"Mr. Zander," she began, curiosity in her voice, "how are you feeling this morning?"

How was I feeling? Good question. Let me think for a second. Well, I couldn't move for starters. I was amazed at how fast my body had seized up (note to self: that's what you get for not going to the gym). I could sure feel my chest though. It felt like I'd been impaled by a metal rod--straight through me to the back of the bed--and I was being pinned down. The pain wasn't too bad--I guess I still had some kind of painkillers in me. It was only after an hour or so of waking did I begin to feel some pain kick in--like a sledgehammer being smashed down onto my chest every second. By that time though, the nurses had already offered up a steady supply of drugs which really hit the spot. I was worried about my breathing, though. I felt like it was safer just taking shallow breaths but the nurses wanted me to breathe in and out normally, with a full breath. I had visions of accidentally taking a big breath and my chest cracking open like the San Andreas fault line. The nurses assured me it wouldn't.

"I was shot," I said with a croaky voice, as much to myself as to her.

"The bullet missed your heart by about this much," she said, holding her fingers up to show me about the width of a ... well ... a bullet (sorry). "Mr. Zander, you're what we call here an 'SMX'er' ... a St. Michael's X-file. You sure had the angels on your side last night. The doctors

operated on you for four hours. You're lucky ... they patched you up pretty good. You're gonna be just fine. We'll get you started on some exercises today to get you up and moving again, okay? We should be able to do something about those drainage tubes, too."

I watched her pour some water into a glass for me. She left it on the dresser. My mind was racing too fast to say anything more to her. I just laid there like a zombie.

"You get some rest for now. The doctor will be in to check up on you."

That, more or less, is all I can remember the day I woke up. I don't really know where the rest of the day went but one thing I won't forget was having those tubes pulled out of my chest (thank god for painkillers). The nurse--another one, redhead, not big mama--told me it would feel like an umbrella being poked inside me, opened out, and pulled out again. So kind of her to tell me that *before* she started. I must thank her ... bitch (painkillers, is there anything they can't do?). What a strange feeling though, to see tubing coming out your body, wondering where the hell it'd been and what the hell it'd been doing. Big big big sigh of relief seeing those things out, albeit with a ten minute afterthought of discomfort (burning sensation). I didn't feel so much like a Darth Vader wannabe after that.

Now, three days later, I'm out of bed, sitting upright in a chair by the window. It's no hotel room in here, believe me. There's just a couple of basic prints on cream colored walls that keep it from being totally sterile. But hey, when you got a room with a view like I have who cares what's hanging on a wall? Anyone well enough to get out of bed and make it here to the window wouldn't care what the room looked like. The view overlooks Downtown--skyscraping office towers, condos, and the sound of the traffic below (well, mostly honking horns, actually). Everyday, I try to match each horn to its respective car during rush hour (kill me, please) but I keep hearing the sound of the streetcars along Queen which screw me up.

Let's see, what else ... there's a few chairs for visitors, old 'we-have-no-funding-for-anything-new' ones. And a TV (I'm guessing 13 inch--no widescreen) hangs down from the ceiling on one of those swivel neck thingys. Next to my bed, I have a dresser, and behind that, on the back paneling, is a metal plate with a whole bunch of plugs and buttons. That's the nurses panel for the room cos' there's no way in hell I can reach it from the bed (don't worry, I have my own panel next to the bed to mess around with).

In the room with me is another bed and another patient, lying there with problems of his own. I've glanced over now and then--I don't want to stare and give the 'wonder-what-he-has-look.' It's a guy in his late teens/early twenties. He has tattoos on his shoulders and buzz cut hair, hiding underneath a black toque. I figure he's found trouble or trouble's found him. He's got bandages on both his arms--that's the only thing that stands out as any kind of injury, so he's probably not as bad off as me (tubes coming out of body beats bandaged arms). During the day, he's either sleeping, drugged out or dead--the arrival of daylight doesn't seem to worry him.

Yesterday I got the chance to say 'hey' and he gave me a quick 'hangover x 1000' kind of 'hey' back before closing his eyes again. The nurses tell me he's fine but don't say much more.

You know, one thing I've realized being in this situation is how important the muscles in your chest are when you try to sit up or get out of bed. Like @\$%! The doctor tells me I'm doing well, though, considering I was shot four days ago and spent two whole minutes clinically dead (no breathing, no pulse, no heartbeat). Giving some thought to the latter and actually counting out 120 seconds in my head, I tend to agree with him. Although, right now ... honestly? I don't know whether I'm lucky or unlucky to be back in this life?

Since waking up, I've managed to walk a little each day, albeit tortoise-like. I've brushed my teeth, cleaned up, and gotten myself out of the shitty hospital gown and into someone's black

kimono/robe that the big mama nurse pulled out of lost property for me (see, I told you I felt like Darth Vader).

Sitting here, six stories up, looking down to the snow-dumped city streets, you come to realize just how busy the world went and got. Look at them down there, people going about their lives, moving from $A > B \times \infty + 1$. Just a larger version of watching organisms through a microscope. Everyone rushing around, always something to do, someplace to be. But do people ever really think about life? What it is? What they're doing? I can say now, having a near-death experience makes you question every single aspect of your life. And I'm going to question every thought I have in my mind through this journal. Right now though, it's too damn early in the morning to get started with Philosophy 101 so I think I'll just go back to scanning building windows and that whole '*Rear Window*' voyeur thing. Haven't spotted anything kinky yet. I was hoping to see some kind of action to wake me up but it's mostly office towers down here. Nothing like my Honolulu vacation when I came across this Asian chick from my hotel window, enjoying herself in a hotel room across the street as her girlfriend watched on (that sure had me wide-eyed). Nah, about the kinkiest thing I can see from here is office photocopying. Sure beats the hell out of cable TV, though. I've flicked through the channels on that thing and I swear if I had've had a life support machine attached to me I would've pulled the plug just to save myself from infomercials and all that reality shit. Anyway, it's probably a good thing the TV sux, otherwise I wouldn't be sitting here starting this diary.

A journal/diary/whatever is the last thing a guy like me would've ever imagined writing. Like I said, though, what I want to do here is record what I can remember from the last few days. Specifically, what happened when I died, what it was like, what I saw, and exactly how I ended up back here in this hospital. I'm no writer (duh), I don't know how something like this is supposed to sound so I'm just gonna say what I want to say when I want to say it. That's what a

journal is about. I can say what I want. It'll be my mind on paper. Although, I get the feeling my mind's already sprung a leak and the near-death experience has begun to slowly drain out of me (maybe through those drainage tubes ... who knows?) So, I'd better get to it. I'm quickly learning that an NDE is like a holiday--once you get back to your daily-routine life, you start to really wonder if you were ever on holiday at all. Even at day three, I feel there's *already* some things I've forgotten about this other world I went to. I'm sinking back into normal life again and I don't want that to happen--I want to remember that place as much as I can. Honestly ... I want to be back there right now. But I realize I was given a second chance at this life for a reason.

That's gotta be the biggest wake-up call a guy can get.

So ... in order to get my mind clear on everything, I want to go back a little, before it all happened. I'm going to record everything about my death in the pages to come, but before I get started, I want to remember who I am, or, more to the point, who I *was*. The type of person I was before I was shot. Before I died. Before I knew life after death existed.

Cooley's, Bloor Street

Exactly one week earlier, Breakfast

“No fucking way,” I said quietly, as I glanced around for any other diners eyes watching us.

“No, no, no, no, no ... that’s a bad idea.”

Across from me in the diner booth at Cooley’s, Eric and James looked at me like I’d just turned down an invite to a Victoria’s Secret lingerie party. I finished my mouthful of hash browns and discreetly continued. “There’s no way we mess with anyone at the store, let alone Belcher.

We’ve always said that.”

Eric kept up the pitch. “We’d have the whole weekend wide open, he’s gonna be in Florida at some food convention. It’s a walk in the park, his wife’ll be with him--no pets, no alarm ... the house’ll just be sitting there. We’d be in and out in five ... ten tops.”

James turned to me and pulled a subject change. “Hey, where the hell did you get to last night, anyway?”

The previous night we’d all been downtown in the Entertainment district, squeezing out the weekend’s last drops at a club called Delirium. It was one of these multi-zoned places where you had a floor of dance, a floor of r+b chill-out and a floor of techno/trance for the kiddies with glo-sticks and a liking for foam. It was Eric’s idea--he’d got a tip from a friend that John Cusack was going to show up while he was in town shooting his latest. My ass he was.

“I did a runner,” I said, taking a sip of coffee, “that place sucked. Everyone was from Buffalo. Get this though, I got outside, right? I flagged down a cab and told this Indian guy ‘High Park’. So he takes off driving, we’re on our way, but I notice he keeps doing loops around the block--

he's looking all over the place, clueless. So I say, 'What the *fuck* are you doing, man?' And he turns over his shoulder and says, 'I looking for hot-dog--you say you want the hot dog!'

Eric burst out laughing. James kept the straightest face (he'd always do that).

"So I told him, 'I don't want a damn hot-dog. H-i-g-h P-a-r-k, I wanna go to High Park.'

Fucking cab drivers."

"That is so messed up," Eric said (he'd always say that).

Cooley's was one of the diners Eric, James and I would stop by for breakfast before we started our shift at Runnerman's. Cooley's was an open kitchen--been around since the 60's and the place still thought it *was* the 60's. You could mistake it for a homeless shelter it was so old and banged up--swivel stools at the counter, comfy red-vinyl booths, old wooden paneling, tables so small you had to play chess with condiments to squeeze everything on--but the food was the best. They knew their grease.

Sidebar: The Cooley's Special (\$6)

Bacon--the hardwood smoked stuff ... awesome.

Eggs, any style (I'm a scrambler).

Hash Browns--they put some kind of magic spice on these things? For all I know, it may well kill you but it's worth it.

Toast.

Choice of Fruit or Sausage--now, you'd think this one was a no-brainer, right? Polish sausage or fruit slices. Well, I always get the fruit. I try to counter-balance the rest of the stuff with the melon, pineapple and grapefruit slices.

Coffee--unlimited refills.

Sorry. As a result of being stuck here with hospital food you can see I'm dying for some real-world grease. So ... where was I? That's right ... Eric, James and I. I'd known Eric and James since working at Runerman's the past two years. I was still trying to work out what I was going to do with my life and the job had given me a buffer while I thought it through. Honestly ... I had no clue. I'd been working minimum-wage jobs ever since finishing high school. You could say under-achiever, I wouldn't argue with you--thing is, I was happy with that. I was never gonna be a stockbroker or lawyer or anything like that. No way was I ever gonna climb the corporate ladder and wear a suit to the office and be one of those yuppie stiffs you see reading GQ Magazine. I just hadn't found what I was looking for (as in the U2 classic). A Runerman's grocery assistant was never going anywhere--I knew that--and it didn't exactly have the ladies queuing up. But, that's where I was at with my life.

I was born and raised here in Toronto. A great city to grow up in, it's just not so great as it used to be. See, in '97 they merged some of the neighboring cities and called it the Megacity. What a fuck up. No one asked me if I wanted to live in a Megacity. From that point on, it became just another sprawling, cookie-cutter North American city.

My parents divorced when I was seventeen and went their separate ways from what was a shitty marriage. One's on the West Coast, one's in Europe. I don't talk to either of them anymore. It's like we all decided to divorce each other in a lot of ways. I guess you could say I was a bit of a handful as a teenager and we never really clicked as a family. I'm not a perfect person--I did some stupid things back then and know I wasn't the perfect son. None of it that serious, just stupid stuff--shoplifting, break and enters, joyriding, doing drugs. In my early twenties I got tired of that scene and gave it all away, except for the break and enters, which I continued to do out of boredom and for the rush that came with it (replacing the drugs). The only drug I craved anymore was adrenalin. See, once you get drugs into you at a young age, you know what a high

is and how it feels, and you want to keep having it. Or somehow replicate it. I'd matured a lot from my younger years but was still willing to steal other people's stuff so I could get that adrenalin high and some free electronics. DVD's, CD's, digital cams, cell phones, iPod, Xbox and PS2s--I'd take any of that stuff from the affluent homes we robbed and the bedrooms of rich college kids with mommy and daddy's \$\$\$\$. I could never afford to buy those kinda things but they were sure nice to have for free. But even if the law never catches up with you and you think you're getting away with it, eventually things have a way of working out. Well ... they have for me, anyway. And that's exactly why I'm sitting here in this hospital chair writing this. Post my near-death experience, I look back on the stuff I did with regret and shame. It was reckless, destructive behavior and I never gave any thought to the consequences of my actions until it was too late. Until now. When I get to detailing my NDE, I'll let you in on those consequences and what I experienced that's made me a different person since coming back. For now though, let me say that we did these robberies partly because we all loved the materialistic stuff we'd collect, but ... more so because it was the only drop of excitement in our otherwise pathetic, boring, insignificant lives.

I played guitar growing up. Did the whole rock scene. I had the look down--the long, dirty-blonde hair, permanent stubble, earrings, tattoos, chains and black t-shirts. These days I've cleaned up a bit and gone grunge--short hair (just-got-out-of-bed look), goatee, ripped jeans, shirt and sneakers--that kinda thing. I never really measured up as a rocker anyways. 5'6" and 120lbs., doesn't really give you that whole menacing, metal look. The only thing I had going for me was when I scrunched my eyebrows up, friends said I had a good 'angry dude' stare going on. I even got a 'you look like Kurt Cobain' sometimes (okay, maybe I did a little). So, at the time, I went out and got a Nirvana tattoo. You know, the drunken smiley face? And I didn't stop there, either. I remembering picking out a couple of other cool looking ones just for the

hell of it. Every other accessory's gone now, but (funnily enough) the ink's still on my shoulders. I don't have a clue what the other two mean. Just some symbol shit. Makes me laugh--people these days picking out tattoos with all these deep spiritual meanings and shit, what's that about?

[Imitates girls high-pitched voice]: "This one means serenity in ancient Japanese and if you divide by π it also equals my birth date, sun sign *and* spells my boyfriend's name backwards."

Wtf (what the fuck).

Oh, and by the way, ever since I was a teenager I've had a bit of an anger management problem. It used to get me into trouble growing up but it's (every so slightly) calmed since then. I don't know why but there's a rage I feel inside sometimes so just a forewarning if I lose it here at some stage. A lot of things seem to set me off. So sue me.

I played in this band called Reception Overflow. We named it after a voice-mail system that once reaching its allowed number of mailbox messages, went into this mode called 'reception overflow'. Don't ask me what the hell that was, we just liked the name. I taught myself how to play guitar, growing up in the 'burbs of Toronto. It never really went anywhere. I just wasn't that good at it. I could play, I mean ... it wasn't that hard to just turn up the amp and play power chords all night but yeah, it never really went anywhere after I got booted from the band. Looking back, I dunno, maybe the rock gods didn't see me making it as a musician. We were at this gig playing at a friends party in Mississauga, right? We were into this song, I played rhythm and this other guy, Scooter, played lead. Anyway, just before the solo started we were rockin' it and I looked at Scooter and shouted over all the distortion, "Yo, dude ... nail it, man!" Thing was, he thought I said, "*I'll* nail it, man," and gave the guitar solo over to me. Let me tell you, I couldn't play lead guitar solos. I choked and just made shit up. Halfway through I thought maybe if I make this *look* so damn cool, they might think it's meant to sound so friggin'

messed up--like that death metal stuff. So I went ahead and swung my axe around, made my 'angry dude' face and rocked the house. That was the longest eighteen seconds of my life. Needless to say, the band booted me. They said I was in a guitar fantasy-camp and to quit thinking I was Slash from Gun's N' Roses. They thought that *I thought* I had killer-chops on lead and wanted to take over the solos from Scooter. That was pretty much the end of guitar for me. Tough break, dude.

