

December 31

I hate Canada so much. I hate Ottawa even more. Why I came back at all is beyond me, except I have to be here at least part of the year to maintain my health benefits. And considering my lifestyle, I need them.

I've started keeping this journal because: 1) I stole it from a bookstore in the mall without looking, thinking I was grabbing a book I could read on my trip to Michigan next week; 2) I feel like this might be a good time to start recording some of the more memorable moments of my life as I approach the likely end of my career; and 3) I realize I'm forgetting a lot of days entirely. For instance, I can't remember anything I did yesterday, even though the serious partying doesn't even start until tonight. I figure if I write stuff down every day I can at least have some kind of reference. If nothing else, that might be useful in court some day.

I'm staying at Miranda's place until I leave for Michigan (I've still got to figure out what town I'm supposed to be going to, preferably before I go) and she's super pissed because Blanche Dowling took a giant dump on her carpet. It's not my fault; she just couldn't hold it. It's actually Miranda's fault. I told her Blanche Dowling can't stomach beef products, but she thought it was cute watching her suck it all down. Well fuck her. She didn't listen to me, and now she has to clean diarrhea off her new carpet. Serves her right. Still, she's so pissed she probably won't have sex with me tonight, and on New Year's Eve that just doesn't feel right. I haven't gone without getting laid on New Year's since I was like fourteen years old. It'll just seem so incomplete, like having your birthday come around and no one wishing you a Happy Birthday or anything. I'm almost tempted to help her clean it up, but I'm not going to. I have issues with shit, and I can't get anywhere near it. That's why I trained Blanche Dowling to do it outside. Keep it the hell away from me.

I acquired Blanche Dowling totally by accident one day and I'm still not all that thrilled about it. With the amount of travelling I have to do she's a huge pain in the ass. Even when she's not taking a monster dump on the carpet.

Sometimes I work as a sort of assistant to old people. Don't ask me why or what qualifications I have for this sort of work (none); sometimes you just wander into something. I just seem to hook up with a lot of geezers who pay me to walk their dog or help them get around or fix some food for them for a few weeks. I've actually got some pretty nice references somewhere in my bag.

Funny thing about a lot of old people, they're lonely as all hell and they'll talk to anyone who'll give them a little time and attention.

Anyhow, I was taking care of this crazy old lady in Willowdale a few years back where I was playing in a tournament (Total prize money for the winner: a hundred bucks. Grand total for me who lost in the semi-finals: nada. Fucking cheap-ass Canadians with their cheap-ass Canadian tournaments.), and after it was over I was broke and couldn't get back to Ottawa where Miranda was working in what would turn out to be her last year as a dancer at the Crimson Cat, having recently moved from Toronto when the federal capital finally legalized the lap dance, which she was totally not into, at least not after that one guy splooged all over her. Where the hell was I?

Oh, right. The old lady. Yeah, she was crazy as all hell. Lived alone in this shitty little apartment with her mean-ass cat. I never actually found out the name of the cat because the lady, Blanche Dowling, was so nuts, that was what she called everyone. The mailman was Blanche Dowling, her dead brother was Blanche Dowling, all her neighbours were Blanche Dowlings, and of course when I asked the cat's name, well, you get the point.

I ran into her at the Shoppers Drug Mart where she was looking confused trying to figure out how much money to give the cashier. Being the good guy I am I helped her out (I feel a little bad now remembering how I took a twenty out of her purse, but that's in the past), and she was so grateful that when she asked me to help her home with all her shit I did (especially since I was

already feeling bad about the twenty), and before I knew it I was practically living with the old bird.

Her cat was evil. There's no other word for it. Except for maybe Calico. I know now that Calicos are notoriously fucked up creatures, but at the time what did I know? I just figured she was a little nuts from having lived with Mrs. Dowling for all those years. She was a little cross-eyed, and her fur was always matted in some places and falling out in others. The apartment stunk of her, and so one day I let her out, half thinking that maybe she'd take off and spare me having to smell her or having to avoid her crazy eyes and her tendency to attack my legs whenever I walked by. She also hissed at anything that moved, and let me tell you, that hiss came from a very dark place inside her. Especially at night, the sound of it would throw the fear of God right into you.

