

TWENTY-SECOND WEEK

Monday, December 29, 2003, 11:45 AM
San Antonio, TX

"Shawn? Shawn?" I began searching each of the hotel rooms wondering if anyone knew which one Shawn was in. I had no idea how I was to report to him if we were to head to the arena together. With the buses about to leave, I needed an answer.

In the end, Hunter was the last person to leave. He saw me in a panicked state and confronted me. "Oh, Hunter," I said, "you're just who I wanted to see." *For once.* "Have... have you seen Shawn anywhere?"

"He'll be with us at the arena, Christian. You know he said he was arriving on his own."

"Yeah, but... he always does that. I mean, he always takes his own car from event to event and he's always with the guys anyway, so..."

"No, no. He's coming in from his house. He lives here, remember?"

I forgot. "Oh, right. Okay, thanks. I'll catch him there." I sheepishly got my stuff together and boarded the first bus I could find. Without Shawn's car ride to be a giveaway, I was going to have to find more subtle methods of locating who I was working with for this week -- if anyone.

I felt strangely alone, even though it was something I had been for the previous two weeks. It was only while I sat on the bus that I realized that it HAD been two weeks without contact with anyone else in the living world. First, it was Ohio Valley; then, it was the McMahan family. Now, I was with the group again -- and yet, I felt more isolated than I ever had before. I needed someone to find me this time. *If only I knew how...*

After about ten minutes of quiet, the bus arrived at the SBC Center, our home for the night. I got off the bus and waited around for Shawn to arrive. As I did, Earl Hebner, senior referee, approached me. "You lookin' for someone, Christian?"

"Yeah," I said nonchalantly. "I wanted to discuss working with Shawn on the house shows this weekend. I was hoping he'd be around and I could let him know."

"Ah, he'll be here soon enough. He always goes by his own drum, you know what I mean?"

"I know... always takin' his own ride, livin' his own life..."

"But he's a good man. He definitely is better than I remembered. Anyway, he'll be here soon enough. C'mon inside -- lunch is waiting."

03:42 PM

Eric Bischoff entered as he always did, smiling and hamming it up. He handed copies of the night's schedule to everyone, exchanging pleasantries as he did. When he came to me, he said, "Ooh, you're here a lot, buddy. Good luck not getting stale."

I checked the list. Eric was right -- under normal circumstances, I could wear out

my welcome. However, these were far from normal circumstances, I hoped. If my experience was any indication, I could fight my way through the overload and come out ahead of the game. At least, I hoped so.

As I got my costume out, I looked across the way. A bag I'd never seen before was positioned, abandoned, on the bench. A giant Z was on one side of it. I approached the bag and looked inside. In addition to the standard wrestler's equipment, there was a two-piece pool cue, dismantled but sticking out like a sore thumb. *That's strange -- what would a guy need with a pool cue in a wrestling environment?*

"Excuse me... just like to get to my stuff..." I looked over my shoulder to see a man approach the bag. His face was covered in scars from bleeding his way around the indy world. He had unusual piercings on his body, and overall he looked like he'd been through two world wars instead of one fake sport. I had to know his story.

"Are you new here?"

"Oh -- I'm not a part of the roster," he said. "I'm actually here to get a tryout against Tommy Dreamer. See, the group I belong to is... well, they've gone under. It's too bad, too -- we had a good fanbase and a good home. But I gotta move on. I was hoping to get me and a few of my buddies in the front door."

"I see," I said, eyeing the pool cue ominously. "You know, we're not much on the hardcore style up here in the WWE. I mean, I assume you can do more, but..."

"No, I understand. Actually, this is a souvenir from the last show. See?" He pulled it out and showed me. Now that I was able to see the end of it, I realized it wasn't a two-piece -- at least, not until it had been broken in half.

"Whoa! How did that happen?"

"Oh, it was our main event. We had this huge last match in a cage with a sh-- a lot of thumbtacks spread around. Sorry, not used to keeping it clean even now. Anyway, my champ brought this out and used it on me -- I was the owner of the company. Cracked me right over the head and gave me this." He pointed to a giant scar on his forehead, one that seemed to have stitches still in it. "Twenty-five, before you ask. The crowd loved every minute of it."

"Well, that's great, but... I mean, I'm sure you realize that Vince isn't one to take just any two-bit indy group and give them a tryout."

"Oh, I know -- but we have a bit of an ace up our sleeve. You see, we ran shows in Philadelphia, which as I understand it, is where the Royal Rumble is coming from. In fact, we took over the old ECW Arena for some of our shows -- awesome place, that little bingo hall. So basically, we have the name and we have a strong hardcore following."

"Well, all that's well and good, but unless the scouts were watching the last few shows, I'm sure that the McMahons haven't heard of you. Still, Shane should be here -- I'd suggest talking to him."

"Hey, thanks, Christian..."

"Say, I feel kinda silly," I said as he turned to leave. "I don't recognize you."

"That's okay. Not too many people do. My name's John Zandig. The group I ran -- Combat Zone Wrestling -- you heard of them?"

"Kinda..."

"Well, we tried to be ECW. I guess we succeeded -- right up to and including going out of business." Zandig chuckled. "Still, I hope that Vince will be kind enough to sign some of my boys. There's some good talent just waiting for a chance to bust out, you

know."

"Yeah -- I've heard of some of them. Like that Trent guy..."