Eric and James were high school buddies. They grew up together in the prairies of Saskatchewan and drove out here for the excitement of the big (mega!) city. They lived in an apartment at High Park, a suburb west of downtown, about 15 minutes by car or subway. They rented the middle apartment in a block of three on a long, tree-lined avenue. High Park was a nice, leafy little shopping village to hang out in and generally get away from the downtown core of traffic, drugs, clubs and bums. I'd been living on their sofa for the past couple of months after getting kicked out of the apartment I shared with a girlfriend at Yonge & Eglinton, a trendy residential strip just north of the downtown core. The thing about being dumped is ... once you see your possessions laid out on the front yard in a non-uniformed kinda pile, you know it's a bad sign. That particular ex-girlfriend wasn't into spring cleaning and it wasn't spring, given that half my stuff was covered in dirty, December snow. She was a prissy bitch. So ... I ended up crashing at Eric and James' place and hadn't left since.

Eric and James had a room each to themselves and here I was every night unfolding my salt-stained (salt from the sidewalk snow) futon in their living room. I'd moved what little stuff I had into their place and proceeded to sell it off in exchange for rent (salt stained futon = \$50). Crashing at their place made sleeping so much of a chore, though ... every night, fold the futon out, put the pillows out, put the cover over it, move the coffee tables, move the lamps. Every morning ... blah, blah, blah. But until I found a new place, it was all I had. Had their place been

a three-bedroom, I would've been tempted to stay and save myself the impending pain of apartment hunting. But having James walk over me in darkness to get to the bathroom at any time of night was kinda weird. Plus, being exposed to two other guys bad habits and freaky shit just made me want to get a place as quick as I could. Let's just say Eric wasn't opposed to the odd Class-A drug bender ending in unconsciousness, donuts, twenty hookers (did I say twenty, I meant two) and *The Tonight Show* at full volume coming from his bedroom (Jay Leno's monologue only has the strength to drown out one hooker, by the way, not two). Eric would always claim he somehow just seemed to bump into these girls coming home from the Queen Street clubs, all drunk and horny. Really, Eric? You did? Yeah.

James had his quirks, too. They didn't involve hookers. His fix was *Law & Order*. I shit you not, any time of the day when he was in his room you'd hear that friggin' *Law & Order* theme playing. A typical scenario would be:

"James, you there? Eric? Anyone home?"

"In the criminal justice system, the people are represented by two separate yet equally important groups--the police who investigate crime, and the district attorneys who prosecute the offenders. These are their stories. Duh-Duh."

"Okay ... James is home."

It was like he had a damn *Law & Order* cable channel running episodes 24/7. And these kinds of habits were just the tip of the iceberg. There was often food left all over the place for days, mountains of hair and water in the bathroom, and the world record for days passed without laundry done was constantly being broken. They didn't even lock the place ... how's the irony? We did break and enters and here's their place wide open any time of the day or night--just slide the back patio doors open and walk in. Let's see, what else ... there was the fridge that thought

it was a 747-400 jet, the toilet that seemed to be set to ‘volcano flush’ mode, and Eric’s old computer, which, at night had the sound of a vacuum cleaner, was big as a 70’s mainframe and was so friggin’ old all you could download on that thing was stick-porn, you know, like a naked hangman. And, to top everything broken or falling to bits with their place, here’s the clincher: to get to the apartment above, the other tenants had to come into ours. So, you could be sitting there scratching your ass or whatever and have people unlock your front door, walk in, and fumble about with their door lock before heading up to their third-floor apartment. Wtf?

Anyway, enough of me. Back to Cooley’s ... and this idea of a break and enter on our bosses place while he was away at a convention in Florida that coming weekend.

“Don’t you see? This is our chance for payback. It can be, like, the ultimate revenge. We can wipe our asses on the furniture,” Eric whispered to the two of us, sipping coffee and sizing the room up for any potential networking opportunities...

Sidebar: Eric

Pros: Funny, great impersonations, motivator, dreamer

Cons: Short attention span, moody, childish nature, completely unreliable

Eric was a wannabe actor. A networker, always conscious of meeting people, showing himself off as a player and sizing up anyone he thought might be able to do something for him. He actually did a commercial for a courier company cos’ he stalked a casting agent at the store and helped push her groceries out to the parking lot. After about 1.5 seconds of screen time where he walked out an elevator (w/o lines), somehow he managed to blow his big break and hasn’t done a thing since. He’d mention all these projects but that they just weren’t right for him. He

was actually well suited to showbiz, though. He had the looks--short, black hair, styled in a forward brush, a clean-shaven full-face, straight teeth and clean skin. About 5'11", he had a strong presence and his fashion sense was way above James and mine. The only blemish was his weakness for junk food. He was hypoglycemic and that'd get him eating donuts and other shit that didn't do any favors for his body. Eric was slick, though, with a killer sense of humor--he could joke himself out of any situation. We'd often sit around and just do improv comedy, running lines, gags and skits we thought would be funny for a TV show:

Cruise: I want answers ...

Nicholson: You want answers?

Cruise: I want the *truth!*

Nicholson: *You can't handle the truth!*

We just about knew *A Few Good Men* by heart. The voices that guy could pull off were amazing. He'd do perfect impersonations and characters--where he got that stuff from I'll never know. His talent was definitely going to waste working at Runnermans. See, Eric was a dreamer with big plans. He'd talk the talk but when it came to the walking he'd collapse on the sofa and watch *Saturday Night Live* with a bag of day-old donuts and coffee. The spirit was willing but the flesh was weak. With his looks, he could've got any girl he wanted if he applied himself (and maybe lost the spare tire around his waist). But he'd prefer to hang out at Starbucks and improv or talk about script ideas and making an indie film. And even if he did go to a club, he wouldn't pickup girls. He'd be looking to meet actors. I often thought, though, that Eric would be the one to go somewhere out of the three of us. That showbiz would find him eventually.

“No ... no trashing the place,” James replied. “Wiping asses on furniture is for punks. If we do this, we need to stay professional.”

“James, this isn’t *Law & Order* ... we’re not professionals, okay? Anyway, trashings’ not our M.O. *If*, and I say *if*, we did Belcher’s place we’d stick to the M.O.,” I said.

“Okay, no ass wiping,” Eric agreed. “But look ... I know Belcher. He’s gonna have some good stuff in there. The house is worth a million--he’s not gonna deck it out in IKEA.”

“I dunno, it’s risky,” I said. “What if he works out it was us? Then we’re screwed.”

“Yeah, we’d lose our jobs ... what a tragedy.”

“I was more thinking along the lines of *prison*,” I whispered.

“Hmmm? Prison versus Runnerman’s, huh? You know, I gotta tell ya, that’s kind of a tough call right now,” added James. “Mondays suck.”

Eric continued the sell. “There’d be cash. I’m guessing at least a grand. He’s got a few different watches--I’ve seen him wear a Rolex. And his wife’s always wearing jewelry when she’s at the store. It’d be the easiest gig.”

“Wait a minute, though,” James said, chomping on his crispy bacon, “the guy’s gonna have insurance, right? I mean, knowing him he’ll probably claim shit he never had and we’ll end up *making* him money. I don’t wanna to be making that prick any more money than we do now.”

Eric turned to James. “Don’t you want to get out of this life? Look at us, we’re fucking pathetic. James, you haven’t got laid in ... whatever. Matt--you’re selling off your furniture as rent money. Look at us ... we work in a s-u-p-e-r-m-a-r-k-e-t. We’re in our mid *twenties*. Our lives are just slipping away from us. We’re gonna be thirty in the blink of an eye--still packing shit into shelves. Is that what you want?”

Eric looked at us with a silent scream in his eyes. He had a point.

“I say we hit a few more places, get some cash flow, then pool our money so we can move into a place downtown and start getting contacts. Contacts, guys... it’s not what you know in this

town, right? We've gotta get out there, networking," Eric said clicking his fingers. "We need to hang with guys like Douglas more and get into the zone. If we meet the right people and make the right moves, we'll move up in the world. That's how it works. High Park's for soccer moms with SUV's..."

James and I sat there for a second, thinking. Well, I was thinking I hope I never turn into a guy like Douglas, and if I did, that someone would shoot me (hmmm, maybe a bad choice of words there. More on Douglas in a bit).

And James ... well, James looked more concerned about his eggs.

"There's a fucking hair in my eggs!"

Sidebar: James

Pros: Eccentric, easy-going, funny, conspiracy theorist

Cons: Cynic, alcoholic, liked James Taylor, hard to read

James was a tall, lanky, doofus looking guy with thick bottle glasses and a kind of Frankenstein-like appearance ... but in a good way. He was an eccentric. A man of few words. But when he did have something to say he'd usually make you laugh with lashings of sarcasm and dry humor. His voice was calm and he spoke in a soft, constant monotone--I think I'd only heard him shout once or twice for Eric to shut up when *Law & Order* was on.

He gave the impression he didn't really care about anything in life, like he was just sailing through and whatever happened was fine by him. I figured only a few things mattered to James: Beer, Photography, *Law & Order*, Crispy Bacon and Ice Hockey.

He'd already had his front two teeth knocked out playing street hockey last Fall. Did he freak?

Nope, he just picked his teeth up off the ground and said something (I can't remember exactly)

like, 'Better get those fixed, I guess'. He took them to this Chinese dentist in The Beaches, a suburb by Lake Ontario and the only strip of sand in the city resembling a beach in summer. As he sat in the dentist's chair and had his teeth somehow glued back in by an obviously unlicensed but affordable dentist, he explained to the guy (with slurred speech from the Novocaine) that his TV was showing this black blob on the screen and, hence, he'd been outside playing street hockey. This blob had grown from a tiny dot in one corner and was beginning to take over the picture at a steady rate. The old Chinese guy, without hesitation, as he worked in James' mouth, said to bring it by and, 'I fix for you'. Teeth and TV's ... makes sense. But that was James. Anything eccentric and he'd be there (w/camera). In fact, I think the only reason he tagged along on the break and enters sometimes was just so he could see inside people's homes and how the other half lived.

Eric and I were distracted for a second.

"Look at this ..." James said, pulling a thick, black hair from his eggs. He held it up in the light, studying it like it was gonna reveal the mystery of the universe.

"What the fuck ..."

"Get over it, James. It's a hair," Eric said.

No mistaking it'd come from the Cooley's waitress--she worked every morning and had the silkiest black hair I think I've ever seen. I think she was the boss's daughter or something, she seemed related to the guy cooking out back you'd see when heading to the bathrooms. Every time we were at Cooley's for breakfast I used to love her bringing our meals out. She'd reach over the table and expose the mother of all cleavage--I'm talking the most luscious tits you could dream of. They'd sit so comfy in her baby-doll shirt, jiggling about as she moved around the table. So, yeah ... a hair ... I got 'em too, but I could personally live with the odd hair now and then in exchange for cleavage.

Hair crisis over, James back to eating, I asked Eric, “How would we get in?”

“Out back ... sliding glass doors. The locks are a piece a’ cake, no noise,” he said under his breath. “So, are you in?”

I paused. I ran it through in my head. Decision making wasn’t a strong point of mine. I sat there for a moment and tried to imagine all the shit Belcher had given me in two years at Runnerman’s and couldn’t find a reason why we shouldn’t get some payback on that prick.

“He’s definitely gonna be out of town?”

“Orlando, Florida. Cassandra told me,” Eric replied.

“And you’re gonna trust *her*? That girl’s tipped to win the Oscar this year,” James quipped.

“Everyone else knows, anyway. I heard the front desk girls talking about last year. Apparently all he brought back for them was a Disneyworld keychain ... to share.”

“You know what,” I said with a quick nod, “let’s do it. I hate the guy.”

“Count me in,” James said. “I wanna see the kind of place the guy’s got. *And* I haven’t forgotten about those stale chocolates, remember? My shit was black for a week eating those things.”

“That was so messed up,” Eric replied.

Sidebar: The Ukrainian Chocolates

James was a pretty good worker, way more than Eric and myself. He could really get busy and fix stuff when he was motivated. Last year, he cleaned out the stockroom freezer and got rid of all the shit that the Frozen Food girl had ordered by mistake. Her fingers (and ass) were so fat she’d pressed an extra ‘0’ on the computer when ordering frozen spring rolls. We got 100 cartons of them ... for the month. In a normal month, we’d sell maybe 7-8 cartons. So, in the back of the freezer, cartons and cartons of frozen spring rolls just sat there slowly turning into

shriveled up little wieners that even a homeless dog in India wouldn't touch. When fatty took her vacation, James went in there with gloves and coat and played Tetris with the stock, moving everything around and cleaning up so he could reach the spring rolls and get them out to the frozen cabinet in the store. He re-priced them (without authority ... an executive decision) down from \$3.48 to \$.50 a pack. People couldn't get enough. Shoppers *will* buy shit if it's cheap enough. Dumb asses. Belcher, on seeing the clean, frozen stockroom, spoke about James' efforts one morning at a staff meeting and awarded him a box of chocolates. When we looked at them later on, they were these gross Ukrainian chocolates that never sold because they looked like little turds (customers were smart, occasionally). Oh, and these things were about 6 months past their used-by date, too. Note: James still ate the chocolates.

"We're gonna be late," Eric said, starting to get organized to leave. He always did that--pissed me off. Whenever he was done, he'd start getting all restless, like his time was too precious to waste if he wasn't sitting there eating. He checked his cell, hoping for a message from his agent. I don't think he'd received a call from her since the elevator walk-on. None of us knew how he managed to screw that up.

Cooley's special breakfast over, we vacated the booth and headed for the register. James went and paid the check (we'd always split it). Eric stepped out onto the sidewalk like a celebrity waiting for his minders. I waited for James and walked back to leave a tip for Ms Cleavage. I remember getting another quickie glance as she wiped our table down. Hoochie Mama. That there ended up as the highlight of my Monday.

Life at Runnerman's, Bloor St.

7 Day Supermarket, Clock-on

There she was ... the enemy. As the three of us stood there in the car park, burning up the last remaining minutes of freedom, we faced the Runnerman's storefront in a David vs. Goliath showdown. High above the store's entrance doors, the monstrous--and all too familiar--Runnerman's sign loomed down on us, a mixture of bright red and orange letters followed by a jazzy, corporate logo resembling a bent-out-of-shape teardrop.

Originally a family-owned, mid-size supermarket, the corporate entity known as Runnerman's Ltd. had bought it out as a chain location a few years ago. From the outside, even from Robert St, you could see right the way in the entire store thanks to large, plate glass windows and bright, fluorescent lighting. Advertising was everywhere inside--no space was left untouched by various subsidiary companies advertising their products, all new and improved, of course.

This was the moment we dreaded each week. Monday morning. We began our usual slow shuffle up to the front doors. No words were spoken. We all kept to our own thoughts. Eric pulled apart the automatic doors--not yet activated for customers--and we discreetly slipped straight down the first aisle to reach the back doors, which led out to the lockers and staff area. Out back, stock was piled to the roof. Pallets and cartons of everything from coconut-oil suntan lotion to instant mashed potatoes. One after the other, we punched our time cards in a machine that looked like it was from World War II, and then followed the dimly-lit maze that lead to the locker rooms. Above us, in a few decibels too many, came the words we had come to hate hearing over the P.A. system:

“Staff to the floor, calling all staff to the floor. The store is now open. Don’t forget your smiles and have a Runnerman’s great day!”

It was a typical Monday. The start of another week. The store was trading at a quiet but steady pace, with the customer demographic mainly comprising of mothers w/ babies, doing a morning shop. The in-store bakery was already halfway through its day (bastards), close to finishing up at midday, and the produce section was still setting up for another week with a clean slate of fresh fruit and vegetables. Throughout the day, sales representatives from the major companies running promotions would be calling into the store to setup their products in extravagant, eye-catching displays in hope they would have good market penetration that week. See, in the supermarket business, Monday was typically known as the setup day. The day that everything would be refilled, restocked, refreshed, re-cut and re-priced, ready for the heavy trade days of Wednesday through Saturday.