Of course it would happen that the old lady died after a couple of weeks. I kind of knew it was coming, and part of me wanted to help her get around in her last days and another part of me thought that maybe I could take some of her crap after she kicked it. As it turned out, after she passed away in her sleep, I did a quick tour of the house before calling the ambulance and there wasn't much to find. She had about fifty bucks on hand, and a whole lot of crap from when she was younger and her husband was still around. I took the fifty and this locket I liked and that was about it. I thought about taking her wedding ring, but that seemed like a really shitty thing to do, so I didn't. Besides, it wouldn't come off her big bloated finger.

After they took her body away, I stayed another two nights until the landlord finally kicked me out. I asked what was going to happen to the cat, and he told me he'd probably have the crazy bitch destroyed. "Good riddance," I thought, but as I was leaving I saw her watching me, and I swear to God her eyes uncrossed, just for a second, as she looked at me as if to say, "Jesus Christ, man, don't leave me to die! Take me with you and I'll change my evil ways and become your lifelong friend."

I don't know what I was thinking, but I took her and her carrying cage with me when I left. Maybe it was the coke I'd

purchased with some of the fifty I'd borrowed from Mrs. Dowling when she died that made me so hyper I felt the need to do something, to act, to take this monster of a cat and save its wretched life, but there you go. I half hitched, half bussed my way to Ottawa where Miranda informed me I was insane and that she hated cats and that this one smelled funny and was looking at her as if it wanted to kill her.

Now when I go to tournaments I always have to sneak this stupid cat into the motels, and every time I let her outside to do her business I always half hope she'll take off, but she's always there when I get back from playing or when I come out to check on her. It's like she never moves; she's always exactly where I leave her. I'm sure she goes off to eat, or shit, or frolic or whatever it is cats do, but she always makes it back to exactly where I leave her. Something about that is eerie as all hell, let me tell you.

For a long time she'd scratch me every time I touch her, which at first was on purpose when I thought that maybe we could bond, and later by accident, and now hardly ever. Over time though she's learned to tolerate me, and even let me pat her when I absentmindedly touch her, usually when I'm drunk, or too high or too depressed after losing a match to remember I don't like her. Most of me would love it if she kicked the bucket, as it would certainly make my life a lot easier, but I don't have the heart to just kill her myself or leave her behind somewhere. She's got to be like fifteen years old now, so with any luck she'll kick it soon. I can't wait.

So New Year's is here and it always makes me take stock of my life. I'd have to call it penny stock to be more accurate, but I shouldn't complain. I can blame my bitch of a mother, and I can blame the doctor who failed to fix up my knee, and I can blame God and I can blame the world and every living thing I've ever come into contact with for making my life one giant oozing pulsating scab of a joke, but I can't complain, really. I get by. I eat. I occasionally get laid. I get to do my job in front of an audience (well sort of), and what more can one ask for, you know?

Oh right, in case someone is reading this long after I'm dead, I should probably mention that I'm a professional tennis player. Okay, I know what you're picturing, but I ain't that to be sure. When people think "professional tennis player" they tend to get an image of Pete Sampras or (evil stinking troll) Andre Agassi or, if they're of a certain age, Bjorn Borg or John McEnroe. Or maybe they follow the game a little and get an image of one of those mid-level journeyman players who make a really good living on the ATP tour, win a few titles, and maybe even squeeze out a Grand Slam title at some point in their career. Or else they picture the hundreds of lower ranked pros who play for ten years or so, make their money, win some matches, get some fame in their home country and retire to become coaches or go into management or business or, for those on the lowest rung of the ATP circuit, teach at a club somewhere. Now maybe if someone is really into the game, they'll broaden their sights to consider the struggling pros that mostly dwell on the Challenger circuit, the minor leagues of pro tennis, if you will. These guys play for ATP points which enable them to earn entry into the top level tournaments where the real money, glory and chicks reside.

I am none of these people.

See, there are a few rungs below even the Challenger circuit. I play mostly what is called the Futures circuit. It's super low rent: you earn crap money; you flip your own scoreboard; you fetch your own towels and balls on the court. In the Futures you play in shitty little towns mostly in the Southern US and South America and, like the name implies, it's typically stocked with a lot of young guys trying to work on their games. Guys who are like seventeen, eighteen, nineteen and trying to work their way up.