"Oh, Trent Acid, yeah. He's my nephew, actually. But I don't think he wants to enter the WWE just yet -- he'd prefer Japan. Still, if the money's right, I can talk to him about it. Anyway, I hope I'll be seeing more of you, Christian. It's nice to get a good conversation in a new world."

No kidding -- just like I got from Paul and Lindsay. "Well, good luck, John. I hope you land on your feet."

"Me too." He left to find Shane as I returned to getting in costume. *Man, another tenant falls flat. I wonder if that place is cursed...*

09:24 PM

I walked down the aisle to a cascade of boos as the match in the ring was completing. Triple H and Chavo Guerrero were meeting again, and the match was much the same as it was in El Paso. As I made it to ringside, Triple H went for the Pedigree, but Chavo backdropped out of it. He got in a flurry of offense, then went to scale the ropes for the Tornado DDT.

I jumped onto the apron as he did so, getting both him and the referee distracted. I conveniently dropped the Intercontinental Title into the ring. As Chavo tried to climb the ropes, I grabbed his foot, causing him to crash off the top and have Hunter fall on him in a form of spinebuster. The referee told me to leave, and while he did, Hunter Pedigreed Chavo on the belt and discarded it. I picked it up as the ref counted three.

Motorhead's "The Game" played as Hunter went through his celebration. I climbed into the ring behind him and began to taunt Chavo. Hunter left, putting the spotlight directly on us. I kicked Chavo a few times, but when I went to whip him into the ropes, I got it reversed. He hit me with a rana coming out, then a flying forearm that sent me bailing from the ring. I landed at the feet of Chris Nowinski, who was coming out for the next match, and Teddy Long, who was coming out to be a nuisance during the next match. Chavo bounced off the ropes and landed a pescado on all three of us, delighting the crowd. As he got up, he demanded a mic.

"Hey -- hey Christian," he said. "I had you beat last time -- I want another shot. You and me, Christian, at the Royal Rumble -- well, if you get there with the belt, that is. What do you say? You wanna do it?"

I slowly rolled into the ring as he awaited my answer. I nodded, and motioned for him to bring it on. He simply smiled. "Not until the Rumble, Christian -- see, you're kinda busy right now... as soon as you turn around... but I'll see you at the Rumble."

As soon as I turn around? I slowly turned to wait for what had to be behind me. As I did, I was hit with a clothesline from the Hurricane, who had come in through the crowd. He began to hit me with lefts and rights as Nowinski climbed in to start the match proper. It was myself, Hurricane, and Chris Nowinski for the I-C title.

We did some three-way brawling, just punching anything that moved. I clotheslined both men out of the ring, then hit a baseball slide on Nowinski, sending him into Hurricane. I headed outside and rammed both men into the announcer's table, then

threw Hurricane back in. I was saving the big spots for when RAW came back from commercial.

I grabbed Hurricane and put him in a headlock, hoping to hit a bulldog. Hurricane shoved me off and into Nowinski. He rolled me up from behind, but I kicked out at one as Nowinski charged Hurricane and hit some forearms. I rolled out of bounds and let them go at it as I watched the big screen. I got the signal from a road agent -- "we're back" -- and returned to the ring, slamming both challengers' heads together.

I grabbed Hurricane in a German suplex, but couldn't bridge. I stood up and stomped at him, then turned around into a headbutt -- *geez, he's STILL got that mask on?* -- from Nowinski. I fell down and waited for the next spot, as Nowinski slammed Hurricane onto me. He covered me, but I thrust my shoulder up at two. I went for Nowinski, hitting a back elbow, but he paid no attention to it due to that face protector of his. *Of all the gimmicks to give the guy...*

As I stared in disbelief, Hurricane grabbed me from behind and went for the Eye of the Hurricane. I grabbed his neck and dropped him straight down into a jawbreaker, stunning him. Nowinski clotheslined him, but that allowed me to grab him from behind and deliver a rear naked choke drop. I covered, but Hurricane broke it at two with a Shining Wizard. *This match is going nowhere.*

Hurricane whipped Nowinski into the ropes and hit a rana on him. He then went for a German suplex, but I grabbed Hurricane from behind and delivered a German to him at the same time. I scampered over to cover Nowinski, but at the count of two, Teddy Long put his foot on the ropes. I went over to talk to him, but upon turning around, a hand caught my throat. Hurricane was ready to deliver a chokeslam, but Nowinski broke it up. Nowinski went for a Double Arm DDT on Hurricane, but I grabbed his face protector and pulled it off. I then put it on myself and headbutted him, sending him out of the ring in pain. I discarded the guard and grabbed Hurricane. After some struggling, I hit the Unprettier and got the title defense. *Bring on Chavo.*

11:01 PM

"Nora, you there?" I had knocked on the locker room door, hoping to see if she hadn't gone home yet. Thankfully, she hadn't. She emerged, serious as ever, and hugged me around the neck.

"Hey there," she said. "I never got to thank you for your support during the whole... well..."

"I understand. Actually, I wanted to ask you a favor." I nervously cleared my throat. Ever since I had been Nora I wanted to make her feel better, and this was the easiest way I could think of. "I... uh... wanna know if you want to spend New Year's Eve with me."

Nora allowed a smile to creep along her face. However, I could tell it was one of regret and disappointment. She bit her lip in a thoughtful manner, as if to attempt to figure out if saying yes or no would be better. "Christian..."

"Please," I said, "call me Jason."

"Okay... Jason, I'd love to, but... I don't know if I'm ready to go out with anyone. I

mean, I'm sorry, but... I want to trust you, and it's not that you're not trustworthy... I just... I'd feel better if we weren't going alone."