Walking up to the front of the store (and whenever else I would check), I saw the girls on register had the exact same looks on their faces as the week before as they ran shoppers items over laser scanners, filling the store with constant electronic beeps. It would be fair to say that you could generally sum any one of them up as suffering from:

- a) tiredness
- b) boredom
- c) effects of an all-night rave
- d) frustration
- e) depression
- f) all of the above

Like most other workplaces, in a supermarket there was a certain pecking order, a food chain, even amongst the girls on front-desk/register, that would determine who got what jobs. It operated along the lines that the newest hire would be on the very bottom, receiving the jobs that, for lack of a better word, sucked. If one was to progress and get promoted through the ranks, they could possibly end up Second-In-Charge (2IC) or even make Store Manager someday. For Eric, James and I? Well ... we were no doubt bottom three. We had the label underachievers slapped all over us.

Further raining on our parade of ever moving up the shit-heap (not like we wanted to, anyway) was that all three of us refused to kiss ass to management, especially to Belcher. But there were always plenty of others willing to brown-nose their way into a promotion--I'd see it time and again in a lot of different variations, including:

- a) The 'this-is-what-I-just-did' bragging to management (Freezer Fatty was a master at this)
- b) Incessant compliments
- c) Volunteering to work back late (some staff just didn't have lives)
- d) Flirting and/or being eye-candy (girls on register were particularly good at this one)

As 'let's-pretend-to-be-happy' music tried to drown out the beeping scanners, and shoppers poked around the aisles with their carts, trying to match coupons with products, Eric, James and I continued setting up the weekly flyer promotions at the end of each aisle. Typically, management wanted us to build up all of the product displays so friggin' big that if a customer pulled an item from the wrong place the whole thing would avalanche and bury whatever shoppers were in its path. But Runnerman's Rule No.1 was management *always* knew best.

Before we could get the new displays up, we'd have to pull the previous week's down and take the remaining stock to its shelf location and fill it up as much as it could take. I remember restocking cans of dog food from my stock trolley as I turned to see James heading down the aisle towards me. He looked pissed off and didn't care who heard him.

"What the fuck is that guy's problem?"

"Who?"

"Belcher," he said.

I continued placing cans on the shelf. "Why, what happened?"

"He gave me a fucking warning for talking to Cassandra."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa--*you* talked to Cassandra Parker?" (Cassandra would never have been James's type. In fact, I didn't know what James's type was).

Sidebar: Cassandra

Cassandra was the newest of the register girls, the girl who seemed out of place when I set eyes on her her first day, two weeks ago. She was in a different league to the others--she was upper-class (or faked it well) and came across with a preppy, snobby, sorority-queen attitude. Even at a quick glance, I could tell Cassandra was one of those girls who always got what they wanted.

Now, I know I could've been wrong with that assumption but to back it up, my last two girlfriends also fell into that league (the club is growing) and so I considered myself well tuned at the time to detect her manipulation station (i.e. her mouth). All I really knew for sure was that she was 21, attending U of T, studying Law (just what we need--more lawyers) and still lived at home. She was no stick-thin girl--no Paris Hilton--but her body had curves in *all* the right places. She had long, dark brown hair with blonde highlights, and beautiful, big brown eyes to match. Her skin was clear, her lips glossed, her breasts were tennis balls, her ass was a bubble

and she had this seductive, innocent smile ... you get the picture. Flaunting her sexuality was more powerful towards man than a thousand bunker-busting bombs.

In a moment of weakness, I'm sure she could've had us trying to kill each other for a chance to get in her pants but, personally, having been bitten one too many times already by her type, I think (I hope!) I could've been able to resist a man-eater like Cassandra Parker.

"So where was this?" I asked James.

"Up front, at her register. She didn't have anyone in her lane so I just stopped and said ... stuff," James replied. "That's my second warning, third one and Belcher'll fire my ass."

"What'd you say to her?"

"Hi."

"Hi? That's it? You went up to Cassandra Parker, the hottest girl in the store and just said 'hi?'"

"Well, not exactly, but I didn't get much else in before she stopped me."

"Like ... ?" I said, prompting James to continue.

"She asked me, you know, in that high pitched 'what-ever' voice ... 'What happened to your teeth?'" James said, giving a damn fine impression of the girl (Eric would've been proud).

(Since the hockey incident, James' teeth were a little skewed. Not bad, but noticeable).

James continued, "So I said, 'Oh, they got knocked out in a hockey accident. My dentist glued them back in, he's Chinese. Hey, so, you're studying Law, right? Do you watch *Law & Order*?"

That's when she stopped me and started blurting out, 'Like, I don't, like, date anyone from the store, okay? And you're really, like, creeping me out, okay? So can you just, like, go back to grocery and not, like, come up here again?' That's when Belcher showed up."

"What a total bitch," I said.

I looked down the aisle for Belcher, checking it was clear. James cooled down and pulled a couple of pet food cartons from the bottom of his trolley, arranging other cartons to get at them.

I continued, "So what'd he say?"

"Told me to quit harassing other staff--said we'd been warned about it in that staff meeting we had and yada yada yada ... second warning," James said.

From a side glance, I saw Eric pass over our aisle, then double-back and enter. He came towards us with his own trolley of stock to go back on the shelves but didn't look like he was setting any records--as usual.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Zip," James answered.

"I'm waiting for the Pepsi guy to show. Said he'd be here at eleven," Eric said.

"James just got a warning for talking to Cassandra," I said.

"No way!" Eric blurted, amused. "*You* talked to Cassandra?" he said, reaching underneath his trolley. "Trust me, James, she's so not your type."

Eric felt between the cartons and pulled out a bag of candy. He waited for a few shoppers to pass before taking a handful and shoving them into his mouth.

"Belcher's gonna have your balls if he sees that," James warned him.

"For this stuff? I don't give a shit ... it's outta code and I need the sugar hit. I'll say it's a medical thing," Eric mumbled, chewing the candy. "Anyway, how can they fire us when the customers do way worse? It's discrimination, I'll sue their ass."

"Women with kids are the worst. They walk past the self-serve bins in aisle four and practically have meals outta that stuff," I added.

You'd see it everyday. Customers helping themselves to a handful of whatever they wanted, standing in full view at a self-serve bin, or, if they were a little more discreet, filling up a bag and

eating as they shopped the store. Drugs were another hot item too, popular with the senior citizens. Tylenol, Excedrin, Pepcid AC, whatever. They'd browse the section looking to buy, waiting for the right time to stuff the pills down their pants, away from security, before walking out the store with nothing.

Eric reached into the bag of Gummi Cola and grabbed some more. "Here ... knock yourself out," he offered, "I always need this stuff in the mornings."

James and I took turns, digging our hands into the bag. I mean, it was only out of code stock--if no one ate it the only place it was going would be the dumpster out back after it'd been written off.

"Shit!"

I spotted Belcher heading towards us. Eric pulled the bag into his body and, with his back to Belcher, slowly placed the candy back between his cartons. Eric and I swallowed but James still had a mouthful of Gummi and just stood there, frozen...

Sidebar: Belcher

Belcher (nice name) was a balding, big nosed, bung-eyed looking forty-year old guy who thought he was king shit, all because he ran a Runnerman's franchise. His left eye was so screwed up that whenever you talked to him it'd be focused out to the side like he was peering over your shoulder or had to be someplace else. Over the past two years, he'd given the three of us so much shit. He hated our guts but no doubt enjoyed having us around over firing us, just so he could feel like a big man when he wanted and put us in our place for the losers he said we were.

“Alright, showtime ... what the hell’s going on here? Huh?” Belcher barked, his bung eye darting about like a missile targeting system.

“We’re restocking...” I said.

“Don’t be a smart ass, Zander. It doesn’t take three of you to pack one line of dog food.”

“We’re about to take a break, actually,” Eric said, in a defiant tone.

Belcher paused for a moment, thinking of a comeback. He smirked and slowly shook his head.

“Look at you three ... you think you’re all so much better than this, don’t you? One day you think you’ll be out of here, right? Gonna make it big?” he said, chuckling to himself. “You have no idea how alike we really are. One day, trust me, you’re all gonna be me. This,” he said, as his arms gestured around us, “is going to be your life. I’d get used it if I were you.”

Belcher looked at each of us with a sense of amusement. He spoke under his breath so only us three heard him. “So you go have your little breaks and jerk off to Buffy or your video games or your screenplays or whatever the hell you do on your own time ... and then get the fuck back to work.”

Belcher turned to James. “And you,” he said forcefully, pushing his finger to James’ chest, “you stay away from Cassandra or next time I’ll kick your ass to the curb, got it?”

Belcher walked off and continued down the aisle, towards the back of the store. That was actually a fairly nice encounter for a change. Suddenly, his voice burst over the P.A. above. For a second I thought he was gonna have round two via the airwaves, but his now overly enthusiastic voice began:

‘Good morning customers and welcome to Runnerman’s, the friendliest store in the Megacity. Customers, we’ve got some *super!* specials for you today ...’ Blah. Blah. Blah. Blah. Blah.

Monday was always the longest day.

*7-Eleven people-watching**Bloor & Steele, Wednesday night, late*

The week was passing with such surprising speed. To put it not so eloquently: same shit, different days. Eric, James and I were sitting in the comfort of Douglas' climate-controlled, fully-loaded, silver Jeep Cherokee. Outside, it was -20C° plus wind-chill--so cold your nuts would freeze and drop off before you even knew you had a problem.

We were parked at the Bloor & Keele Street strip mall, right outside the 7-Eleven convenience store. We had one of the spots we'd often get, facing the front of the store, where you could sit and watch people come and go. People watching ... the most underrated pastime known to man. And 7-Eleven stores were the perfect arena. They were lit up so much you almost needed your sunglasses at night when you stepped through those sliding doors. And from Douglas's Cherokee, we could just about see every inch of retail floor space, thanks to the large, wall-to-wall windows and rows of fluros raining artificial light down onto customers.

At least a few times a week, or whenever Eric needed a sugar fix for his hypoglycemia, we'd stop by the store, grab some junk and then sit there in the car, being entertained by those who came after us. Parked outside a 7-Eleven was like a mimed, reality stage show. Here were people paying good money to go to the theatre when you could get a better show at the local strip mall. It was amazing what you could learn watching everyday people. We'd try to workout people's lives, their thoughts, who they were and what they were doing. Humans give so much of themselves away through non-verbal communication and the beauty is, none of us are ever

aware we're doing it. And somehow, late night convenience stores seemed to elicit the best/worst of people's body language habits. Go figure.

Earlier that night, Douglas had stopped by the apartment to chill and it wasn't long before Eric got a bit of sugar-deprived crankiness and we headed out to make a 7-Eleven run for some snacks before *Leno* started. As we sat there taking turns with a jumbo bag of Lays and other unhealthy junk, we filled Douglas in on Friday night's b & e operation.

"You're cool with tomorrow night?" Eric asked him.

"I'm down. I am so down ... I'm gonna cane it, cane it, cane it. If you're gonna pull something on your bosses place, you gotta have a little *Satan* on your side, right? Ooh yeah! I'm down,"

Douglas said, raising his hand up and high-fiving us one by one...

Sidebar: Douglas

Pros: Ready to party, laughed at anything (flimsy pro's, I know, but it's all I got)

Cons: Yuppie, Poser, Yuppie, Shops @ GAP

Douglas was a friend of Eric's. They met at the Greenleaf Sports Club, downtown, where Eric had been going the last six months to try and lose the spare tire around his gut. Douglas was a stockbroker for a large, downtown brokerage firm. He and Eric had started hanging out because Douglas, like Eric, had the showbiz bug and wanted to move towards producing. He loved the idea of a producer, calling the shots on a project and making things happen.

Douglas wasn't rich-beyond-wildest-dreams rich, but he made well over \$100K (I'm not sure exactly) and I'm guessing twice that when the bonuses were handed out at his office. He was in his early thirties but had a baby-face and gap-tooth smile, keeping him looking in his mid-

twenties. A stocky build was the result of sitting on his ass all day watching computer screens, hence the sports club.

The one thing that set the four of us apart was Douglas' fashion and grooming. Sculptured dark-blond hair (same color as me), suits, ties, designer shirts, colognes, watches--he had a thing for fashion, and allowed GQ magazine and the rest to tell him what to wear, what to want and what to like. I assume part of his fashion consciousness could be attributed to his job and the fact his firm wouldn't take well to him turning up with grunge at his office.

Looking at Douglas gave you the impression of a man in love with a life of excess. Generally speaking, though, he was a good guy. He meant well. He loved to party and live it up whenever he could--the pressures of the job were a weekly build up and sure, there had to be some kind of outlet.

Since they'd met last summer, Douglas had regularly called Eric with invites to clubs, parties and the like. And that was right up Eric's alley because he got access to places beyond the velvet rope, places that you just couldn't go unless you had a friend in the know. Douglas's contacts and money allowed Eric (and James & I) to tag along to some of the city's best wrap-parties, after-shows and other events you'd never get into alone. But I think his ego definitely got a kick out of having us hang around. When we were out with Douglas it always seemed like a carefully managed exhibition. He craved attention and the idea that he was a player. And he wanted us as his material witnesses.

That was Douglas. Then ... there was 'Satan'. In an attempt to fit in, Douglas called himself 'Satan'--a self-proclaimed nickname--and, using his favorite word 'cane', constantly claimed he was creating 'death and destruction' (figuratively speaking) all over Toronto's nightlife scene. He always made the point of telling us how much 'damage' he was going to inflict at a club or party. The closest thing to 'damage' I ever saw him commit was lose his balance dancing and fall on the edge of a table, sending another group's drinks crashing to the floor. But sure enough, you

could be at the worst party in the world, something that had totally tanked, and invariably rely on Douglas to be there smirking like a Cheshire cat, doing his little jiggy dance and shouting over the doof-doof how much the party rocked (and that he was causing d+d).

Last summer, the first time I met Douglas, the four of us were at a house party in Scarborough, one of the rougher neighborhoods east of the city. It was a suburb you didn't really venture into day or night and, I have to admit, I was a little on edge not knowing him *and* the kind of party he'd taken us to. Long story short--the party sucked ass. But ... I'll never forget that first impression of Douglas. A large group of us had been standing out on the back patio of this double-story house. The lighting around the place was almost non-existent. Maybe they'd spent all the money on beer, who knows? Anyway, as we continued to drink and talk shit around the group, I noticed a light in the distance. At first glance I didn't think anything of it ... until I turned away and instinctively looked again. I kept my eyes on it, distracted as to its identity. As odd as it sounds, this light (not unlike my NDE of which you'll learn) was moving toward the house and, as it did, the sound got louder and louder. Identifiable. It was a train ... I could hear it clicking over the kinks in the tracks, even over the raucous laughter from the other guys. The problem was, however, it was headed straight for us. I motioned to the group.

"Why is that train coming straight for us?" I asked in a blonde kind of moment.

Everyone turned to take a look. The laughter quickly died down and we all stared at the light as it continued to bear down on us. Wtf, I thought. Yeah, I'd been drinking quite a bit from what I remember of that night--which obviously hadn't helped the situation--but I was pretty sure no drugs had snuck into my bloodstream.

The train let out a screaming blow of its horn. Wrrrrghhh. Wrrrrghhh (train-speak for get out the fucking way). It was headed straight for us. Click-click, clack-clack. Click-click, clack-clack. Screw drugs, when I heard that, it became real enough for me.