I'm thirty. Get the picture? That's like a hundred and fifty in tennis player years. Why do I do it? I'm too tired and anxious about the prospect of going out tonight and maybe not getting laid to get into it now, so maybe later. Let's just say I was once a prodigy. That's harder to let go of than a fistful of dollars, a bagful of weed and a pair of giant, silicone-enhanced beasts all at once, if that makes any sense whatsoever. You could say I'm one sad-assed

old guy who can't stop chasing a dream he no longer has any legitimate right to have.

I played the US Open and Wimbledon once. Sure I did. I played all the big ones once upon a time. That feels like a thousand years ago now. Only problem is, I remember what it feels like, and part of me keeps thinking that maybe I'll get back there somehow. Most of me knows that ain't happening however.

Anyhow, I'm going out. If Miranda is going to be a bitch about everything I'll just go out on my own and try to hook up with someone else. Fuck her. Still, I wish to hell it weren't so god-damned cold out. End of December in Ottawa. Christ. I hate Canada and I think the feeling is mutual.

January 1

I don't remember a lot about last night so this journal thing is already paying off. I partied with some old friends, or rather some of Miranda's old friends, but they were good enough. I rang in the New Year from a bathroom stall in the strip club where I was screwing Miranda's former roommate, Chantal. Hey, I said I couldn't go a New Year's Eve without getting laid. My record remains intact.

I have to leave for Michigan (some town called Springdale apparently) tomorrow morning with the intention of arriving on the 4th. We'll have to drive like hell to get there on time, especially as I have no idea how to get there, only that it's in Michigan somewhere.

I'm supposed to play an indoor Futures tournament in Springdale, the first of the tennis season. I use that term lightly, since we don't really have a "season" any more than we have an "off-season." See, the real tour (that would be the ATP, or Association of Tennis Professionals tour) kicks off in Australia in January and runs until around October or November, at which point you get maybe six weeks off before you're supposed to be back in Australia or New Zealand or, if you're lucky, a Fijian whorehouse for New Year's Eve (in fact, now that I think about it, the first couple of events are already well underway, having

started yesterday). But our tour starts now too. Only instead of attending warm-up tournaments for the Australian Open, to be played at the end of this month in front of tens of thousands of people in huge stadiums with laundered towels and fresh balls and spacious locker rooms and shitloads of prize money and cameras from TV stations all around the world, I'll be playing an event in Springdale, Michigan where I could win maybe a thousand bucks and three qualifying points towards the Challenger circuit. That's if I win. If I don't win, well then it's no points and a lot less than the grand.

But I'm not bitter, just hung-over and a little under the weather.

Miranda isn't talking to me. She says I screwed her former roommate last night and she's pissed, but that's ridiculous. . . . Oh shit, wait a minute. I just read what I wrote earlier and I guess I did. Shit. Well I hope it was worth it.

January 2

I think I'm starting to get the hang of this. I don't remember the last time I chronicled my life this consistently. I don't remember the last time I did *anything* this consistently. As it happens, I'm bored and tired and there's not much to do as we drive through northwest Michigan.

Had a few border "issues" today. Fuckers at the Windsor/Detroit checkpoint took one look at me and started grilling me about everything from the last time I did drugs (which felt like a trick question) to where I was born (and when I couldn't remember right off I was sure they were going to haul me off).

Since 9/11 these border guys have been real pricks, and no matter that I cross back and forth between the two countries on a fairly regular basis, they still give me shit each and every time. Why do they always pick on me? After all, it's not like they can see the deep well of sour defeat that fills my bitter soul.

When they realized I was travelling with a priest however, they backed off. Gary's very useful to have around in certain situations. I swear that if he wasn't wearing that collar they'd have searched him and found his monster stash of weed and busted us both. I

don't like weed and I wasn't carrying anything, but I guarantee you they'd have taken me in too. Just the look of me seemed to bother these guys and, well, the slightest excuse is all they need these days.

Anyhow, we got through fine, but one of these days Gary is going to run into an atheist border guard who won't give a damn about what he happens to be wearing and his ass will be as busted as shit. I never can come up with a very good simile. I'll have to work on that.

And yeah, I know what a simile is. I'm actually unbelievably smart. Like scary smart. You wish you were as smart as me. And I'm not just saying that to be arrogant either. I was always smart as a whip, even as a kid. I was always bored in school, and I think it was because I was simply too smart for what they were teaching. Even though I dropped out in the eleventh grade, I still feel like I know more than most people, and sometimes I come up with these weird, smart things to say and have no idea where they come from. Anyhow, I got sidetracked again. Jesus, spilling your guts takes some practice. My brain is always going too fast for my pen. When I was back in school, they said that I had attention deficit disorder, and even though I told the school counsellor who told me that to suck my cock, he may have, in retrospect, been right. Too much shit in my head and not enough ways to get it out. If only you could get rid of some of these backed up thoughts through your pores when you sweat I'd be set. Because I sweat a lot.