My heart sank. "Oh," I said, almost as though I anticipated the excuse. Soon, though, Nora seemed to get an idea.

"However... would three be a crowd?"

"Three? Who else?"

"Gail. She's been there the most for me, so I wouldn't mind if she came along, you know?"

I smiled. "Sure, I can accommodate. No problem."

"Thanks. You're a great guy, Jason." She smiled and turned around, returning to the locker room. I walked back to the buses, a huge grin on my face that wouldn't go away. It had nothing to do with liking Nora -- although I severely sympathized with her plight. I just knew I could make her forget her troubles for one night -- and that it would be my gift.

12:44 AM

I returned to my room at the hotel. Shawn had had an outstanding match in the main event with Kane, and although he didn't come away victorious, he made Kane look better and stronger than most people would imagine. In addition, the remainder of Evolution first announced their entry into the Rumble, then faced Road Dogg and Ron Killings in the main event. Everything went downhill for them, though, when Triple H's sledge shot went awry, allowing Killings to get the pin.

I opened the door and immediately heard strange noises coming from inside. I had to do a double-take, trying to place where I'd heard them before. It sounded like pain at first, but then again, all random noises sounded like pain. It wasn't until I heard words like "yes" and "more" that I realized what it really was.

"Um... am I interrupting?"

"Oh, no... sorry, man, it's just the TV," called out the person inside. I walked in and stared at the television, where a movie that I don't remember being available in theaters was playing. Tommy Dreamer, my roommate for the trip, was on the bed watching -- clothed, thankfully, as though he were taking a more scholarly interest.

"Um... you're paying for this, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, it's cool."

"Good." I uneasily slipped into my bed, thankful that there were twin beds in the room. As Tommy enjoyed his lack of plot and ample display of "talent and acting", I tried to zone out the noise, afraid I would imagine Lindsay there with me. *For the first time, I don't want to watch porn. This is surreal.*

Wednesday, December 31, 2003, 09:15 PM
Houston, TX

While most of the SmackDown! crew decided to gather at the Undertaker's ranch to laugh, sing, and generally inebriate themselves to unhealthy levels, the RAW people were scattered throughout the festivals in Houston. None of us had any idea of what would make for a good party, so we all tagged along with Booker T, hoping he'd be able to point out the good places of the nightlife. Halfway through our impromptu tour -- "I wuz kinda hopin' I'd be able to git back before midnight, ya dig?" -- we found ourselves on Pease Street in front of a long line of people.

"Hey -- hey Book, what's that?"

"Ah, that's some charity event. Some music group's throwin' the party here. I wouldn't get too close -- lotta riffraff. You never get a moment's peace, sucka."

I turned to Nora. "Sounds like it's a good cause -- wanna see if we can crash it?"

She shrugged. "Couldn't hurt. I'd rather just get to dinner myself. We'll see if they have food."

Booker shook his head. "Nah... just dancin and drinkin. But dude, there's plenty o' places you can go to get a meal here. Like dat Viet restaurant over there. Man, you want Asian food -- this city's da place."

Gail looked at him suspiciously. "I'll be the judge of that. Still, it couldn't hurt. What do you think?"

"I'll go for it."

"Yeah, me too."

"Aight. You guys able to get home on ya own?"

"I think so. The hotel's well known enough."

"Good. I'll catch ya this weekend, suckas. See ya." Booker walked back to his car as we headed off to eat. *I'm surprised he's so reluctant to be a part of his hometown. Maybe he's afraid that if he sticks around, I'll pin him.* I chuckled at my own thought, then went straight-faced when Gail and Nora looked at me.

10:45 PM

After a long meal and entertaining conversation, we left the restaurant. Even Gail was pleased with the quality of their cuisine, while Nora seemed relieved no one saw her and made a big deal of her. We were heading over to the building where the other celebration was occurring -- it was called the Engine Room -- when Nora stopped mid-walk. She seemed confused.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Um... could you go on in, Jason? I wanna bring something... feminine up with Gail."

I seemed hesitant. I wanted to tell her I could hear it without causing trouble, but saying that would cause trouble. Besides, if she knew the real reason I was capable of listening to these things she'd think I was crazy. I shrugged my shoulders and walked ahead, wondering what I could've been missing.

As I approached the Engine Room, a crowd of people in line noticed me and cheered. I looked around, pretending it wasn't me they were cheering. I then began to ham up the applause and bow to the fans. As I looked for the door, a security guard

tapped me on the shoulder. "Hey, you're Christian from the WWE, arencha?"

"Well, yeah, I am..."

"Hey -- you can get in on me. No biggie."

"Um, great... but, uh, I was hoping that a couple of my friends would be able to join me when they arrive, so if a pair of females approach you by the names of Nora and Gail, let them in. They're with me."

"Sure thing, buddy. Anything for a celeb."

I walked through the doors and tried to adjust to the pulsating and pounding of the dance music. A mass of humanity was present inside this giant ex-warehouse. I had a hard time seeing anything in the half-darkness outside of the giant clock that was counting from 70 minutes to midnight local time. I walked over to the nearest table and sat down, hoping to adjust quickly.

"There you are!" I could barely hear Gail's voice as she and Nora sat down next to us. "You just got here, right?"