At that moment, Douglas dropped his beer and flew off the patio--bolting away, scared shitless. I've never seen anyone move like he did. He may've been a little stocky but he was gone in a second. And as the train's headlight moved closer to us, it quickly began to light up tracks which passed right by the house. The house was next to a train line. It suddenly rushed by us-- swoosh! Nobody moved. We felt a powerful gush of air go through us as it passed. The clickety clacks were like gunshots. The whole house shook like a Californian earthquake. Ten seconds later, it was gone as fast as it had arrived. A red light at its end slowly faded away. Douglas was nowhere to be found, his spilt beer soaking into the patio decking.

On the way home that night, he spun the story that he'd rushed off to get his camera from the Jeep and was so pissed off he missed it 'cos he wanted to try out his new Canon digital SLR, top of the line. He said it caned every other camera on the market. I told him the next time I saw a train headed for us, I'd let him know.

So ... the idea of Douglas being some crazy, hardcore party dude didn't really fly with me. He was every bit the yuppie poser.

"Check this guy out," James said, motioning out the window. Our attention turned to a fat man struggling out of his car and heading into 7-Eleven, wearing stained track pants and a huge down-feather coat that made him look like the Michellean man.

"This Belcher guy, isn't that the guy I met at that sweepstakes thing at the store last summer? He kept trying to feel up the checkout girls ... " Douglas asked us.

"That's the one," Eric said, in between devouring a cream-filled jam donut like he was french-kissing it.

"Trust me, he's the biggest asshole," I told Douglas.

"He gave me those stale chocolates, remember?" James said.

“Hey, I forgot to say ... I heard Dan Ankroyd is gonna be in town. See ... you meet someone like that, pitch an idea they like and you could be in the game, dude. It’s *that* simple,” Eric told Douglas. “You hear about things like that all the time. Right place, right time.”

“Ever heard of Sundance? It’s not rocket-science, just make your own damn movie,” James said.

Douglas reached his hand around to the back, where James and I sat. “Hey, hand me that box there, can ya?”

James handed a white, rectangular box to Douglas. He quickly opened it up and removed a bubble wrap bag. “Check these out,” he said, pulling a pair of futuristic-looking, black binoculars out of the bag.

“Are they ...”

“Ooh yeah ... night vision, baby! Satan can now see in the dark!” Douglas shouted.

He brought them up to his eyes and looked out the windows.

“How much?”

“A grand. They’re top of the line for this kinda model. What the pro’s use.”

He clicked a switch on top of the binoculars as we all watched him.

“You gotta bring ‘em on Friday night,” Eric said.

“I’m gonna be our eyes in the night with these suckers.”

“We have a Slurpee contestant,” James said.

The fat guy had made his way to the opposite end of the store where the 7-Eleven Slurpee machine sat. Disheveled and dazed, he slowly grabbed a Big Gulp cup and began to fill up on green Slurpee.

“You can’t use a Big Gulp for a Slurpee, dumb-ass,” James said to himself.

“You can do whatever you want--I’ve destroyed one of those Slurpee machines before--you think those guys from Bangalore give a shit?” Douglas said, referring to the Indian cashiers.

In any other circumstance a Big Gulp Slurpee was an insane amount of Slurpee/sugar to be taking in but, looking at the way he was dazed, I really think the guy needed it.

“What happened to that script idea you had, Eric?” I asked.

I’d listened to him talk about writing an indie script for months. I’d seen him work on it for maybe a minute.

“I’m getting it together, it’s in my head,” he said. “Hey, give me a go of those things.”

Eric grabbed the binoculars off Douglas and brought them to his face.

“Holy shit,” he exclaimed, “these things are so messed up!”

Douglas’ Cherokee was like a moving, yuppyville mall. In the back, James and I sat next to clothes, CDs, DVDs and magazines, all scattered in a mess. Thing was, it was all brand new stuff. I mean shirts and socks and ties still in GAP bags with their tags on, never worn. CDs and DVDs still shrink-wrapped. And enough magazines in the seat pockets to open a newsstand. Some guys had waaaaay too much money.

“We’re gonna cane this guys house so bad ... there’s gonna be death and destruction on Brunswick, baby. You’re gonna see Satan unleashed like you’ve never seen before. This is gonna be a whole new level of Satan, okay? I’m so pumped for this,” Douglas announced.

Eric passed the binoculars back to me and James, “Here, check it out.”

I looked through the binoculars and watched the fat guy place two king-size Twinkies in the store’s microwave, fiddling with the settings. I turned and looked out my side window.

“That ... is fucking amazing,” I said.

I could see right up Bloor Street to High Park Avenue, and turning back over my shoulder could see into the park itself. Everything had a bright green tint to it but was just like day. I could see the trees, the bushes, even the snow blowing in the wind ... everything.

I handed them over to James. He placed them beside him, uninterested, which didn’t surprise me. Instead, he was stuck on watching the fat guy. He studied him closely.

“He’s a factory-worker. He’s about to clock on for the graveyard shift,” James speculated.

Douglas chimed in. “No way. He’s finished work and he’s getting some shit to cane on the way home. Too easy.”

“You can’t drink a Big Gulp Slurpee and then go to sleep, are you nuts?” I said.

Outside, a girl pulled up in her car and left the engine running. She was dressed up for a night out. She had a big coat on but underneath you could tell she was wearing club stuff. Her legs were exposed to the harsh February winds--the things some women do for fashion.

“Check it out--hot chick going in,” Eric blurted.

The girl walked through the doors and headed straight for the freezer, pulling out a tub of ice-cream.

“She’s been dumped,” James said, as we watched the brunette hurry to the registers, head down, body language emotionless.

“Or stood up,” I said.

“A girl with ice-cream has to be something bad,” Eric said. “No other purchases, she knew exactly what she wanted, left the car running. She’s headed back to her apartment. The night hasn’t gone well. She’s crushed.”

“Gimme my night vision,” Douglas said, reaching his hand back.

As the fat guy waited for his Twinkies to nuke, we watched him scratch his ass and have a good eye of the brunette. I must admit, she was cute. Yes, I remember those kinds of details. I hope she wasn’t going to eat too much ice-cream, shame to lose that kinda figure.

“She is *hot*,” Douglas said, hands on binoculars, zooming in on the girl. “I’d cane that all night.”

She took off from the register and headed out, quickly jumping back in her car in a flash.

“I see you, baby ... shakin’ that ass ... shakin’ that ass!” Douglas shouted.

“I think those things just paid for themselves,” James quipped.

The fat guy took a huge chug of his Slurpee and then re-filled it, before he grabbed his Twinkies and headed to the registers. He turned and briefly fingered through the girlie magazines before reaching into his pants for his wallet (I'm so glad it was his wallet).

Eric said, "He drives a snow plow. The only thing he has is his job and he's gotten so used to pushing snow off the roads that it's become his master. The very thing he makes his living on is what he spends his money on--ice ... in the form of frozen, 7-Eleven Slurpee."

All of us looked at Eric.

"Where the hell do you get this stuff?" James said, on behalf of us all.

"You gotta stop watching late night cable," I told Eric.

"Especially *The Comedy Channel*," added James.

"Like you don't have a *Law & Order* problem, James?"

James ignored him and went back to the fat guy.

"I'd love to cane a girl like that. So, what time tomorrow?" Douglas said, pulling the binoculars away from his face as the girl sped off up Steele.

"I'm guessing 1.30? Saturday morning. Gives us 30 minutes to get there, do the job, and get outta there around 2. We'll blend in with the crowds going home from the bars," said Eric.

"Rock n' roll, baby! Cane it!" (guess who)

"It's gonna be so easy money," Eric said.

"I just wish we could see the look on Belcher's face when he gets back from Florida," I replied.

"Yeah ..." Douglas added, "that dude is gonna get so caned."

Customers can be the worst...

Friday, afternoon stretch

Over the P.A. System: “Mr. Zander, could you please take a mop and bucket to aisle six. Mop and bucket to aisle six, Mr. Zander.”

That motherfucking prick.

Belcher got great pleasure out of calling on one of us. The service desk girls would never use us--they had their own trolley lackeys for cleaning shit up. But Belcher ... he'd jump at the chance to call on Eric, James and I. His voice would come over the P.A. gleefully requesting we clean shit, take out the stockroom trash, empty the carton crusher, fill the milk cabinets etc, etc. All the worst jobs and none our responsibility, either. The two trolley lackeys, in between car park runs, would have more than enough time to do all of that stuff and he knew it. But you'd hear it in his voice, over the P.A., smirking the whole time he called our names.

The twelve-till-two staggered lunch break was over for the day and the staff of Runnerman's were all back to work, feeling a temporary high, seeing as though the weekend was now in sight. I was in aisle six, mopping the floor, where a lady--whose hair hadn't seen a bottle of shampoo in months--had clumsily pushed the front end of her shopping cart into a standing display of Papa Rossini's pasta sauce, toppling half a dozen bottles to the floor. I was at the crime scene, so to speak--the sauce, like blood, spreading out from the victim.

You know, not a day went by without some customer knocking, bumping or crashing into items with their cart. How the hell did they handle a car when this was how they drove a shopping cart? No wonder there are so many road deaths. Head-on collisions, sideswipes, rear-enders--whatever was the case, after any cart collision there'd be a choice the shopper had to make. Sometimes, if you happened to stay unnoticed, you could watch them--there were two types of people when it came down to an oops-I-broke-it smash.

Some would accidentally break a bottle of something and report it, feeling genuinely sorry. It was just an accident, these things happen. But the type of person you'd more often see, depending on whether someone had seen them, would either cover-up, blame their cart, deny everything, or better still, just continue to shop as if nothing had happened, walking away to leave the mess as a gift for us to be consigned by Belcher to clean.

Yep, in the two years I'd been at Runnerman's, I'd just about seen it all. Human behavior at its best and worst. I'd often get shouted at, harassed and abused in the rush hours when the place would fill up and gridlock full of people trying to get some stuff and then get the hell outta there. Even the most sweet and innocent-looking old ladies would yell at you, wanting to know why there were no more coupons left in the auto-dispensers so they could get six cents off a particular brand of cat food. And looking at other items in their cart, I'm sure some of them weren't even buying it for a damn cat, either.

Shit. Glass mixed with pasta sauce that stank like shit. Sounds like a new product line, maybe?

You know, you quickly become an expert on using a mop and bucket working in a supermarket. It's a definite art form, too. See, you had to mop and clean every inch of floor while keeping it safe for customers to pass on so they didn't slip and sue your ass. The key was in the water distribution to the mop. Too little water meant you'd be scrubbing the floor until you had a heart attack. Too much water in the mop and the floor would be flooded, allowing the potential

for a customer to slip over and sue the store for millions. That'd be my supermarket career flushed down the toilet.

As I cleaned up and placed the larger pieces of splintered glass into the bucket, I counted up five bottles of sauce as casualties of war. The amount of waste and damage that went on at Runnerman's was staggering. Now, times that by every supermarket across the country and it's criminal. The broken bottles, the leaking packets, the faulty spray cans, the perishables--and the out-of-code candy that we'd often eat but was perfectly fine--it would all be recorded, written off and dumped. Who paid for all that shit? Hell knows. It wouldn't even be passed onto the homeless. Just dumped. And probably 50% of all the stock I'd dump out in the bins would be totally fine for consumer use. But, I'll refer you back to Runnerman's Rule No.1: management *always* knows best. Always.

I remember it being around 2.20pm.

I'd hoped for something 3:00pm-ish but it wasn't to be. It was a game that most of the staff played, especially the girls on register. The worst thing you could do all day was keep your eyes on the store's wall-clock, upfront. The better way to play would be to try and hang out as long as you could, until you were busting to know the time and then either get a surprise or a depressing let down when you finally just had to look.

Continuing to mop, I soaked up the remaining pasta sauce and broken glass as Eric entered the aisle.

"Oh, that's great--real great. Hey, perfect timing. You just missed out on helping me with this shit," I said. Somehow, Eric had the uncanny ability to show up when a job was about done. He had amusement on his face (I wonder why).

"That is so messed up," he said.

“What’s with people, can’t they drive a fucking shopping cart without smashing into something around here?” I said.

“Yeah, well get this,” Eric began, “I’ve been crawling around on my hands and knees out back, looking for canned apricots cause some old guy likes to have his regular brand. I told him, ‘Hey ... this ain’t no Russia, pops,’ There’s only like ... twenty other brands on the damn shelf.”

Eric bent down and picked up the last remaining pieces of broken glass, placing them in a cardboard box I had for the clean up.

“Where’s James?” he asked.

“Doing milk.”

“Belcher’s leaving tonight for Florida, after close,” Eric whispered close to me.

“Have you talked to Douglas?”

“Yeah, he said he’s still down. We’ll head to King Slice, meet him there, grab some pizza and then get the subway in.”

I nodded. I was about to say something but...

“Mr. Zander, could you please go to the back docks, delivery at the back docks, Mr. Zander,” came Belcher’s smug voice over the P.A.

“Sonofabitch,” I moaned. “C’mon, let’s see what it is.”

“No can do. I’m waiting for a call from my agent and my cell has bad reception in the stockroom,” Eric said. “I’ll have to catch up to you, bro.”

Yeah ... nice one bro, I thought, as Eric headed towards the front desk, leaving me behind.

You gotta hand it to Eric, like I said, he could talk his way out of anything. Thing was, I was starting to tire of that game.

Little did he know...

Friday, Closing time

As heavy snow gently fell outside and began to blanket the car park and sidewalks, the working day was quickly coming to a close and a collective sigh of relief the weekend had arrived could almost be heard the store over. Runnerman's, however, was still full of shoppers--homemakers now replaced by office types and bachelors, grabbing things like frozen dinners and cases of pop for the night. It was all about convenience these days. No one was able to cook anymore. The world was far too busy making money to buy raw ingredients to mix up, and the market had instantly catered for the change. Now almost everything was tailored towards the quick-fix life. Microwave-friendly, pre-cooked, pre-cut, pre-whatever. As long as it was quick, it didn't really matter what kind of toxic chemicals were used to produce it.

"Mr. Zander and Mr. McFadden, could you please attend to the doors for closing. Mr. Zander and Mr. McFadden, to the doors for closing, thank you," came Belcher's announcement over the P.A.

Tonight, it was James and my rostered turn to watch the doors after we closed right on 6.00P.M., down to the second (thank God we hadn't started to trade late ... yet). It would take at least another twenty minutes for the remaining shoppers in the store to be rustled out like cattle, so every night two staff members would have to baby-sit the doors and make sure nobody would sneak in or try to invent some story that if they didn't bring home milk, their

wife was going to kill them. On an average weeknight, most of the staff would get away at around six-thirty, the last ones to leave being the cashiers who had to wait patiently for the few customers who insisted on counting out every single food stamp and coupon. As six-thirty rolled by, the U of T nightshift students would appear, ready to dump thousands of cartons in the aisles to complete a full restock of the shelves while everyone slept, finishing up as the bakers arrived for a new day. Yep, life at Runnerman's was a complete 24/7 cycle. It never stopped.

“Attention customers, the store is now closed. Could you please finalize your purchases and make your way to the checkouts. We would like to thank you for shopping Runnerman's, your discount grocery store,” the front-desk manager's voice blurted out over the P.A., making it official.

Standing at the front doors, I could see James down aisle 8, trying in vein to dodge shopper's carts, waiting for them as they road blocked the whole aisle, many of them tired corporate moms shouting at their kids to put boxes of Count Chocula cereal and the like, back on the shelf.

Eric was at the Deli counter, caught up with a customer, showing them the direction to the milk, right at the back of the store. Supermarkets put milk in the back so you had to walk the entire length of the store and be tempted by other stuff just to get to it. And bread was always at the opposite end to the milk. Clever, huh?

“Don't you just wanna smack dumpers in the head?” James said as he reached me.

Sidebar: Dumping (*verb*)

- a) To change one's mind about the purchase of an item and dump it at a random store location rather than returning it to its proper shelf spot.

