

Head Long

By Michael W. Paul

Donald walked past the mirror then stopped, backed up, and took a long, intense stare. The candid angle wasn't very attractive. He had those sagging lower cheeks that made even the toughest old geezer look somehow tame and harmless as if he wanted to bake a pie for you and sit at the table to watch you eat it. A forced smile covered the evidence of life experience, and a subtle upward tilt of the head helped even more. He would have to hold that pose from now on, he decided.

In less than a year he'd be 50, and he told himself life would be better. But the struggle to find meaning in nothing was almost as hard as holding onto the something that he once had. When she said she loved him, he put away all his memories and sought a fresh start, without the emotional baggage. It was a good thing because his baggage cart would've broken an axle under the additions from Amelia, yes, her name meant beloved, and she was. Donald was never good at forgetting. His theory on life was, if you have nothing going on right now, then you'd better make sure you milk what you did until it screams from sore nipples. So he treasured photos, quotes, stories, fibers of hair, yellow notes with kissed-on smiles, cologne-scented declarations of devotion, unfinished bottles of Aquafina, trophies, and the occasional newspaper clipping that praised him and the loins from which he sprang. He put some relics on display and the others were his to feel she had never left. After being with Amelia for three years, he'd slowly begun to replace his symbols of achievement with tokens of her love, seeing the latter as more important, more significant to his success in life than proving a marginal dominance over another human being. Her exit however, was so sudden and so complete, Donald didn't have time to say goodbye. He awoke one day and collected every remnant of Amelia, no matter how small and insignificant. It was all he had left.

He'd betrayed his modus operandi for a more radical approach to life, and it had turned around and bitten him in his seat cushion. Donald would have to create new memories now, but what were the chances he could top his old ones? After all, he'd moved on from them and destroyed most of the evidence of his successes. Evidence of his defeats was written all over his

face and all over his demeanor, his posture, his tone of voice. Never a vibrant man, never one to light up a room, he lost what little youth had followed him to this point. He could enter a room and the exit sign would beam with promise to those in his presence. His peppered hair, previously noted sagging cheeks, chest and abs combined to mimic the nose of a big, sad, jet airliner, a cross between a street fighter and a wiener. His sculpted muscles now somehow rounded off around the edges, making him constantly check to see if his prescription had run out on his thick spectacles. A man isn't supposed to have soft, milky skin he thought, but he felt he pulled it off well.

Donald often missed his father's presence, the man who taught him how to succeed in survival, but not how to really live, not that his worth was inherent in just being human, and so expressions of affection towards Don were rooted in accomplishments. He wrote of his father:

*You held my hand enough,
to pull me down the path you walked.
Always walking ahead,
afraid if I looked into your eyes I'd see,
you weren't so tough.*

His mother would look through old photo albums, their rusty edges exemplifying gallons of tears she'd rained on them.

“He was so young,” she'd say, and then put the books away to prepare a pot roast.

He'd peek into the pot and think, “At least Dad didn't end up like this cow”.

The cruelty and mundane of life were all around him, but Donald's sorrow and insecurities had no place in the life of a mother who couldn't see past her own pain, the loss of her husband so long ago. The newspaper clippings were a musty, faded image of the love of her life. And this in turn, drained much empathy from Donald in regards to Mom.

Donald didn't mind being seen with Mom in public, but a 50-year-old man who is still that close to Mother might not be considered a great catch. Who was this provider whom his mother loved? Once he lost his father, he lost his worth, and then, he loved and lost Amelia.

The best revenge is living well, so he'd have to return the sawed-off Mak-90 and thousand-round ammunition belt and instead, just bust into that party and impress them to death with his

success. If she's there, then it will probably kill her. That was his plan. He slowly put his flak vest into storage and burned the threats made from carefully cut Sears Catalog captions.

Judy, who rang up his bullets every Saturday at Rajo's Guns, had been tousling her hair and smiling quite a bit when he handed her his credit card, careful to wipe the gunpowder off the edges of his VISA. Judy was a fixture in Don's practical world. Most daily household purchases required the dance of her skilled fingertips lightly on the cash register, her tasteful guidance on product choices, her delightful way of suggesting cheaper yet equal products, or her inside scoop on upcoming sales events. Her attention to detail colored her with a caring, omniscient, omnipresent mysticism, earning Don's respect and trust. Most men would think it was a flirtatious gesture, but not Donald. His gratitude and careful observation of her constant tangle raking led him to suggest she change her shampoo. He went through the trouble of doing research for her. The next week, he took the extra step of recommending Compound W for that beefy growth alongside the left of her nostril. The new shampoo must have worked, because from that day on, she stopped tousling her hair. He was always a handy man in his mind.

Don had rooted out his best-ironed shirt and pants, still gleaming from the starch bath he gave them the day before. He looked in that mirror, turned, positioned, arrived at "the look," then with confidence so shallow it bordered on pretense, went back to look again.

"Yes!" he thought, "I'm in." As he shuffled into the hallway, it was apparent he'd overdone the heavy starch, and the cinder block walls echoed like two cats fighting their way out of a paper sack at the bottom of a well.