"Yeah!" I responded, trying to be heard over the music and guessing it was a lost cause. Nora vacantly stared off at the music and dancers, trying to determine if she belonged at a place like this. I noticed her staring off into the distance and tried to get her attention. "Something wrong?" No reply. *It's too loud here.*

Gail grabbed my arm. "Is there somewhere quieter around here?"

"I think so! There's supposed to be some silent auction!" *Hopefully with the emphasis on silent.* "I just can't find any other rooms!"

"I think there's another one this way! Let's go!"

I got out of my seat and walked over to where Gail was. She grabbed Nora to get her attention. Nora quickly followed the rest of us as we headed to the other room to begin bidding on items. Along the way, Gail took me aside as we pretended to look at the original liner notes to "Hotel California".

"Nora's feeling a little weird right now," she said, hoping not to attract her attention. "I can't really explain."

"Can you try?"

"Yeah... I guess. See, she's been spending so much time around me after... you know... that I wonder if she's..."

"She's what? Lonely? Scared of being by herself? I'm surprised she's let us spend this much time away from her."

"No, you don't understand... when she asked you to go ahead it was to... well, she said she thinks she loves me."

I did a double take. "Wh-- what? She what? H--how?"

"I don't know. I mean, I guess when someone picks you up from absolute zero you get a sort of attachment."

"Okay, I can understand that, but... does she know what love is? I mean... heck, I've thought I was in love dozens of times, but it was all just a passing fancy, you know?"

"I know... I don't know what she means. All I know is she's been on this binge about how she won't let a man ruin her life."

"Yeah, but... what about her boyfriend?"

"Phil? I don't think he exists. I think she's making him up just to throw other men off of her. And if he does, he's no good for her either."

I thought carefully about this. "Maybe... maybe she's just gauging your reaction. I

mean, maybe she thinks you feel that way about her."

"I dunno... it's confusing, that's for sure."

"Well, go for it. If she loves you, she'll kiss you."

Gail smirked. "You just want to see that, don't you?"

I tried giving my best innocent face, attempting to make my future halo appear over my head. "Oh, you don't think I have ulterior motives, do you?"

"Gimme a break. You and every other guy in the locker room. Now c'mon -- we should have some fun."

She hustled us over to where Nora was, and the three of us returned to the party room to enjoy free drinks and a night of dancing.

11:59 PM

"Here we go!" Nora squealed with delight as the tenths-of-a-second counter kicked in. We all looked at the giant countdown as the live band began to play buildup music. The crowd was cheering louder and louder as we all got in place. Carson Daly -- *an MTV VJ at a VHI event; who knew?* -- was counting it down with us as we all began shouting loudly.

"You know," I said as I turned to Nora, "it's customary to kiss someone at midnight."

"So I heard," she replied. *Hmmmm...*

Carson Daly cut off the band as he yelled, "15 seconds left, everyone, let's all count it down together! Here we go!"

TEN! NINE! EIGHT! SEVEN! I turned to face Gail and Nora as they both looked up at the countdown clock. SIX! FIVE! FOUR! I went to put my arm around Nora, but she was too far away. THREE! TWO! I began looking all around, acutely aware that I was alone in a mass of humanity. ONE! I saw Nora just in time, but...

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

At the stroke of twelve, Gail turned Nora's head and kissed her. My eyes went wide. I knew it was just tradition, but given Gail's aloofness when I talked to her, this caught me off guard. It was like watching a car wreck -- I couldn't look away, even though it would be the polite thing to do.

All through "Auld Lang Syne" I sang along, able to use the music to keep myself from focusing on the two Divas kissing each other. I was hoping it was a one-time thing as I toasted 2004 and the live band rocked out again. I never expected that Nora would react this way.

Suddenly, I felt a pair of lips on either cheek. I looked to one shoulder and saw Nora smiling sweetly. I turned the other way and saw Gail, beaming and giggling. "Aw, shucks," I said once I regained my bearings. "Thanks, girls."

"Nah," Gail said. "Thank you."

January 1, 2004, 02:14 AM

We finally returned to Nora and Gail's hotel room. Gail seemed to have taken one too many Bacardis over the course of the evening and needed Nora and me to help her up. Nora opened the door and allowed Gail to lie down, telling her, "Just wait there; I'll be back." She returned to me and hugged me.

"Thanks for taking me out tonight," she said. "I had a great time."

"Yeah, and now you and Gail will have more fun, right?"

"What??"

"I saw you kissing her at midnight. Gail told me you said you loved her."

"That? Jason... I thought I felt strongly for her. I feel the same way about you and about a lot of people. I had... I had to know if it was affection or something else. I'm confused."

"How is that?"

"Jason, after what happened... I don't know if I can trust guys anymore. I mean, Phil's a sweet kid, but even he seems like a bit much at times. I didn't know if it was because I'm not ready for his discipline or if I had residual... feelings about guys. And with Gail here... I wanted to know who I liked."

"Meaning you thought you may be a lesbian."

"Well... yeah. Is there something wrong with that?"

"No, no! I never said there was. I mean, to each her own, but... um... wouldn't you have felt that before?"

"What? Are you saying you never thought you were gay?"

"Well... no, I mean... yes... I don't... Nora, this isn't the point. I just wanted to know whether you and Gail were..."

"All right, all right. Look, Jason, you're a sweet guy, and I'd love to repay you somehow... but I don't see you as anything but a friend."

"Actually... you know... I was thinking about this for some time." It was an idea that I realized Christian had, and I was just waiting for the right time to express it. "How would you like to work with me in a program?"

"But... you and Chavo..."