Dumping was one of the more frustrating of customer habits when you worked in a supermarket. The most commonly known form of dumping was 'register dumping'. This would take place when a customer was headed to the registers and did a little 'do-I-really-need-that' analyzing with their basket of items. You'd often find impulse items such as candy bars, cookies or muffins dumped all over the shelves nearest to the front of the store. That was the normal kind of dumping. Taking it to the next level of how frighteningly dumb some customers were, however, was 'extreme dumping'. 'Extreme dumping' was when a customer would dump an item in a location that would then perish the item, and once found, would have to be thrown away and written off. For example, let's say a customer bought some slices of ham from our in-store Deli. Once they decided they didn't really need the ham after all, well ... it's all cold, right? What's the difference between the 4C° dairy case and the -20C° freezer cabinet? They would just slip the ham quietly into the freezer cabinet and head for the registers. Dumb fuckers.

"Who dumps a bag of muffins into the freezer cabinet? Who are these people?" he continued.

I burst out laughing. I couldn't help it. James just had a way about him. But he was right.

Customers were the worst, sometimes.

"Hey, check it out, she's hard at work," I said to James, as I noticed Cassandra and Belcher talking it up as she closed down her register. James and I watched Belcher put on his coat and scarf, ready to leave. Bingo. I couldn't hear them with all the scanner noise and kids screaming as they went through the registers but you didn't have to be a rocket scientist to figure it out.

Cassandra was doing her best 'oops, I did it again' flirty touch of his arm, feeling his coat

material and laughing as she battered her eyelids and tossed her hair. You could see Belcher eating it up.

“I’m guessing she’s gonna be front-desk manager come Monday?” James quipped.

“She definitely wants something,” I replied, the both of us watching them rather than the front doors.

Finally, Belcher checked his watch and said his goodbyes to the front-desk girls. He’d always leave closing to the girls on front-desk duty. One by one, they were all wishing him a nice weekend away. It looked like friggin’ Sesame Street--they were all doing little cutesy waves with their hands next to their faces, all smiling, brown-nosing him (suck suck suck).

Making the break from them, Belcher began to head towards us. As he reached James and I, we pulled the doors apart like two Manhattan doormen and he walked straight passed us, out of the store and into the car park and the falling snow. He didn’t say a thing--the guy just walked out like we were nobody. But that was the thing with Belcher and his bung eye--half the time you didn’t have a clue where he was looking or even if he could see outta that damn thing. I think he could, and that he was just your everyday, garden-variety asshole. He’d never acknowledge us outside of store hours, anyway, so it wasn’t anything new to get a front-door snub. All the more reason to hate him.

As the register girls descended into store closing madness and the noise levels of shoppers waiting patiently in long queues grew, James and I discreetly turned, just enough to peer outside at Belcher, carefully dodging puddles in the car park as he walked to his car.

Little did he know...

I turned to James and whispered. “I hope he enjoys Florida ‘cos payback’s gonna be a bitch.”

When we arrived downtown...

Bathurst/Bloor Subway

1.26am, On schedule

Since leaving King Slice (best pizza in T.O.), my heart rate (and cholesterol) had gone through the roof. On the subway in, the adrenalin had already begun to flow freely through my veins. Climbing the steps of the Bathurst subway to street level, I'm sure Eric, James and Douglas were all equally pumped as I was but, as we reached Bloor St and the moonlit winters night, the bitter February wind cut through us like a knife and took away the will to speak. As revelers walked passed us in large numbers, heading down the subway steps to catch the last trains home, our night of fun was just getting started.

Walking along Bloor St, towards Brunswick Ave, we all kept our heads down, our hoods on, our hands in our pockets, and our mouths shut. This wasn't for the reason you might think--to go unnoticed--but rather to survive the bone-piercing wind of old-man winter. February is the coldest month in Toronto. Putting traffic, garbage, gangs and smog aside, winter is my #1 grievance of this place. I *hate* the cold. And the problem with Toronto is that there's really only two seasons, not four. It's either a) winter, or b) winter's on its way. The long winters here make summer seem like a 4-week vacation you take every year to the Caribbean. The cold's an entity here, it has the ability to mess with your head and break you. It's a very unpleasant existence when your skin freezes, your lips crack, your nose is like a stop sign, and your ears and fingers lose all feeling. And, let's not forget the dirty snow, freezing rain, flurries, black ice, wind-chill,

naked trees, a thousand shades of grey and the occasional ice storms. Yep, whoever came up with that whole ‘winter wonderland’ thing must’ve been smokin’ some pretty good crack.

Thankfully, as we reached Brunswick Avenue and turned off of Bloor, we became somewhat sheltered from the harsher easterly winds by the rows of houses up and down the avenue. We continued to slowly trudge through the snow towards our destination.

“Fuck!” I moaned, wiping my nose with my coat sleeve (bad habit).

“Weather Channel said it was gonna be -40 wind-chill overnight,” Eric said.

“You need The Weather Channel to tell you it’s fucking freezing?” James replied. “They should just flash ‘FF’ on the screen with sirens going off when it’s like this.”

“You gotta get a down coat, James,” Douglas said. “Down, baby. That’s where it’s at. Ooh yeah. I could be naked underneath this thing and still be warm.”

“You promised you’d never do that again,” James said, straight-faced.

“Check it out,” said Douglas, as he unzipped his blue ski-coat a little and showed it to James.

“This thing’s got about 50 caned ducks stuffed in it. B-*eautiful*.”

“How much?” Eric asked.

“\$600, top of the line, The North Face.”

I’d owned a cheap, department store down coat for the past three years. It did the job but had sprung a leak last winter and now I kinda dripped feathers everywhere I went.

“You know, when they settled this city, no way they settled in winter,” I said. “Who in their right fucking mind would think *this* would make a good place for a city--fucking minus forty and snow up your ass?”

Eric laughed and chimed in, “How’s the surprise they would’ve got when the first winter came round? All settled in and then ... oops, hey guys? I think we mighta fucked up.”

Trudging through the fresh snow, there was an eerie silence all across The Annex as the light and noise from Bloor St faded away. The Annex was one of the cooler (no pun intended)

downtown suburbs and was a mix of artists, U of T students and corporate types, giving the area a good, all round vibe. On Bloor, a very busy strip of cafes, bookstores and fashion outlets were always buzzing with locals, but once you stepped away from that main artery, you found yourself in peaceful, tree-lined streets with row upon row of original Victorian-era double and triple-story homes--seemingly removed from the downtown core of which they were part of. Our M.O. for these types of nights was pretty simple. One of us would carry a backpack with our gear and three other backpacks inside. Once we reached a home, we'd each have our own backpack to fill with our choice of merchandise. And when we got outta there, we'd just look like your everyday University students on the move--especially so tonight, seeing as U of T was only blocks away. Cool, huh?

"265 ... what number is it?" Eric asked us.

No one answered him.

"James," he said again, "what's his number?"

"How the hell do I know, you're the one that's been to his place," James replied.

"It's 3-something. I can't remember. I need something to eat. A donut or something to make me think," Eric said. "Have you got anything in the bag, Matt?" he asked me.

"I got nothing. No donuts, no sugar," I answered.

"Is there a Tim Horton's around here somewhere?"

"I've got a cigarette," James offered.

"277," Douglas pointed out.

"So I met with my agent yesterday," Eric began, getting his mind away from food, "guess who was sitting across from us?"

"Dudley Moore?" James said.

"He's fucking dead."

"When did that happen?" James asked.

We ignored him. You did that a lot with James.

“The dude from *The Wonder Years*, you know the guy?”

“You mean that kid? Savage...?” Douglas said.

“No, the Dad. He’s in alotta stuff. Movies and Disney shit. He’s always playing a dad or some military guy. I don’t know his name,” Eric said. “He was sitting right across from us.”

“Hey, why hasn’t your agent got you anything since you did that FedEx ad?” I asked Eric.

I counted a few steps in the snow as we waited patiently for Eric to answer.

“There was an incident...” he said, adding a pause. “I kinda threw up on her.”

“You threw up on your *agent*?” Douglas asked in disbelief.

“289,” James noted.

“You never said anything about this?” I said.

“I wonder why,” James replied.

“Right after I finished the FedEx shoot she invited me to this industry night, to meet some talent, makes contacts, network--that kind of thing,” Eric began. “It was at the Gypsy Co-op on Queen. They had everything--food, open bar, band, waiters flyin’ around everywhere. So, these waiters, they kept bringing out all these trays of little gourmet pastries. Half of them I had no clue what they were, but every time they brought them out, I took a whole bunch--I was hungry as hell. I *wanted* to take the entire tray off of them. Meanwhile, I’m drinking as you do at an open bar and yada yada yada ... it hit me.”

“I so wish I had’ve seen this,” Douglas said, laughing.

“So I think ... uh-oh. You know when you know you’re gonna be sick? You can feel all the food taking the elevator to the top floor, back into your mouth? I just froze. My agent pulled me over to meet this music-video director and I couldn’t run off, so I just tried to hold it down and keep still. Just as she said, ‘Raoul, come here darling, I’d love you to meet Eric, one of our new signings...’ is when I threw my guts over her front.”

Douglas burst into laughter. “I *knew* there was a reason she hadn’t called back,” he shouted, applauding the story.

I realized residents would’ve heard him but were probably used to hearing partygoers on the way home from a night out. James and I ... I think we were too damn cold to laugh.

“It was so messed up,” Eric said.

“You mean, *she* was so messed up?” James quipped.

“I’m lucky she’s even talking to me, I spat chewed up Hors’ dOuvres all over her dress.”

“Hey, I think this is it,” I said quietly. “There’s his car.”

We reached 321 Brunswick Avenue and slowly walked past the double story home, watching closely for any sign of life. Belcher’s Lincoln was parked right out front, no doubt he got a car service to the airport. Now, I’m no real estate agent but the house must’ve been worth a fortune for this neighborhood. I figured there was a big salary gap from grocery assistant to store manager.

Beneath a canopy of trees--stripped back by the season--stood a grand old Victorian two-story house with a pointy, arrow-shaped roof to keep the snow off. Built with red brick, it had four lots of tall, bay windows, painted white around their edges. Several steps lead up to a covered porch, with two pillars at either side holding a second roof up over the porch and entrance.

Wooden railing surrounded the porch, and there was a table with chairs stacked away, probably only used for the four weeks of summer. Okay, I lie ... 5 weeks. Sue me.

The house was dark and the curtains were drawn. We hung back for a minute, just watching.

“Turn around,” Douglas said to me.

“I’ll check what’s going on,” he said, as he unzipped my backpack and reached in, grabbing his night-vision binoculars.

The wind was still blowing through us but it had calmed down from the strength it had back on Bloor. The moon and stars were above us. Fresh powder snow covered everything in its reach.

It was eerily quiet except for the sound of snow falling from branches and hitting the ground below. The whole street was at peace. Only a masochist would be out in this weather ... or anyone up to no good.

“Are we good to go?” Eric whispered to Douglas.

“Gentlemen,” he replied, looking all around the house through his binoculars, “we have ourselves an empty house to cane.”

The classic stealth maneuver...

With a final glance around us, we crouched down and stepped over a small wooden fence along the front of Belcher's house, separating the property from the sidewalk. As we moved through the front garden, we made a trail of fresh prints in the virgin snow. A birdbath carved of stone stood amongst small shrubs and bushes, all covered with the white stuff. February was a time of the year where gardens just didn't exist in Toronto. Even the birdbath was 'out of order' and the only birds diving in for a dip would've been kamikaze ones.

Quickly disappearing out of sight from the street, we headed left, down the narrow, side walkway of the house. I could feel the cold penetrating my socks as I crouched along, my feet deep in about 12 inches of snow. We all took care not to brush up against Belcher's garden bushes, the snow weighing down on their leaves--any loud rustling and an alert neighbor could've been the end of us.

At the end of the walkway, the path opened up to the back of the house and a yard, barely big enough to hold a swimming pool. The four of us stepped off the snow covered ground and onto a slatted wooden deck, leading to the back of the house and sliding glass doors.

We were quiet. We took a moment to catch our breath from the classic stealth maneuver. The yard was dark and I could barely see in front of me. I turned around and peered through the sliding glass doors into the house. Everything was locked up. No one was home. Perfect.

I pulled the backpack from my shoulders and placed it down onto the deck. I gently unzipped it and started pulling our gear out:

Scrunched up backpacks (3)

Gaffe tape

Mini MagLite torches (3)

Pack of disposable gloves

Our novelty masks (4)

Canadian-Tire standard toolkit

Eric and James grabbed their backpacks, unfolding them into shape. Douglas was busy scanning around the yard and inside the house with his night-vision binoculars.

“Fucking-A,” he whispered to the three of us, “these things are so awesome.”

“Can you see anything?” I asked.

“I can see *everything*.”

“I mean activity, dumb-ass.”

“The place is dead,” he said, continuing to scan.

“Then let’s get this party started,” I whispered, as I placed my latex Michael Jackson mask over my head.

I’d bought a bunch of masks for us at a party store in Etobicoke. Mine was modeled after the real (i.e. ‘black’) Michael Jackson and looked way more realistic than Whacko Jacko did himself.

My mask even had his black, curly ‘Thriller’ hair attached and a normal shaped nose.

Eric became Dr. Evil--from the Austin Powers movies--and had the voice perfected so well that the first time he wore the mask during a break-in, I couldn’t stop laughing and we had to call it off prematurely, in case the neighbors had called the cops. Since then, every once in a while during a robbery, Eric would talk in character, just for the laughs. James, well he wore a generic gorilla mask (no frills for James) and Douglas ... well, Douglas became ... sorry, Douglas *was* Satan, and wore a bright red devil mask with a big sinister frown, wrinkly skin, Spock-like ears and two horns popping out the top.

We wore the masks just in case we ran into trouble or a house had cameras, which was more common than you'd think these days. Black ski-masks? Far too unoriginal. I always saw black ski-masks as the sign of a pro or the (dead @ the end) bad guy in a Hollywood movie. The novelty masks worked for us on so many more levels 'cos we just didn't see ourselves as ski-masked bad guys. We weren't pros. I mean, the people we robbed were wealthy, middle-class--they wouldn't dream of not having insurance. So, in a way, our crimes were against mega-corporate insurance companies making squillions of dollars. We'd take stuff, homeowners would claim for it, get replacements and be better off. I considered it a forced technology upgrade. Because we stole mostly tech stuff like cell phones, mp3 players, laptops and stuff, when our victims replaced their stuff they'd get the latest models, okay? I'm sure a lot of them actually liked the fact their old laptop was stolen so they could get a faster one. That's how I saw the novelty masks, as a way of setting the tone of our actions. We weren't hardcore bad guys, right? Right? This was our fun, this was what made us feel alive.

With our masks on and a pair of plastic gloves each (duh, no fingerprints), we were ready.

"James, you've got the door, okay?" Eric said in classic Dr. Evil, holding his pinky finger to the corner of his mouth.

"This place is in for such a caning," Douglas whispered, grinning through his mask. "Hey, does anyone want to go to Brass Rail after this?"

"For the last time ... no," James quipped.

Douglas had an unhealthy (unhealthy, what am I saying?) addiction for strip clubs. The Brass Rail was his favorite. For him, a lap dance was as normal as going out to pickup a newspaper at the store.

James grabbed his toolkit and crouched over to the sliding door, while we waited for him to work his magic. He paused for a moment and spent a good 30 seconds staring at the lock.

"James", Eric whispered, "while we're young? My ass is freezing to my pants."

I smiled to myself. Telling James to hurry was like trying to get Eric to give up donuts. It just wasn't happenin'. James was always getting on Eric's nerves, and it figured, since Eric was the highly strung, instant gratification, I-want-it-NOW type. Always had been.

James slowly began to twist and turn two small screwdrivers in the lock. He tried to be as quiet as possible, wedging them left and right. My heart rate jumped even more.