He entered the airy auditorium with the anticipation of a star basketball forward approaching peak athletic achievement, only to find himself unable to stay on the summit. This could be the night that changes his life!

It was the class of '79 Imy Mine High School reunion, and all but 87 students were gone, caught in that nationally publicized Imy Mine explosion. It was ironic that 1979 prom theme was Rita Coolidge's "We're All Alone." How prophetic, thought Don, but in his isolation he had lost touch with his humanity, so without a face, that mine disaster was an amusing anecdote to life's ups and downs—no face, no eyeballs, no quivering lips trying to hold back the tears. The press was so overwhelming that those not in the inner-circle of the unfortunate victims had no chance

to connect with this tragedy on a deeply personal level.

There she was, Amelia, who jumped like she'd just been defibrillated on her backside, quickly flipping around, thinking she was being attacked by a pillow full of eggshells. All Don saw was a pirouette, perfectly executed. Amelia tried to make eye contact with Don, but he was aloof (intentionally) and scuffed on over to the punch bowl. He was in his zone—he had ignored her once, so perhaps he could do it again. This was working well. He was living well. He kept telling himself this, and with head held high, he slipped into a few circles of petty talk with drink in sweaty hand. It was the best punch he'd ever tasted, with a familiar zip.

He returned for seconds and thirds, unable to pass the time with much more than a nod, but putting his nervous energy into the only physical act he could pull off with an acceptable degree of grace, sipping that mysterious punch. He would return to the same talk-circles to discuss politics, the condition of the high school gymnasium after all these years, and the unfortunate death of more than a fourth of the class in that mine disaster. But as the conversation dripped with formality, he stepped to one foot, and then to the other, and then to the other, and it became difficult for him to find his balance. He quickly found a chair and with a snap, crackle, and pop, was able to compose himself. Someone had spiked the punch.

He managed to regain his balance enough to carefully make his way to a sturdy, bare wall, starch from his pants adhering to the seat cushion and carrying it halfway to his destination. Don leaned over with his head on the wall and after finishing his sixth glass of punch drifted to sleep, the cinder block stamping its signature on his left cheek.

The music played—their favorite song, back when Amelia loved him, Sara Groves' "Fly". He dreamed of Amelia floating across the dance floor in her coral ankle high sheer skirt, like a watercolor in the rain, smiling as she spun with the music, turned by the wind but not changed by it. He adored the way her lips pursed when she said his name, "Donny", how her eyes were a thousand amber dragonflies in a whirlwind on the water. He awoke, wiped the line of drool off the wall and his cheek with the sleeve of his glistening shirt, and noticed someone had set a cup of punch on the floor next to him.

He was still not sure he could stand but was able to reach down to the cup and lift it to his lips. When he looked up, there she was, and they made eye contact. She looked different from

the dream, a straining, dying tree blocking a fluorescent sun, menacing but still safe as long as it stayed upright. He tried to drink, but as often happened when he was in shock, he drank from the far side of the cup, pouring spiked punch down his shirt. She turned away and he attempted to stand, a wobble here, a wobble there, working so hard to keep his cool he took on the appearance of a sky dancer with a defective blower, soaked in alcohol and Nutra Sweet. As he struggled to remove the soaked shirt, he heard music starting--it was their song. Or was it? He wasn't sure, they all reminded him of her, the Amelia in his mind, but he tried to get up and dance, something he had never been good at except in front of the bathroom mirror, after a hard workout at the gym.

Still, too zonked to realize it, he made a vain attempt, spinning like a child who stayed on the merry-go-round too long, too scared to let go, too weak to hold on to the ever accelerating ride. The crowd around him kept moving away, and he thought he might be having a Saturday Night Fever moment. But no---they just didn't want to be whacked by their weed-whacker classmate who seemed to think they were weeds. Suddenly, the movement stopped, abruptly, almost inexplicably, in a flash of light. He'd run headlong into one of the tall mirrors that surrounded the dance floor and came crashing down in a hail of shiny shards, and his image in the form of a compound eye lay before him. He rolled himself over to catch his own gaze in the lower portion of the mirror. This was not going well. Maybe the gun idea was a better plan, but he knew he'd only ever do it in his head. All he wanted was to matter to someone, to her, to not be dropped like an egg every time he seemed a little cracked. The urgency with which she left, the totality of her disappearance, though she lived just four miles down the road, made him feel as if he once belonged to this planet but was now seeing it from the moon. He was totally isolated, totally alone.

Standing over him was Amelia, puzzled, embarrassed, sad, her forehead knotted into a fist. The spectacle seemed to have added ten years to her. Her lips moved to the words she wanted to say, but she could barely give breath to them.

“I'm sorry”

She turned and exited the room, while out of the corner of his eye, he saw a dark stream of blood. It's funny how the best-laid plans can leave you lying on the ground, unable to do

anything more than beg for mercy in a pool of your own blood, staring at the shattered reflection of yourself. This is what Don had become, a pariah. Classmates, classmates' children, even classmates' grandchildren stood silent, no one willing to step into this embarrassing frame. Don found his soaked shirt and held it to his head.