"Not right away. Think about this: the woman who's been through it all, now taking the next step to glory -- the Intercontinental Title, something achieved only once before by a woman. And she's going to do it at WrestleMania."

Nora's eyes went wide. "You and me? At Wr... but... are you sure?"

"Why not? Even if you lose, you win. Can you imagine how much people would be rooting for you? You could be the next breakout star. Sunny, Sable, Chyna, Trish -- Molly. Wouldn't that be awesome?"

Nora's eyes went wide as she thought about it. "Well... it would... but Vince..."

"Oh, relax, I'll go pitch it to him. I think he'll get a kick out of it. Besides, you know the guy loves recycling stuff that worked the first time."

"Okay... I guess. But I feel like I'm using my misfortune to be a star."

"Nora, do you hear the fans out there? I was in the Chamber. I heard everyone cheering you when you pinned the Big Show, and I heard silence after I pinned you. That was a deflation that can only come from disappointment. They want to see you. I want to see it. C'mon -- don't let your public down."

Nora nodded her head and smiled. "Yeah... let's do it!"

"All right! Now, get a good night's sleep if you wanna enjoy the parades and the football and the SmackDown! tomorrow."

"Football? Since when have you cared about football? You're Canadian!"

D'oh! Something as simple as that can blow my cover! "Well, I've been in this country long enough."

"Right... nevermind. I should get some sleep. I hope Gail doesn't do anything stupid tonight. Thanks, Jason. You're a real friend."

She kissed my cheek again, then closed the door as I walked on to my own hotel room. The wheels had been set in motion -- all we needed was for Vince to okay an idea that had come from his demon's mortal enemy.

Thursday, January 01, 2004, 10:55 AM
Houston, TX

I emerged from the shower to see what was going on in the world. NBC had the Tournament of Roses parade on, with thousands of red-colored floats and smiling people. CNN was reporting on celebrations in Greece as the year of the Olympics began. ESPN had a bowl game. ABC was prepping for Rose and Orange Bowl coverage. However, whichever channel I selected, I heard a moan -- and not from the TV either.

It wasn't until I turned around that I realized what the moaning was. Tommy was still in bed, still trying to sleep, and definitely in a bad mood. "Could you wait until later, man?"

"Geez, Tommy, it's almost 11 o'clock."

"I know... just keep it down."

I rolled my eyes and got dressed after turning off the television. I thought about the previous night's developments as I got ready for the new day. *Do you think Nora will think I was serious? Forget Nora -- what about Vince? Will he like my idea? Well, he's off with the SmackDown! crew anyway, but I guess I can run it by people here and see if they'd go for it.*

I exited the room after making sure I had everything. I walked down the hallway and over to Nora and Gail's room. I knocked on the door and waited. "Go away," grumbled a voice from inside. I shrugged my shoulders and headed to the elevator.

"Jason, wait..." I turned around quickly. It was Nora, emerging from the room in her bathrobe and slippers. She stood by the door and propped it open with a throwlatch attached to the inside of the wall. I headed over there to talk to her. When I did, she hugged me again. "I'm sorry. Gail's hung over."

"Yeah, so is Tommy," I replied. "I just... wanted to make sure everyone was okay. Did I come at a bad time?"

"Oh, no... oh, this?" She looked at her covering. "Nah, I was just going to wash up. I need it. Gail threw up all over the place last night. It was awful."

"Wow, I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah... she was in no condition when it was over. I doubt she even remembers last night. Might be better, actually."

"Why's that?"

"Well, she... she was coming on to me."

I winced. "Oh, great, not again."

"Yeah... first Darren... I mean... she didn't do anything, you understand. She just... she wanted to play."

"Ah. But I thought you had someone in your life."

"You mean Phil? I don't know. You see, he... he treats me like I'm a student sometimes. I like to say he's my boyfriend, and... truth be told, it would be nice... but he's not romantic. He's all the time going on about how he walks the line and he doesn't stray into anything. If I told him Gail got drunk, he'd tell me to switch roommates."

"He doesn't sound like your type."

"What do you mean? He's a wrestler who doesn't get involved in dirty business and has the respect of a lot of people because of it. He's a wonderful guy -- he just thinks I can work hard to erase this blight from my life."

"You mean being raped?"

"Well... in a way, yeah."

"I don't understand."

"See, he thinks that I didn't fight hard enough. He wants me to atone for having had sex. It's..."

"Crazy, is what it is!" I was ready to tell her I knew what she went through, but I remembered I couldn't. I had to stammer for other words. "Nora, you... he made you. He... you didn't want to... it doesn't matter..."

"Jason... it happened. Why it happened or how it happened is secondary. I thank you for your support, but... you don't have to make me feel better. I want to make up for this somehow."

"You know how? Teach self-defense. Work a hotline. Make sure Darren never sees freedom again. You don't need to feel like you did anything wrong."

"Jason... I want Phil to see me as a human being. I want him to appreciate me. Please, try to understand. I want to meet his standards." She headed back inside. "Thank you anyway... I gotta get clean."

The door closed. I headed to the lobby to find Shane McMahon. *Whoever this Phil guy is, he's demanding a little too much. But his philosophy sounds like I should've heard it before...*

03:54 PM

"...so, basically, I want to do this."

Shane tilted his head to indicate he was in thought. I could tell he was searching for a way to play Devil's Advocate, but what I couldn't figure out is whether he wanted it to happen or not.

"Well... do you think you can carry her?"