Robbing houses was the best. And a good workout ... screw the gym. The anticipation was all over us. This was the type of rush I was hooked on--better than drugs, better than booze, better than sex.

Douglas continued to scan around Belcher's yard and over the fences to the neighboring houses. He was our eyes in the dark. He pulled the binoculars away from his eyes and focused towards James and his handy-work for a moment.

"How do you know he doesn't have the place wired?" he asked.

"We don't," I whispered.

"But," Eric turned to him and explained, "I was here a few times last summer and got to look around. Belcher made me deliver bunches of groceries home for his wife. She'd had a fender bender, got her neck all screwed up. Couldn't get out of the house. The guy was too cheap to pay for home delivery in his own damn supermarket so whenever I was here dropping stuff off I made mental notes of the place. There was no alarm back then, positive."

"If anyone finds a system inside just get the hell out, okay?" I said.

"Was she nice?" Douglas asked Eric.

"His wife?"

"Yeah," Douglas replied.

"Are you asking me if she was nice as in 'nice', or if she was hot?"

"Guess."

“She was a total fox, I’m not kidding. And she knew how to flirt, too. There should be some kinda law against hot women being with guys like Belcher. I remember she had these pink sweatpants on and her ass ... her ass was outta this world.”

“Maybe they weren’t sweatpants, maybe they were spacepants?” James quipped.

“Maybe she wanted a special kind of delivery? Ever thoughta’ that? Yeah, baby!”

“Hey ... keep it down,” I whispered to Douglas, his voice getting a little loud for my liking.

Douglas pulled a 9mm replica pistol from his coat pocket. It was, in fact, a lighter that he bought on eBay to smoke the Cubans he’d buy from a work colleague of his. For our purposes, though, he’d bring it along as insurance. A safety net in case anything went down that we weren’t expecting and we needed to show someone we meant business ... in theory, anyways.

Click.

James tilted his arm as he turned the screwdrivers around in the lock. The lock had clicked undone and disengaged. He gently slid the door along its rollers. He turned to us in his gorilla mask and whispered, “Even a monkey could’ve opened that lock.”

We were in.

When we got inside Belcher's house...

One by one, we quietly moved into the house. James waited for the three of us to enter and carefully pulled the sliding door shut again. Finally, we were out of the cold and it never felt so good to be inside a warm, comfortable house than it did at that moment.

As the four of us stood up, I was glad to feel my toes beginning to thaw. In the darkness of Belcher's kitchen, my heart was smashing about in my chest for those first few moments, knowing who's house we were in and what he'd do to us if he ever found out who screwed him over.

We began to explore the layout of the kitchen. Together with night-vision monitoring, courtesy of Douglas, Eric, James and I each had a mini MagLite to keep us from knocking into stuff and/or ending up on our ass.

There were ceramic, chessboard tiles on the floor. An antique, oval dinner table and cushy chairs were just inside the glass doors. Several newspapers were pulled apart and had their sections spread out on the table. On one side of the kitchen was a row of cedar cupboards and a bench top, sink and dishwasher. There were several coffee mugs left on the bench top and a breadboard with the last few slices of a continental loaf. I saw an empty bottle of wine, lying sideways in the sink. Just above the sink, windows looked over to a neighboring house. On the other side of the kitchen, stood a stove and refrigerator, surrounded by another bunch of cabinets and utensil draws. A door with a large, plate-glass centre led out into the living room. I looked all over for any sign of an alarm system or mounted cameras. Nothing. So far.

“Why is it so freaking hot in here?” Eric whispered in Dr. Evil's voice.

I could feel it, too. The central heating must've been on full blast. It was like a damn sauna in there, we could've walked around naked.

Eric immediately began pulling off his coat, not bothering to mask any ruffling sound it made.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I have to get this thing off. I feel like I'm at the beach in here," he complained, as he took his shirt off and went altogether topless. A hairy chest and a handful of unwanted flab--not exactly what I wanted to see right then and there but that was Eric for you.

He walked over to Belcher's refrigerator and pulled the door open.

"Now what?" I asked again.

"Seriously, I need something to drink," he said. "It's so hot in here I feel like I'm gonna pass out. Who has their heating turned up this high?"

"It's probably some auto setting or something," Douglas said.

Eric scanned the shelves of Belcher's fridge, looking for something to drink, while Douglas passed him and headed toward the living room. I ditched my coat, too, and followed Douglas, shining my flashlight all around me.

On entering Belcher's living room you got the distinct impression that either Belcher, or his wife, had a passion for home decorating--it was a pretty nice room, I have to admit. I stepped off the kitchen tiles onto soft, plush, burgundy carpet. The slushy snow from our boots had already left a trail from the kitchen (oops). A staircase was on my left, leading up to the first floor. To my right sat a dining table with a tall, clay vase in the centre, full of flowers.

Bookshelves stood against the walls, chocked with books and tomes. A blue, L-shaped couch was in the centre of the room with one side facing an open fireplace and mantelpiece, and the other, a big screen TV and bay windows overlooking the front garden and Brunswick Ave. The mantelpiece held all sorts of knick-knacks, picture frames, and an antique clock in the middle.

Expensive looking artwork adorned the walls, both abstracts and landscapes. A lamp sat on

each of the smaller bookcases in the room, along with a globe, a few Runnerman's retailing awards, and one of those old model sailing boats. It really seemed like Belcher had a bit more to him than I first thought. To see a man's castle ... I guess it put some perspective on the guy. Don't get me wrong--he was still an asshole, but the picture frames and other stuff showed a side of him I hadn't seen at Runnerman's.

"Who owns a fucking supermarket and has no pop, no juice ... *nothing* to drink in their fridge?"

I heard Eric say in the kitchen, starting to sink towards one of his infamous mood swings.

"There's just, like, a thousand jars of condiments! What kind of shit is that?"

I turned around and could see he was annoyed. He closed the fridge door and then joined us in the living room. James was right behind him, bringing up the rear. James was keenly observing all around him. Stupid things. Little things. Receipts on the fridge. Fridge magnets. Ornaments on the walls. James in a nutshell.

Turning to my right, I saw a large, wall mirror and below it, a spacious mahogany desk and executive leather chair. My flashlight passed over a laptop computer sitting on the desk and instantly caught my attention.

Hell-ooooo. What have we here?

Tell him what he's won, Dave! Why, it's a beautiful laptop computer! (Enthusiastic crowd applause)

I walked over to the desk for a better look. I came into frame of the mirror and it dawned on me--I was Whacko Jacko, Man in the Mirror. 'Bad' album? Get it? I kill me. Sorry.

"This is nice," I heard James say, admiring the place.

Suddenly, something went crashing onto the floor and just about gave me a heart attack. I spun my head round in a flash and saw a golf bag on the floor next to James. Several of the clubs had slid out. I exhaled a breath of relief and held my hands up to James as if to say 'what the fuck?'. James wore glasses so it wasn't his eyes that were the problem. It was just James, being himself.

Crouching down, he slowly pushed the clubs back into the bag and placed it back against the wall.

I turned back to the desk. Placing my flashlight in my mouth, I searched with both hands for anything worth stealing apart from the laptop. My eyes had adjusted to the darkness but the MagLite, as usual, was still a big help. On the desk, there were photos of Belcher and his wife (Eric was right, she was hot), a bowl of pot pourri, a stack of bills underneath a glass paperweight, a daily, tear off calendar, stationary and a phone. Not a whole lot there. I could see all I wanted was the laptop--that definitely had my name written all over it. It was connected to an external LCD monitor, inkjet printer and cable modem, but that stuff was all too bulky and I didn't want it anyway. I began to unplug the cables as the other guys did their own treasure hunting. I turned my head briefly to see James swiping a digital camera from a table just inside the front door. I think I already mentioned this, but he was obsessed with photography. His thing was to capture real life, not landscapes or portraits but offbeat stuff--signs were classic subject matter, he'd tell me.

Eric and Douglas were going through the draws on one of the cabinets against the wall. I saw Eric take a credit card of some sort--they were always good for quick-purchase entertainment (see Brass Rail) until they got cancelled.

As I gently reached over the desk to the back of the monitor, I heard a distant noise. I froze. I bit down on the flashlight in my mouth. I couldn't tell where it came from and I didn't know what it was. It wasn't that unusual, because you would often hear noises and stuff in the older houses--floorboards or an old furnace, for example. But I could've sworn that that was a voice. I think I was starting to get a little paranoid from doing this kinda thing. After a few seconds of silence, I went back to the laptop. I unplugged the last remaining cable and then placed it in my backpack. The bonus of an item like that would be getting home and going through the contents. Maybe there was something on the hard drive to use as leverage against Belcher. Best

case scenario would be a few porn subscriptions that could get him fired or have to explain to his wife. Now *that* would be some payback.

I pulled open the top desk draw. I dug through it thoroughly. Unfortunately, nothing for me there, just stationary, some computer manuals, accounting software and cd-roms. The second draw was more of the same, and the third was full of files. I left the desk and headed towards the others, slowly looking for anything else that caught my eye.

James continued to browse around, looking through the bookcases like he was in a bookstore on a lazy Sunday. Eric and Douglas were admiring a wide-screen TV and home theater setup. Next to the TV, a blue armchair was nestled between two coffee tables. One, a metal-framed glass-top table, was covered in magazines and scrunched up newspapers, along with remote controls for the theater. On the second, stood a DVD tower crammed full of DVDs. I looked through the bay windows next to the TV for any sign of outside life. Not a peep, The Annex was asleep.

Eric got my attention.

“We’ve gotta start thinking how we can transport something like this,” he whispered, sizing it up like a project manager. “This would be so sweet to watch *Leno* on.”

I ignored him. To tell you the truth, my ears were still concentrating on the earlier noise and if it was going to repeat itself.

Douglas was crouched at the TV cabinet, looking at the DVD player. “It’s a DVD recorder with hard drive. I’m *so* taking this.” Like a kid in a candy-store, he quickly moved his focus to the tower of DVD’s and began to flick through them.

Eric crouched down and joined him.

“That is so awesome--check this--The Usual Suspects, Special Edition. Spacey and Singer ... what a classic,” Eric said. He pulled the DVD from the tower and handed it across to Douglas.

“Here, take it, I’ve already got a copy,” he said, holding it out.

“Nah. I don’t want it.”

“Whaddya mean?” Eric said, puzzled.

“ I didn’t like it,” Douglas told him.

“Woah, woah, woah--hold on--are you nuts? How could you not like this movie? It’s a masterpiece of filmmaking. Mr. Kobayashi, Keyser Söze, the ending?”

Douglas looked directly at Eric, “I thought it sucked. I figured it out halfway through. I mean, c’mon? Who else could it’ve been? Wasn’t it obvious? And the stupidest thing was that the ending made the whole movie never really happen ... what the fuck’s that about?”

“Hey ... guys ... c’mon. Focus,” I said. “I’m gonna head upstairs, okay?”

I left the two film critics to bash it out and walked over to James. “Did you hear something before?” I asked him.

“Hear what?”

“There it is again. There!”

James and I listened.

Both Eric and Douglas’ voices were rising.

“Okay ... okay,” I heard Eric say, trying to keep calm. I could tell he was annoyed. He’d often just let his moods get the better of him, especially when he hadn’t had a recent sugar-hit. “I just don’t get how you didn’t like this? Everyone likes this. It’s a recognized classic! Of all the movies not to like ... you see the irony here, don’t you? Keyser Söze’s the devil--you’re wearing a friggin’ devil mask and telling people you’re Satan!”

“Alright ... I *get* it! I’m still not taking it, okay? Jesus! If you like it so much, why don’t you take it so you have two copies to watch,” Douglas barked.

I quickly turned to them both and waved my arms wildly in the air. It got their attention.

“What’s wrong with you?” Eric asked aloud.

I pointed upstairs with one hand and put my finger over my lips with the other. I carefully walked over to them and whispered up close.

“Somebody’s up there, listen.”

A fucking problem...

We were all silent. We waited. It was as though someone had freeze-framed us. The clock on the mantelpiece continued to count out life.

“I can’t hear anything?”

“Oh,” came a distant, muffled voice.

“What the fuck was that?” Douglas whispered.

Eric put his finger over his lips to Douglas. We all heard the noise. A faint sign of life was coming from upstairs. We huddled close together, like a sports team in a time-out.

“Someone’s up there,” Eric whispered.

“Maybe it’s a TV, you know, on one of those timers?” James suggested.

“It sounds like a voice, maybe we woke someone up?” I whispered.

“Uhhhhhhhhh.”

“That’s definitely a voice, it sounds like a moan,” Douglas replied.

My heart was in my mouth. We heard the voice become clearer with each passing moment.

“It sounds like someone’s in trouble?”

“Maybe Belcher beat his wife before flying to Florida and she’s up there dying?” Douglas said.

“Uggghhhh.”

“That’s fucking,” James whispered.

“Fucking what?”

“The noise ... it’s fucking--two people fucking,” he replied.

“And you’re an expert?” Eric asked him.

“Goddddddd,” came the voice again.

“This is nice ... real nice. I thought he was supposed to be in Florida?” I whispered angrily to Eric.

“Wait, maybe he is. Maybe it’s his wife?”

“Maybe she met two hookers at a club?” James quipped.

Eric glanced at him, unimpressed.

“His wife’s probably having an affair,” Douglas whispered. “They’re getting it on while he’s away.”

“Ooooooooooh,” the voice continued.

“I thought you said they were both going?” I questioned Eric.

“That’s what I thought! Maybe she didn’t want to go this year? How the hell do I know!”

“So?” James whispered, “what do we do now?”

We all stood there, staring at each other. At that moment, I think we all thought about getting outta there. Knowing Belcher’s wife was in the house with some unknown lover freaked me out. But, in all our home robberies, we’d never had a confrontation and the thought of that kind of rush was just too hard to resist. We totally had the upper hand. We could do this.

“I say we go up there and scare the living daylights outta them. Can you imagine how good that’d feel?” I said.

“Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod--yessssss!” came the voice.

“This is, like, so messed up,” Eric whispered, “I don’t wanna be listening to Belcher’s wife doing some guy up there, let alone smash through the door and have that image burnt into memory. We’ll all be scarred by this shit.”

“Don’t be such a pussy,” Douglas said softly.

“What’s the etiquette here? Should we wait for them to finish? Maybe I can go have a cigarette outside?” James said.

“So what are we gonna say?” Eric asked.

“Douglas,” I said, “she won’t know your voice. Just point the gun and ask for money n’ shit. Don’t show any fear, don’t back down.”

“Hey, I think I can handle this kind of thing. I trade millions of dollars of other people’s money everyday. *That’s* fear.”

“Fine. Are we all cool?” I asked. “In and out. We’ll be gone in 60 seconds. They won’t know what hit ‘em.”

“Ohhhhhh wow,” continued the voice upstairs.

We all looked at each other and quickly nodded. We turned our MagLites off.

“Shouldn’t we have, like, a signal or something, in case we need to abort?” James asked.

“Did you just say abort?” Eric whispered, puzzled at James’s vocabulary. “James, I’d lose the word ‘abort’, okay? No girl is going to date a guy who uses ‘abort’ in a real sentence. Period.”

“I knew I should’ve brought the chloroform,” James mumbled to himself.

“Everything’s cool, James,” I whispered, “Douglas has the night vision. He knows what he’s doing.”

“Well, I suppose I could always roll my eyes, like this...” James said, trying out his idea for a signal.

“Hey ... screw you, James,” Douglas told him, “you wanna do this, go right ahead.”

“Let’s just do this already!” I whispered to them. I tried to ease the tension.

“Well?” Douglas whispered, waiting for James. “No? Don’t wanna put your balls on the line? You’ll just stick to the back, huh? Thought so. Nothing but a little pussy.”

“You lead,” Eric whispered to Douglas, “give us a signal if you need us to stop, okay?”