One or two voices from the crowd could be heard to mutter, "Are you all right?" but most were turning to each other asking, "Is he all right?" and, "What the?"

It was time to make his strategic exit, blood, booze, saliva, and pride creating a slipping hazard at his feet. As he searched for the nearest exit, trailed by a cloud of ruby dust of intermingled blood and pulverized mirror, he mistakenly entered a broom closet, then found a door with starlight on the other side. He returned to his world, hailed by distant barks and howls of neighborhood dogs reacting to the reverberating crunch, crunch, crunch of Donald's straw-like clothes, burped from the side door of the dance hall.

His red Honda Civic hatchback, perfectly placed in the back alley, was his waiting prince on a crimson horse, to take him away to the world that was only in his head. The street lights were alien ships, and in a little over a year he'd be in his personal Area 51, the place where the secrets within can never rival the magnificent imagination of those who have never seen. Don did not belong here, there, depending on perspective. He plopped into the passenger seat exhausted and sat silently as his breathing kept time. No one checked on him.

Random hair was still resting upon the dash board, still from her, a pile of fibers, but the alien light showed the handiwork of an artist. He held them up against the glow and saw her life like a movie clip that had been spliced out of his masterpiece. How he wished he could run his fingers through thousands of these. In his horribly drunken state, he remembered the feel of her head upon his shoulder, her body so limp and helpless, he could've done anything to her, anything, anything his evil heart desired. She was totally helpless and yet, he just watched her, watched the movement of her eyes in deep REM sleep, darting back and forth like a dog chasing a rabbit under a rug, the most beautiful of God's creation seeing heaven, but keeping it all to herself. It only leaked out when she looked at him. Oh to be someone's heaven.

Memories of her were still hard, still beautiful, like a cut diamond passing through his lower intestine—not a sliver, but a Queen Elizabeth diamond, one you could golf with. In a crap-

filled life there was something sparkling, precious and indestructible that was inside of him, that he'd helped shape, but was so perfectly formed anyway, only he could tell the difference. He lapsed into a deep sleep.

After what seemed like hours, Donald was startled awake by his own breathing. He tried to climb from the passenger window, the passenger mirror kissing the other side of his head with an angry hickey before allowing it to pass. The driver's side door was open, and as a satisfactory thump secured him behind the steering wheel, a roar arose from the dance hall. They'd found their John Travolta, and it wasn't him. Then he saw Amelia move out from the same back door in a dark, ghostly shape, not noticing his car. She climbed into her Toyota Corolla, sat upright and proper and unaffected by her spy, and slowly pulled away. Don tried to start the engine, but what good would it do to follow her? His old Civic didn't have power steering, and after colliding with that dance hall mirror, his arms were very sore. He could only go left, but he figured if he went left three times, he could go right. So he accelerated and tried to chase Amelia. But the kaleidoscope of spinning light warned him to stop. He got no farther than the opposite side of the hall, quickly removed the ignition key and brought the chaotic chorus of its 1.6 liters to a scating silence. With his last non-vomit breath, Donald scaled the center console and surrendered to the deeply bolstered charcoal velvet sports seat, tightly closing his eyes and mind to the source of his nausea.

That's when a shadow silhouetted by the street lamps cast itself across the long windshield. A knock on the window---it was Judy. With a grunt, he rolled down his window.

"Donny, are you okay?"

He replied, succinctly, "No".

Judy paused for a moment and with hesitation in her voice said, "I live a few blocks from your home, would you like me to drive you back?"

Donald stared up at Judy, and she smiled a bit, half forced, half sincere, shedding light on a fresh facial scar just left of her rather dominant nose, and hair of such a fiery bronze, Donald wondered if the smelter had poured it over her before it had time to cool. Judy climbed into the unlocked driver's door where the keys were already in the ignition, started the car, and tried to turn the wheel. It wouldn't budge, then she gave it a hard pull on the freshly Armour-All'd

steering wheel, causing her hand to slip off in a violent motion that ended in a tender region just below Donald's belt. Donald gasped in pain, followed by a sound that could only be compared to a bag of chips being sucked into a vacuum cleaner.

“Oh, I'm so sorry!” Judy squealed, trying to bite the laughter from her bottom lip over Donald's obviously painful reception of her fist. Suddenly Judy looked upon Donald like the scraggiest, ugliest, most pitiful mutt in the pound, with eyes that longed to be owned. Judy gently cupped the back of his head and in a surprising move, gave him a gentle hug.

“You...you...you smell good,” said Donald between coughs and wiping of sweat off his forehead. “Use, use the torque steer—start the car and apply gas—it turns easily to the left”.

Donald had done this years before when he broke his arm in a freak roadside billboard accident.

“If you make three left turns, you turn right”.

Again, Judy tried to stop from smiling, silently shook her head, and lifted her near-metallic hair from her right ear. In the moonlight, a lone strand drifted onto the dash board and rested there. Donald rolled down the passenger window with both hands, leaned his head out the open window, and fell asleep in the breeze. Maybe living life in orbit wasn't so bad.