"Shane, it's not a matter of carrying. She's a great athlete -- probably the best of the Divas. It'll be an even match, both on-screen and in the back."

"You realize you run the risk of looking real bad out there."

"I know, Shane, I know... but look, I'm just a midcard second banana anyway. I

was helping Big Show, I was helping Jericho, now I wanna help Nora -- well, offscreen. I think this can work."

"But there's no drama. I mean, when Joanie was doing it she had the size to match up with most guys -- she was a legit 5'9 and 200. You realize she was as large as some of our Cruiserweights, and she looked a hell of a lot more impressive? Nora... what is she, 5'4, 5'5? And weight-wise... well, you dwarf her, and you're no more than 220!"

"I know, Shane, I know. Look, I'll bump for ten if it helps get her over. Besides, after Chavo and I do our thing, the I-C title will have a great image. It's just a matter of time."

"I'll talk to Dad, but... I don't think he's up for it. We had to have the Clique push him to get Chyna into the men's scene, and now... I don't know. I'll see what I can do."

"Well, aren't you and Gerwitz in charge?"

"All the programs go to him for the final say. I wish I could say yes -- hell, I'd love to see it. But I can't. I agree, Molly Holly is the best women's wrestler in the US, maybe in the world. But can she really hang with the men? Sure, I guess... but you know how much people like Orton were mad at having to do the job to her. What if Vince came up to you and said, Christian, lay down?"

"So be it. I wanna work here." *And it's one less person I could get fired.*

Shane seemed to be pondering as Eric Bischoff walked over. "Hey guys, what's the story?"

"Oh, hi, Eric. Christian here would like to work with Molly for WrestleMania."

"Well, aren't we being a bit presumptive, Christian? I mean, the boys upstairs might decide to give Chavo a run with your strap."

"Fine. I'll do it anyway."

"Really... to go from I-C Champion to Andy Kaufman? Kind of a long fall, isn't it?"

"I know, I know... but I wanna make sure Nora gets the reward she deserves. She's been connecting with the fans in a way I didn't think possible. She should have a spot at WrestleMania... it's the least we can do."

"Well... good luck. If you can carry that fat-ass to a good match, I'll eat my nWo hat." Eric chuckled and walked off. Shane shook his head.

"Don't get mad -- he didn't mean it," he said, although his tone indicated uncertainty. "You'll get your program if I have anything to say about it."

- The SmarKDown! Rant for Jan. 01 / 04, taped Dec. 30 / 03.

- From La-re-do-mi-fa-so, TX.

- Your hosts are **Michael "I resolve to shave my goatee" Cole** and **Ta "I resolve to get a last name" zz**.

- Opening match: **Matt Hardy Version 1.0** v. **Ultimo Dragon**. Matt Facts: Matt resolves to run 5 miles a day, and Matt thinks LSU will beat Oklahoma. Must be an American thing. Dragon kicks away to start, stifling the hell out of Matt as **Paul Heyman** joins us

on commentary. Apparently, Mattitude have been begging him for a title shot. Begging, I say. Well, here's hoping. Hardy goes low on Dragon, then flips him over the ropes, where **Shannon Moore** gets a few shots in. Moore throws Dragon back in, but Hardy misses the legdrop and Dragon gets a rana for two. Matt with a Side Effect for two. Moore distracts the ref, allowing Matt to score with the tag belt for two. Matt gets a Northern Lights Suplex for two. Dragon leapfrogs Matt into a sunset flip for two. Nice. Moore again jumps on the apron, prompting Heyman to trip him up. Dragon is distracted (figures), so Matt tosses him and follows with a quebrada on all three -- but Dragon escapes so that he can do a quebrada on all three. Back in, it gets two. Dragon gets the Asai DDT for two, as Moore puts Matt's foot on the rope. Heyman blows the mist in Moore's face, but in the ring Matt gets a Twist of Fate for three at 8:06. Not bad, all in all. *** Mattitude deliver a RnR double dropkick to Dragon and commence the beating.

- **Stephanie** is out, and why not? I was in a bad mood anyway. She promises that **Hulk Hogan** will appear via satellite later tonight. **Kurt Angle** interrupts and says he wants to defend his title because he's a FIGHTING CHAMPION! So Stephanie gives him a triple threat match. Angle will face **John Cena** and **Rhyno** TONIGHT. I like that.

- Handicap match: **APA** v. **Brock Lesnar**. I guess they need something for Brock to do, don't they? Both APA attack to start, with **Simmons** getting the Angry Man Spinebuster and **Bradshaw** the Last Call for two. Brock pops up and clotheslines them both, then gets a leglock on Simmons. Bradshaw saves, only to be sent into the corner and given shoulder thrusts. Simmons tries to charge, but Brock tosses him into Bradshaw, then German suplexes both of them at once. Okay, that was pretty cool. Double clothesline by APA leads to a double powerbomb, but it only gets two. Simmons takes a header to the outside, and an F-5 for Bradshaw finishes the slaughter at 5:00. Just a match. *1/2

- **Kurt Angle** enjoys everyone's favorite pastime -- making fun of **Kevin Kelly** -- then insults **Hogan, Eddie, Cena, Rhyno**, and the next 10 people he can think of over the next two minutes. He's the champ and they're all jealous. Well, if this doesn't telegraph the Rumble result -- 25 guys and a bazooka putting the title on the Goblin -- then I'm getting too cynical even for my sake.