Douglas slowly began to walk towards the stairs, night-vision binoculars in one hand, 9mm replica in the other. You would never have known the gun was a lighter unless you actually saw the flame at its tip. It looked real enough to make anyone shit their pants. And, together with our novelty masks, I was just hoping Belcher’s wife wouldn’t have a heart attack when she saw

us. Seeing Whacko Jacko in your bedroom doorway watching you have sex might be enough.

No way did I want to be trying to revive a naked Belcher's wife.

Leaving my backpack behind for noise reduction, I followed Douglas next up the stairs, making sure my footsteps were quiet. Eric and James followed behind me. I held onto the hand railing and hoped the others did the same. Whatever you do, do not trip, I thought to myself. We needed the element of surprise or all hell would break loose.

As I reached the top of the stairs, I stared through the darkness, down the short, hardwood floor hallway, covered by a narrow Persian rug. At the end of the hall we could hear the source of the noise. It was coming from the main bedroom. I could see the door was pushed to.

As we slowly crept toward the door, James was right, there was no doubt they were going pretty hard at it in there. Belcher's wife was gasping, sighing, oohing and ahing. I could hear both of them softly panting. The bed was creaking like a metronome in perfect rhythm. I would never have admitted it to the guys, but it was actually strangely erotic, knowing they didn't know we were listening in, only feet away.

Like anti-terrorist crack-commandos in the dead of night, each step we took was in slo-motion, one after the other. On either side of the hallway, we passed the other bedrooms and a bathroom, all in darkness. I carefully stepped past a phone-stand and a pot-plant, not wanting to touch or knock anything. My throat went dry. My heart thumped like bongo drums. The anticipation was like you wouldn't believe. It was a purely natural high (try and beat that, Cocaine).

Douglas stopped just outside the bedroom and waited for the three of us to reach the doorway.

We all listened in for a moment, the couple's voices somewhat dampened by the door. It felt like we were kids sneaking into an XXX theater.

"Oh my god."

"Uhhhhhhh."

“Oh my goddddddd.”

“Lift off me a little.”

“Like, ohhhh, that is sooooo good.”

“Lean back.”

“Ohhhh *God*, don’t stop--don’t stop--don’t stop.”

Listening to them, it occurred to me that the female voice was familiar. Like when you hear a song on the radio that you’re sure you’ve heard before. That couldn’t be Belcher’s wife, I thought to myself? That was more like a girls voice. And over the course of the next, oh, ten milliseconds, my brain pattern, in between heartbeats, went something like this:

Airport.

(Thump-thump).

Snow.

(Thump-thump).

Planes don’t like snow.

(Thump-thump).

Airports get snowed in.

(Thump-thump).

Flights get cancelled.

(Thump-thump).

Oh.

(Thump-thump).

Fuck.

(Thump-thump).

And before I could do anything to stop him, Douglas gently pushed the bedroom door and it swung open with barely a sound...

In the darkness, aided by moonlight through the bedroom windows, I could see Cassandra Parker, queen bitch of the Runnerman's checkout girls, on top of Belcher. They were sitting on a queen bed, above the covers, in the middle of the room. Cassandra was running her fingers through her hair as she rode Belcher, all the way to the top of the Runnerman's food chain. We just stood there frozen, watching her body bounce up and down for what seemed an eternity but was mere seconds.

It wasn't a large room. There were two dressers on the left hand wall, more artwork, and a TV cabinet on wheels with TV/DVD. Two large wardrobes were up against the right wall. Clothes were scattered on the hardwood floor and a free-standing mirror was in the corner. On either side of the queen bed were nightstands, sharing between them a clock-radio, lamps, phone and cologne bottles.

Belcher and Cassandra kept at it. They were butt-naked except for a pair of white socks on Cassandra's feet. She had one of those Celtic knot tattoos on the small of her back. His eyes must've been closed and her back was to us as they weren't even slightly aware of the audience they now had. And like a gang of school kids peeping through a window, we didn't have a clue what to do next. I didn't know whether to run, hide, join in, faint or interrupt.

Douglas suddenly reached his hand into the room and found the light switch on the inside wall. He flicked it on. We had crossed the point of no return.

Cassandra looked over her shoulder and let out the most ear-piercing scream I think I've ever heard from a girl. Now, I'm assuming it was from seeing us standing there in the hallway and not an orgasm ... but I'll never really be sure. She immediately jumped off of Belcher, like a teenage girl getting caught with a boy by her parents. She curled up on the bed, covering her breasts with her hands. She grabbed a pillow and put it over her lap in a heartbeat.

“What the hell is this!” Belcher shouted, as he rose up from the bed and did the same with the other pillow, covering his lap.

“Nobody fucking move!” Douglas screamed, pointing the gun at them both.

“You,” he snarled at Belcher, “don’t be a hero, dude. No freaky shit and no one gets hurt. This isn’t a fucking dream, okay? I’ll blow your fucking heads off if I have to. Cover yourselves up.”

Belcher pulled the bedcovers up over the both of them, slipping their legs underneath.

Cassandra held one hand over her breasts, grabbing her side of the covers with the other.

I remained dead still, along with Eric and James. Douglas stood up to the plate and I must admit, he was pretty convincing. Both of them looked like they’d seen a ghost, or maybe that was just the look of getting caught together, store employee and manager--who knows?

Cassandra was whimpering up against the back of the bed, doing her best to cover her body.

“We want the cash,” Douglas yelled at Belcher.

“There’s some in the drawer,” Belcher replied, gesturing to the nightstand.

“Get it. Nice and slow now, or I’ll put a cap in your naked ass,” Douglas instructed from the end of the bed, pointing the gun directly at Belcher’s head.

Belcher leaned over to the nightstand and slowly opened the top drawer. He reached in, fumbled for a second, and then quickly lifted up a tiny, pocket-sized gun in his hand, pointing the black nozzle at Douglas. Douglas dived to the floor.

There was no warning. He squeezed off three shots in succession.

POP.

POP.

POP.

We all turned in the doorway and got the fuck out of there. Cassandra started screaming her lungs out as Eric and James ran down the hallway ahead of me. You hear some people say that at times of great panic and life threatening fear, everything seems to slow down to a crawl right

in front of your eyes, but for that moment of chaos, when Belcher started firing, everything happened so fast. I couldn't believe how we all came out of it alive. The last I saw before spinning to get outta there was Belcher pointing the gun in our direction--he never waited, he just pulled the trigger. I remember the shots sounding like 'pops' and wondered if they were real and if this was all really happening.

Maybe it was his bung eye or he was pumped full of adrenalin, like us, but he totally missed our asses. That, or we pulled a damn Matrix on those bullets.

At the speed of light, Douglas picked himself up off the bedroom floor and pushed himself right past me, outside the bedroom doorway, bolting off down the hallway and down the stairs. "Ohmygod--ohmygod--ohmygod--ohmygod," I heard Cassandra squeal in quick succession, although this time I'm certain it was out of fear and not pleasure.

I turned around and realized she was looking at me. Her eyes were as big as baseballs as they stared straight at my chest, and at that very moment, I looked down and saw the blood on my sweater.

Now, talking about everything happening so fast earlier, well ... at that moment, everything just reversed right up and stopped to a crawl. I hate to say it, but much like bullet-time in *The Matrix*. Maybe I hadn't done a Neo, after all.

"I've been hit," I yelled, but the guys were already halfway down the stairs. I could hear the thud of their boots come to a stop as they reached the bottom. There was no answer. They were gone. I put my hand up to my chest and held it there. I looked back into the bedroom. Belcher was holding the gun straight at me, his arm making it shake with a slight tremor.

"You fucking shot me!" I gasped at him.

I began to feel pain. I went down on one knee but then quickly dropped backward onto the Persian rug with a thud.

"Shit. You fucking shot me! Oh, God," I moaned in pain, squirming my body around.

I stared up at the ceiling. I held onto my chest and felt the pain light up like a fire inside me. It burned. Oh, it burned.

I heard Belcher and Cassandra's feet hitting the floor as they got out of bed.

"Oh my God, you really shot him! We have to call 911," I heard her say.

Belcher's voice was frantic.

"It was self-defense, you saw it, right? Shit! Tell me you saw what happened?"

"Call 911, he's dying," she screamed.

"Wait! Wait! Let's just think this through for a second. They can't find you here, you've gotta get the hell out. If my wife finds out about you she'll kill me."

"He's not moving. Oh my god, I think he's dead," I heard her say, her hysterical voice directed towards me.

"Here ... put your clothes on and get outta here, I'll fix this!" Belcher assured her.

I slowly lifted my head off the floor and looked back into the bedroom. I watched Cassandra take her bundle of clothes from Belcher and drop them at her feet. She slid a g-string on and then frantically pulled a pair of jeans up over her legs. I watched her breasts jiggle as she zipped up. Yes, I was lying there with a bullet in me, feeling like acid was eating my guts out, but I was still able to appreciate what a hot body that girl had.

I had to put my head back down, the pain was intense. I heard Belcher's voice on the phone.

"321 Brunswick," he said matter-of-factly, "I need an ambulance ... I've just had a home invasion ... I've shot one of them. I think he could be dead..."

Sidebar: What happens if the people taking emergency calls have an emergency? Does an operator stand up from her cubicle and shout out 'somebody call 911!?'

I felt a pool of blood slowly forming on the hardwood floor, next to me, and began to really panic.

“I don’t wanna die. I don’t wanna die. I don’t wanna die. Why did you fucking shoot me?” I cried.

“Wait ... he’s alive. I can hear him. No, I’m not in danger. He’s hurt,” Belcher said into the phone.

“Tell them to hurry! I don’t wanna die,” I gasped in pain to him. “I don’t wanna die. Somebody help me.”

There were so many thoughts rushing around in my head. It took a single bullet to the chest for me to instantly realize I had wasted the life I’d been given. You dumb-fuck, I thought. There was still so much I wanted to do in life--travel, get married, go to the Stanley Cup, jump out of a perfectly good airplane...

Please God ... I don’t wanna die.

I had never prayed before in my life. I didn’t even buy there *was* a God. But as I lay there, I was afraid. I could feel my life-force fading and thought maybe now was a good time to try. It calmed me down.

Please God, just get me out of this one.

I swear I’ll change everything.

I swear to you.

I’ll never take anything for granted.

I know I’ve fucked up.

Big time.

But I don’t wanna die.

Not like this.

Please God.

Not like this.

I couldn't move. My breathing became rapid, through my mouth, and I was panicking like you wouldn't believe. All I could see was the snow-white ceiling when I opened my eyes. My regrets began to surface. I had these stupid little thoughts swirling in my mind:

I wish I had've had more sex...

Why didn't I talk to the Cooley's waitress?

Shit. My iPod. I just finished ripping all my cds to that fucker...

I should've traveled, seen the world, headed west, gone to Hollywood...

Oh God, my Xbox. Halo 2.

No. Everything'll be fine. The paramedics are on their way. I'm gonna be fine.

I should've cut people some slack...

7-11 ... shit. I love my life.

Why does everyone have to have a fucking gun in their house?

"Why did you shoot me? You fucking shot me, you prick!" I screamed. I was hysterical. I was so scared. This was my life.

King Slice Pizza. Mario knows me there. He knows I love a slice of pepperoni and an Orangina.

I have Raptors tickets for next Thursday at the AC Centre, Lakers need to go down...

The Joker nightclub. The hottest girls. God ... no. Don't you let me die, God! I haven't lived.

The new season of Sopranos, Second Cup coffee ... Tim Horton's!

Why did he have to shoot?

Toronto ... I don't wanna leave Toronto. I love Toronto. It's my home. It's where I belong.

Do you hear me? I can't die, dammit! I'm not going to die. I'm going to stay lying here and wait for the ambulance. Medicine's so advanced these days.

Medicine's so advanced these days.

Medicine's so advanced these days.

I felt cold.

The blood was trickling out of my body. Footsteps came towards me, ever so slowly, cautiously.

I slowly opened my eyes. Cassandra and Belcher were peering over my body, looking down on me. I couldn't speak anymore. I felt sleepy.

"Is he dead?" she asked him.

"I don't know. I don't think so?"

"Should we check?"

"Let's just wait for the paramedics, they're on their way. Go, get out of here. I'll call you, okay?"

If anyone asks, you were never here, you don't know anything..." Belcher told her.

"The mask's Michael Jackson, see? They all had masks on," she said.

"I'm gonna pull it off," Belcher told her.

"No, wait ... I don't, like, know if that's the best thing to do?"

"I wanna see his face!" Belcher snapped.

Belcher crouched over me and gently pulled the mask off my head. I couldn't move, I couldn't stop him. Lying there, I was fucked. But the strangest thing, was that the pain was slowly fading.

Either my body was on autopilot, conditioning itself to a new pain threshold, or there were some kind of invisible paramedics around me pumping me full of pain killer. Whichever it was, I didn't know and I didn't care. It was just such a relief to be free of that misery. Now, though, it was getting harder and harder to keep my eyes open. They were getting sooooo heavy. I felt

an immense tiredness come over me. Like little weights were dragging my eyelids down. It was so hard to fight. Maybe I just could go to sleep while I waited?

“Shit ... I don’t believe it,” Belcher said.

“Oh my god? Is that ... ?”

“That’s Matt Zander from the store. Jesus Christ,” Belcher exclaimed.

“He’s like, still alive, look ... I think?”

As my eye lids opened and closed, I could just make out the two of them standing over me, staring down in shock. Guess they never saw that one coming. Although, I’ll call it even, as I never saw Cassandra Parker doing Belcher to get ahead, either.

“Like ... what a total loser,” I heard her say to Belcher.

And with those words, my eyes closed and I began to feel as light as a feather.

Eyes closed, I had no idea...

I do not have the words.

I never realized.

I am part of everything.

You just don't understand.

But I will try to help you now.

Energy flows through me.

Feeling is the true language.

This city, so beautiful.

Pulsing.

I am connected now.

Traffic lights ... red. Then green.

Homeless souls.

I feel everything happening around me.

Downstairs Jazz.

A taxi and a fare.

No thing is separate from me.

Snow falling to the ground.

It is part of the whole.

Because that is all there ever will be.

Now.

Reports of my death were actually quite accurate...

Okay. Here's where I'm going to try as best I can to describe what it's like to die. I say 'as best I can' and 'try' (Yoda would kill me--there is no try) because I just don't know if I can pull this off. The problem is, all I have to detail the experience of dying to you are words. And trust me, words don't even come close to explaining the kind of state of being in this other world or dimension. I mean, imagine trying to describe the difference between what a 3D movie is like--with those special, red and blue glasses--compared to a regular movie up on the big screen. You know? It would be tough even for the best damn writer out there, and I think you already know, I ain't him. Dying is ... something you've got to see for yourself. But don't worry, you will one day, none of us are going to get out of this life alive. So just consider the following like a sneak preview trailer of a big, summer 3D blockbuster movie that some day you'll be front row centre to see. Now ... with that being said, sit back and hold onto your butts. This is what happened after everything faded to black...

As my eyes closed for the last time, and the sight of Belcher and Cassandra standing over me faded away, I immediately felt myself move. I began to gently float upwards, away from the hardwood floor, toward the ceiling. Have you ever watched a feather in a tumble-dry gush of wind? Or a pile of leaves swirling around in circles in the gutter? Well, I would describe the movement I experienced as a similar force of nature--a steady, constant burst of energy, encircled all around me, raising me up. I admit it was a weird feeling to begin with, and I did wonder where I was going, but surprisingly, I wasn't worried--this force around me felt perfectly natural and I was relieved, more than anything, just to have the pain finally silenced.

That's when I realized...

I was out of my body.

Like, woah.

I was dead.

Me ... dead!

How 'bout that?

But...

I was still me. I was still alive.