Anyhow, I was talking about Gary who just looked over and asked me what I was doing, and when I told him I was "chronicling my life's journey and doing a philosophical study of my thoughts" he said, as he usually does no matter what you say first, "Cool," at which point he went back to watching the road for helpful signs that might actually point us in the general direction of Springdale.

I've known Gary since we were little kids. I actually lived with him and his weird parents for a year after my mother ran off when I was ten. When I (accidentally, regardless of what the slanted

police report may have stated) set fire to their sofa, they kicked me out, and even though I ended up in the Ontario Juvenile Protection Centre, I still kept in touch with ol' Gar.

Gary was always the most philosophical kid I knew. Nothing ever seemed to faze him, even when he got busted for hacking into the school computer (let off with a warning, he gave up his huge talent for hacking right there). When he discovered weed in high school he was even more so. Still, even knowing Gary as I do, I was floored when he told me he was going to become a priest all those years ago.

Sure his parents were Catholics, and sure he seemed to like going to church, but there's a huge leap from that to donning the frock and fucking collar.

Besides, he's never gotten laid. Ever. I think I'd have to kill myself if that was me. That's the life of a priest though, and that's what he wanted. Go figure.

Gary did the whole deal. He went and studied with the Jesuits and did time at a Theological College, the whole shebang. He even did some time as a kind of "junior minister" with a parish just outside of Toronto, but when they caught him smoking up and told him he couldn't do that anymore he left. He insists there's nothing in the Bible about not smoking weed, and he'll stand by that for the rest of his life. I've never read it so I'll have to take his word for it.

In any case, he still wears his collar and he's still a priest but he doesn't make a living at it anymore. In fact I'm sort of afraid to ask him how he pays his rent and affords his truck, so I've never asked. I'd hate to piss him off because he's always glad to drive me around to tournaments, and he's the only person I know who can take off for weeks on end on a moment's notice and who never asks me to chip in for gas. It's all part of some grand adventure for him.

Anyhow, he's driving me to Springdale, bless his heart, and smoking a blunt as we go. I'm high just off of his fumes—he's in possession of some pretty potent stuff.

I never smoke. Not pot, not cigarettes, nothing. I'm a professional athlete, see, and I've got to think of my lung capacity.

And I *am* still a professional athlete, no matter what you might think when you meet me. I may have a little bit of a beer gut and my legs may have gone to shit, my eyesight may have seen better days and, yes, my shoulder may ache from time to time and my stomach may cause me gastrointestinal problems and my wrists may not be as flexible as they once were, but I can still move when I need to and I've still got my natural talent that promised to take me places once upon a time.

When I was a kid it all seemed so easy. Diet meant not asking for double meat on my pizza. Exercise meant spending a few hours out on the court, goofing off. Jesus, the stuff you bounce back from when you're a kid. Now I have to watch everything I eat and do and even then I don't always succeed. I once said everything I eat goes straight to my waist, but I realized I sounded like a fag and never said it again.

Oh I don't have anything against fags, by the way. There's a guy on the Futures tour named Lincoln Holmes who's a fag and I don't hate him at all. Well, actually I do, but not because he's a fag. Oh and I don't hate him because he's a black dude either. Because I'm not, like, one of those racist or homophobic-type people. I mean some of the nicest ass I ever had belonged to this black chick named Laquisha or something, and I'm all about letting the gays stick their dicks into whatever they want to. Free country and all. No, I hate Lincoln Holmes because he's a better tennis player than me. I hate him because he's got a future in the one thing that means the world to me.

Lincoln Holmes will be at this tourney. I always hate looking at the draw sheet, because I usually end up drawing someone like Holmes in the first round and my trip is all for nothing. The best is when you draw some new guy who's like really nervous, and when the top seeds end up falling early on somehow, you can coast right through to the final without having to play the guys who usually beat you. Problem for me is, more and more of them are starting to fit into that category.

Now I've made myself depressed, and I've got a headache from all the pot smoke in the cab of Gary's truck. I need a nap. Fuck.