- **Eddie Guerrero** v. **Undertaker**. Taker boots Eddie to the outside, then pounds him while he's out there. Both men have cheering sections, and the announcers are at a loss to explain it. Taker rams Eddie into the post, then returns to the ring to give him a lariat for two. Eddie dropkicks the knee, then works it with a half-crab. Taker makes the ropes. Taker charges Eddie, but Eddie side-steps, then applies a kneebar. Taker kicks Eddie away, then grabs a dragon sleeper with bodyscissors. Eddie makes the ropes. See, this is how you establish Taker as a legit fighting badass -- make him use moves regularly, not out of nowhere. Eddie dropkicks Taker in the face, then tries a spinning toe hold. Taker pushes him away and gets a chokeslam for two. Powerbomb is set up, but Eddie grabs the leg and dragon screws it (with Taker nearly tearing his knee out doing the bump). Eddie goes to the outside and frog splashes the knee. Back in, figure-four attempt is blocked twice, and Taker punches Eddie down in the corner. Boot choke and something resembling a crossface follow. Eddie slips out, then gets the El Paso Lasso for the tap-out

and a HUGE pop at 9:34. Not as awesome as their SummerSlam brawl, but serviceable.

**

- Backstage, Eddie finds **Kurt Angle** and gets into a shoving match.

- **Rob Van Dam** and **Goldust** v. **Nova** and **Paul London**. London and RVD start, and Van Dam goes medieval with kicks and flips. Nova tries his luck and gets nowhere, either. Goldust pounds Nova down and hits the sliding punch into an RVD enzuigiri for two. London gets the cheap shot, then Nova Stinger splashes Goldust in the back to make him weirdo-in-peril. London with a facejam for two. Nova back in and gets the Spin Doctor for a close two, RVD saving. London tosses Goldust out, but a double-team is foiled by an RVD pescado. You ever notice that the cruiser style is back in -- flying all over the place? I wonder if **Vince** hears the pops it gets and uses them like heroin. Back inside, Goldust gets the butt butt on Nova and makes the hot tag. London eats the stepover enzuigiri, but Nova catches RVD for a superplex before the Five-Star hits. Goldust gets Shattered Dreams on Nova, but London sneaks back in and hits the London Bridge to win at 7:31. Goldust sticks out like a sore thumb, and I wonder if this is jobbing Dustin down or pushing Nova/London. *** They need a name, though -- Nova and London just sounds like a jobber team, you know?

- **Billy Kidman** talks about being the US Champ, but you can hear his stock drop when he opens his mouth. JUST WRESTLE, trust me. **Rey Misterio** thankfully interrupts and says they gotta focus on the next match. They try to talk strategy with **Tajiri**, but that goes about as well as you'd expect, which is to say, not at all.

- Royal Rumble Qualifying Match: **Billy Gunn** and **World's Greatest Tag Team** v. **Tajiri** and **Filthy Animals**. Well, 5 out of 6 ain't bad. All managers are banned from ringside, and the winning team joins the Rumble. Pier Six to start, and the faces hit stereo topes on the heels to wow the crowd. **Haas** and **Kidman** get things going as Kidman clotheslines down Haas. **Shelton** gets caught coming in, and **Rey** goes AERIAL with the rana to clear him out. Gunn, however, gets a cheap shot in the fracas to make Kidman champ-in-peril. Anyone else think it's interesting the tag champs are split here? Just wondering. Shelton with a spinebuster for two. Haas hits a T-Bone suplex for two. Gunn with the One and Only for two. All three men enter and get a double Doomsday Device for two. Haas and Shelton get their finishing sequence and Tajiri saves. Haas with the Haas of Pain, Rey saves. Gunn comes in and screws up (I'm shocked), hot tag Tajiri. Karate rush sends Gunn bailing, and Haas is caught in the ropes and given the Tarantula. Rey adds to the fun by giving Haas an inside-out 619 while he's still in the Tarantula! Shelton runs in and powerbombs Tajiri, Rey, and Kidm... okay, not Kidman. Unprettier attempt is foiled by a Gunn clothesline. Haas gets an Angle Slam on Rey for two as the whole thing's breaking loose in Tulsa. Hop Up Rana gets two on Gunn, but Shelton superkicks Tajiri for the Haas pin at 12:24. Almost everyone is great, and even Gunn is a good tag wrestler, so this match was just fine. I could do without Billy Gunn in the Royal Rumble, of course. ***

- **Hollywood Hulk Hogan** is indeed live from his home in California. He talks about

Kurt Angle and says the usual -- if you've heard it once, you've heard it a million times. He wishes Angle good luck in the main event.

- Main Event, WWE Title: **Rhyno v. Kurt Angle v. John Cena**. Cena and Rhyno brawl to start as Angle waits on the sideline. Rhyno tosses Cena outside and Angle works on him, choking him with his medals. Back in, Rhyno misses the GOAR GOAR GOAR and crashes into the post. Cena works the arm, but Angle gets a German on Cena. Rhyno clotheslines Cena with the bad arm, then Angle rolls Rhyno up for two. Cena hits both men with lariats, then a Throwback for Rhyno for two. Cena twists Angle's arm and goes OLD SCHOOL on him, but Rhyno crotches him before **Undertaker** can sue for gimmick infringement. Angle gets an armdrag and armbar on Rhyno while Cena kicks away. Rhyno trips Cena, then hiptosses Angle and powerslams Cena for two. Angle goes for the rolling Germans, but Rhyno gets the GOAR GOAR GOAR on both men (with the bad arm) before the third one hits. Rhyno is up first, and he grabs Angle into a suplex for two. Cena shoulderblocks Rhyno down, and Angle gets a crossbody on both men. He covers Rhyno for two. Cena pounds on both to make his comeback, but Rhyno ducks a punch and DDTs Cena for two. Angle is woozy, so Rhyno shoulderblocks him, then goes up for a frog splash (!) for two. Cena gives Rhyno a German, then sets Angle up for the F-U. Rhyno clips Cena, and Angle falls on top (putting his feet on the ropes) for the pin to retain at 10:58. On second though, maybe Angle's turning heel at the Rumble if not before. If so, certainly **Hogan** is the guy to do it on, if only for my pleasure. **1/2