I didn't feel tired anymore. My eyes were wide open (assuming I still *had* eyes?) and I could see clearly. As I floated upwards, I passed by artwork on Belcher's walls--abstract stuff--and looked at it wondering why people paid money for paintings where some 'artist' had just picked up a can of paint and hurled it at a canvas. Yep ... I was definitely still me.

Leaning to one side, I instantly rolled over. I could still feel my body, or *a* body, but I just couldn't see any of it. All I had was vision of Belcher's hallway and bedroom beneath me, like I was a set of eyes dangling from the ceiling on a piece of string. I still felt I had arms and legs and that I was complete, but in a much lighter, more efficient, streamlined model than my old body.

Now, here's the first of those 'hard to explain in words' bits ... I was in a state of weightlessness. Pure weightlessness. I felt I could go wherever I wanted to go. The sense of freedom was so strong in those first few moments because I simply didn't have any density to me anymore. Like I'd been dressed up as a cartoon character in a heavy, furry suit walking around Disneyland for years and I'd just taken the suit off for the first time. I felt unrestricted in every kind of movement. There was an energy flowing through me, some kind of electrical pulse or surge, like I'd just skulled five espressos. It didn't hurt, it was the complete opposite, it

felt incredible, this buzz ... like I'd been plugged into the source of all life and was recharging myself.

'So ... this is what it's like to be dead,' I thought to myself.

That's the weirdest thing about death, I found. That I was still me, outside of my body. Which meant that my body really wasn't me at all, you know? You go through life always thinking that you--the person you are--is your body, when it's not at all. My body was just flesh, blood and bones. Just a vehicle for the real me to get around in. Here is this huge industry on making the body beautiful--plastic surgery, treatments, fur coats, going to the gym, blah blah blah--when the body's merely an avatar. It was a real surprise to realize that, as I always thought when I saw myself in a mirror that it was 'me', if you know what I mean? Kind of spooky, isn't it? Anyone now running to a mirror to stare and wonder who you really are? I certainly have since coming back, believe me.

When I reached the ceiling, I stopped moving and just hovered above the hallway, right outside Belcher's bedroom. I didn't know what was going to happen next so I just waited there and looked down at Belcher and Cassandra standing over me (standing over my *body*, I should say). Belcher had boxers and a t-shirt on, and I could see the top of his balding, shiny head. What a view. Cassandra on the other hand, oh boy. I had a nice view straight down her top from above but she was dressed now (damn).

"He's not breathing," I heard Cassandra say. She was crouched down over me, blocking any view I had of myself. "Should we do CPR?" she asked, looking up to Belcher with frightened eyes.

Immediately I hoped, 'God, yessssss. Please gimme CPR,' but a second later I thought, 'now that's not much use to me if I'm up here and my body's down there, is it, Matt?'

Belcher crouched down beside her and felt my pulse. He turned to Cassandra.

"He's gone."

“Oh my god,” she gasped in shock, as she put her hands over her mouth.

‘What a dumb-ass that guy is. I’m not dead. I’m right here, just look up you moron,’ I thought. I hadn’t gone anywhere.

But I knew they couldn’t hear me. I didn’t need any ‘Death for Dummies’ book to understand the place I was in was somewhere ‘different’--that they couldn’t see or hear me, and somehow, there is such a place that exists, another dimension (the 4th?), another layer of life that’s separate from everyone still living. Isn’t that freaky? That there really are other dimensions like some scientists say. Man, they’re right. People should listen to scientists more often. We’re all too, I dunno ... skeptical and suspicious of that kind of stuff. Anything we can’t see we tend to dismiss because we’re scared by it. The whole world’s turned into Scully off *The X-Files*. Once you die--trust me on this--you become a Mulder. Big time.

Imagine what you could do if you discovered how to slip into this plane at will? Holy shit, how much fun could you have? It’d be like the invisible man! You could go anywhere, anytime. A fly on the wall to anything you wanted to see but weren’t invited. Damn ... if only I weren’t dead, huh?

“Get out of here ... go,” Belcher said to her, “I’ll call you when it’s over.”

I watched Cassandra take off down the hallway and run down the stairs. She was gone. Damn.

Just when I was admiring the view of her ass from my elevated position she has to run off.

I looked back and saw Belcher step away from my body and walk to his bedroom window. He looked out the window both ways, like he was crossing the street, and I knew the ambulance was getting closer. I could hear the sirens closing in. Bit late, you sons of bitches, I thought.

But, honestly, I didn’t care at all. This state of being I was in was so peaceful, calm and relaxed--after the pain of the gunshot I was glad to be out of my body.

And that’s when I looked down and saw myself, lying there on the floor of Belcher’s place.

I saw myself dead...

Now, you might be thinking how shocking that would be, to see yourself from outside of your body, lying somewhere dead. But I'd say it was more of a surprise than a shock because it really didn't seem as though I was looking at myself. And, it was like I was seeing myself for the first time, because my body lying there on the floor was three-dimensional. It wasn't like I was looking at a mirror or a photograph, you know? I was seeing myself as others saw me--as just another guy--and I looked different to how I always imagined (obviously with a gunshot wound and pool of blood around me I didn't look my best). But because I was still 'alive' it just didn't seem like it was me lying down there anymore. It could easily have been a dummy or an actor in a made-for-TV dramatization on my life.

'I really look like *that*?' I thought to myself. I thought I was better looking than that.

I have to say, when I saw that blood soaked sweater, my eyes closed, and a lifeless expression on my face, feeling sad, angry or scared didn't even cross my mind. This may sound strange but it was like that body was someone else's now. It wasn't me anymore. Here I was floating at the ceiling and 'it' was down there on the floor. That's when I further realized the body is just a house or a means of transport, like I was saying. Once you leave your body, you're really just discarding a disposable shell that fades away into the ground when there's no 'you' left in it. Your body isn't important to you after you die. All I was looking at was a lump of mass with a hole shot in it. Now that I was outside of that thing, it wasn't 'mine', it was just an object. Does that make sense? Like seeing your beat up car on the side of the road, smoke from the engine, radiator fluid leaking out, knowing damn well it's a write off.

Suddenly, my attention turned to Belcher and I watched him shuffle off downstairs. Now I was alone, just me and my thoughts. And on the subject of thought, everything was in my mind, everything I thought and said to myself was just like the voice you hear in your head when you're in your car, on the streetcar, or wherever. I still had my inner voice, which was comforting.

'So what am I supposed to do now?', I asked myself.

'Is there a codeword or something I need to say? Do I have to wait for a pickup? I guess I don't need to be in to work on Monday. Cool.'

All of a sudden, two paramedics came rushing up the stairs, with Belcher following close behind. I thought I could try to tell them somehow not to bother working on me but before I could think of how to do that, they ran down the hallway and slammed their gear down at my side. The guy began checking my vitals. The other one quickly prepped an injection and jabbed it into me but I didn't feel a thing. Even when she touched me I felt nothing.

But I was happy I couldn't feel my body at that point. I didn't want to be back in that thing and I didn't want them to help me get back in that thing. I was fine just where I was.

"Is he dead?" Belcher asked them.

They didn't answer him. Both of them were focused on saving my life.

My eyes(?) moved off of them for a moment and I looked out Belcher's bedroom windows. I could see the still of the night, interrupted by the ambulance pulled up outside, its lights flashing in the falling snow. Across Brunswick Avenue, I watched neighboring houses turn a bedroom light on, as residents pulled their curtains back, wanting to see what the commotion was.

Now, there's another thing that began happening that I simply can't explain. Well, two actually.

Firstly, when I say I looked out the windows and saw the street, ambulance and neighbors peeking over towards the house, I say it with a much different meaning than you think, i.e. different to if I was to walk over and stand at the windows. What happened was, as soon as I had the thought of wanting to look out the windows, I was literally right there at them, with no movement or effort on my part. One second I was looking down at my body in the hallway, the next, looking out the windows in the bedroom, about 15ft away. I didn't float there, zoom there, walk there or drift there--it was all based on thought. My thought triggered the visual I saw. This then extended to the next thought and the next. Meaning that when I saw the

ambulance lights flashing in the falling snow, and had the thought in my head, I went there, right in front of them, up close. I likened it to zooming in with a digital camera. You know when you're looking through the viewfinder and you hit the zoom and quickly move in close to your subject? Well, that's what my eyes or vision was now capable of doing. Only it happened instantaneous. Maybe the best way I can explain this thing is by saying ... it felt like I was everywhere, all at once and whenever I had a thought about something, it was like I was paying attention to it rather than moving to it to see it. Does that make sense? I'd have the thought of seeing the neighbors peeking through their curtains and instantly be zoomed in, right up close, close enough to see lines on people's faces. I could see the detail of snowflakes coming to rest on trees. I read the ambulance's plates, noticed the scratches on its doors, the dirty slush snow on the street. All of these images appeared inches away from me. Changing like a slideshow, based on my thoughts of them. When my thoughts were gone, I simply returned my focus to the paramedics.

I heard them talking to each other, hurriedly. They were working on me, rapidly trying to kick-start my heart. They realized I was in real trouble as soon as they knelt down beside my body. But they weren't giving up, they seemed determined. One was in his 40's, the girl was in her early 30's. I watched them from above, like a spectator. They worked as a team, doing all sorts of things at lightening speed. Although it seemed like minutes passing by, somehow I knew it was only seconds. Time, as we know it, didn't seem to apply to the place I was in.

In this state of consciousness, now that I realized I was out of my body, another heightened sense I became aware of was the ability to hear thought--namely, Belcher's and the two paramedics. It took a little while for me to realize and understand that's what I was hearing. But once I did, it was unmistakable and it happened in a concentrated way when I focused my thoughts onto each of them. I could hear their minds at work. There was no effort to do this,

though, it felt as natural as jumping back on a bike after a few years. It was just like I heard them saying these things aloud, but to themselves.

Belcher was thinking about what he was going to tell his wife, Tracey, when she got back from her weekend away visiting a girlfriend in Montreal. She already knew his flight was cancelled to Orlando and that he wasn't going to fly down for the convention--he'd called her from Pearson Airport before he got a car service back to the city. In the car, he had called Cassandra and asked her if she wanted to meet up for some coffee to discuss where she was headed with her career and to get to know her a little better. Tracey would never know about Cassandra, that was a lock, and so all he was planning to tell her was he was asleep when he heard intruders breaking in downstairs. Grabbing his gun, he fired shots off in self defense, scared for his own life...

As he stood there, watching the paramedics, he was running the story through his mind over and over, getting it straight. But he was in the clear, I heard him think to himself. He wondered about Eric, James and Douglas--who they were and if they'd come back or be caught. He hadn't recognized Douglas's voice and wanted to know who the other three were--friends of mine or otherwise. He knew the police would be all over this, investigating what happened, the shooting and everything. Especially once they found out I was a store employee of his. But he had a license for the handgun so as far as he knew, it would be a case of self defense and he wouldn't be up on charges. Self-defense, he thought. That's all it was. He planned to call Cassandra later and meet tomorrow to tell her what happened and make sure she knew to keep her mouth shut. More to the point, however, he *really* wanted to pickup where they left off, before Tracey flew back late Sunday. Cassandra was one of the sluttiest checkout girls he'd taken home.

All of this, I read from Belcher's mind. I knew exactly what he was thinking. How this could be, I just don't know? I began to--I know it sounds crazy--'remember' that ESP was real. That thought is energy and you can feel it all around you in this place. Everyone gives off energy

from their thoughts and when you're in this state, when you're out of your body, you can 'hear' that energy and understand a person's thoughts.

I even heard the paramedics ... the guy, the senior of the two, was hoping for some kind of response out of me. He was tired, only a quarter-way through his graveyard shift and thought CPR was their last chance to try and start my heart again. He hated losing people on the job--one of his pet hates--and wondered why the cops were taking so long to get here.

The girl loved Belcher's house, wished it was her own instead of the high-rise box apartment she rented. She thought I was totally FUBAR'd (fucked up beyond all recognition) but didn't want to say it to her partner because he'd always exhaust every possible option before giving up. She was having marital problems ... she was dreading having to go through a divorce so early into a marriage and wondered if she'd made a huge mistake by rushing in, just because she'd reached her thirties and was still single. She had a song in the back of her head ... it was going over and over. I didn't know what it was.

Even with all these things going on and these new spiritual senses, I was beginning to feel a little anxious about being alone in this world. I mean, here I was dead, in a different place now, and I wished I had've had someone there to give me a run-through. Maybe I did need that Dummies manual after all. I mean, I wanted something to kind of happen soon, right? Don't tell me I had to be some kind of friggin' ghost and haunt Belcher for eternity? If that was the afterlife, gimme my money back, man.

I certainly wasn't angry about my death, though. Not at Belcher or even the guys, for leaving me behind. I dunno why, I probably should've been as mad as hell, but I was at ease with everything now. I felt like I was one with the entire universe, and anger wasn't an emotion I'd ever need to feel again.

Suddenly, I heard a noise. It grabbed my attention away from the paramedics below and had me looking all over the room and hallway.

Out of nowhere, this strange sound--some kind of buzzing--began to fade in and get louder and louder. What the ...? No, it wasn't the cops or any other sirens outside. It sounded like an old-fashioned phone, ringing right in my ear, like the ones from those old black and white 50's movies. I looked around, scanning the hallway and the bedroom.

'What is that? A phone call?' I asked myself.

Questions started to pile up in my head. My mind had been KO'd with curiosity by this sound.

The paramedics began CPR on my chest but as the guy thrust down with his hands, counting aloud, his voice slowly began to drown out and fade away.

The ringing got louder in my ear.

Brrrrinnng.

Brrrrinnng.

Brrrrinnng.

It was like one of those secret, red phones that the Pentagon calls the President on if they spot a UFO above a military base. Maybe it was God? I thought...

'Y-eeeeello?'

Is that Matt? Matt Zander of Toronto?

'Ub-hub.'

(huge audience cheers)

'Matt Zander, you're our lucky prize-winner for tonight! Thaaaaatttt's right, because you've spent your life robbing hard-working families of their prized possessions, you've just earned the trip of a lifetime to the sunny, tropical paradise of Hell! (lively cheering down the phone line, applause).'

Shit. I was losing it. Can you dream when you're dead? What was this sound?

The buzzing continued to get closer. It had changed from a ring to a kind of grinding now, quite machine-like. It wasn't a nice sound now, it was getting rather uncomfortable. You know that movie *Contact* with Jodie Foster, when she receives signals from outta space? Well, there's this rhythmic grating sound when that signal comes through and that's the closest thing to how this sound was like. It seemed to be coming from above me.

When I looked up, my jaw dropped. I watched as this tiny, black pinhole in the ceiling above started to expand out, like an ink stain on a shirt pocket.

'What the hell is *that*?'

Awestruck, I continued to stare at this thing, slowly growing in size, forming a circular shape. It grew to the size of a manhole and was pulsing, in a life-like way. Everything around me had now gone quiet, everything except the rhythmic grinding.

I could tell the hole was starting to come down over me, spiraling itself toward me. I didn't move at all, all I could do was watch it engulf me. I wasn't frightened, though. I felt as calm and relaxed as you'd be getting a massage by Inga from Sweden.

The lights in both the bedroom and hallway began to soften, like someone had a light-dimmer and was slowly turning the knobs down. The paramedics, Belcher, and the room, began to sink away as if I was on the space shuttle and I'd taken off, watching the earth slowly shrink down to the size of a marble below me.

In what was only seconds, this hole--this pitch black space--came down and swallowed me up entirely. I wasn't in Belcher's house anymore. I was in complete darkness. A void. Space.

And it was at that moment when I looked up above me ... and saw a tunnel.

What comes after the tunnel?

Visit www.garydenne.com for information on the continuation of 'The Matt Zander Journals'.

Send feedback and/or comments about this preview of 'The Matt Zander Journals' to the author at:

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Thanks for reading,

gary 😊