The Bottom Line:

Another very acceptable SmackDown! in the books, as they continue to trump RAW in just about every way. The Rumble main event looks iffy at this point, and it'll depend on whether Angle has his miracle boots on. Of course, there's always a chance Hogan will be able to get a decent match.

Nah.

Friday, January 02, 2004, 12:49 PM
Houston, TX

We were ready to hit the house show circuit again, and all of us climbed into the vans to make the trip. As I left the hotel room, I looked around for Shawn's car. It wasn't in sight. I guessed he'd be making the trip straight to Memphis for next week's RAW.

As I put my stuff in the storage area, I felt a slap on the back. I winced as I stood up, then turned around. It was Batista, smiling and holding his hand out for a shake. "It's good to see ya again," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"Oh... allow me." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of glasses. *Whoa -- he's my new associate, I guess.* He handed them to me. "Go ahead, man. No one's looking. Besides, I wanna see the look on your face when you see who you drew."

I slowly slipped the glasses on with my eyes closed. I was scared of seeing some long-dead wrestler, or worse yet, a demon. Maybe -- although I doubted it -- I would see nothing, just Batista himself. Whatever it was, I had to know. I opened my eyes, and as I did so, I smiled a grin a mile wide.

"Welcome aboard, Stefani," I said. "Looks like we ride together again."

Saturday, January 03, 2004, 04:54 PM
Jackson, MS

"He's here! He's coming to work the show tonight!" Nora skipped around backstage like a schoolgirl, almost flying past the men's dressing room. She stopped and whirled around. "You seen him yet?"

"Who?" answered a puzzled and bemused HHH.

"Him! Phil! He's supposed to be helping with the show tonight! Oh, I'm so excited!"

She skipped away as all of us looked at each other. "Who's Phil?" Hunter asked out loud.

"Oh... that's her boyfriend," Hurricane responded while adjusting his mask. "At least, I think it is. She sure seems to talk like she likes him."

"She has a... I thought she was making that up!" Randy stared at Hurricane, confused. "Are you... who is this guy? And where are we getting our talent from?"

"A bunch of guys that Jeff Jarrett recommended to us," said Eric, walking in with a smile on his face a mile wide. "They'll be playing the faces tonight for the lower guys. I suggest you get ready if you're up against them."

I checked the roster. It was going to be myself with Big Show, like the old times, against Chavo Guerrero and Hurricane. I looked up and down the lineup to find anyone named Phil. Nothing stood out -- just the usual low-level names you'd expect. I saw that a six-man was booked with Evolution against a group called the Second City Saints. I called Batista -- Stefani -- over and pointed it out.

"Who are they? You're the NWA expert."

"That's not an NWA group -- they're from before that. It's a trio of guys from Chicago who pride themselves on clean living. I'm surprised they're all coming down -- I thought Ace was under a written deal."

"Ace?"

"Yeah. Ace Steel -- he's the third wheel of the group. The other two are CM Punk and Colt Cabana. They've been doing their thing in Ring of Honor for a while. Of course, now they must be seeing if they can land an OVW deal -- or maybe they're just here cuz of Nora."

I did a double-take. "Wait... are you saying that Phil is..."

He nodded. "CM Punk. And the guy's not that good for her, you know. Man, you should pay attention more -- I thought you noticed him calling someone on a cel phone backstage when you were with us."

"C'mon, Stef, you know I wasn't exactly the most familiar person with the territory. There are things you haven't noticed, too, you know."

"Probably... well, anyway, I'd suggest you do your best to talk to him. Maybe he can see things the right way around. He damn near ruined our Double J reclamation. I hope he doesn't do it twice."

10:58 PM

After the show ended, I got my stuff together and found Shawn. Batista, Shawn and I headed to the exit, discussing plans for Monday's show. Shawn seemed excited about coming back from his long layoff -- he was ready to go full-time for the warmup to his match with Sting. We stopped at the door, though, when we saw who was outside.

"Hey there, Nora," said Shawn. "I see you've really taken to him, haven't you?"

"Yeah..." she blushed as we looked at the two of them, in each other's arms.

"Well, he's been so helpful to me. He's making me a better person, you know." As she gushed about all the ways Phil was helping her, I turned to Batista and exchanged cynical glances.

"Well, as long as you're happy. After Darren got to you, I was afraid you were done for," Shawn said, wiping his brow. "I wouldn't want that to happen to any of my friends."

Batista stepped forward. "So," he said, trying to get the boyfriend involved in the conversation, "you think you have a future here?"

"I doubt it," said Punk, shaking his head. "I'm not much into this sports entertainment shit. Too much stupid stuff going on, and all the emphasis on girls whoring themselves -- it's not my style."

"That's all gonna change," Shawn jumped in with. "You see, Vince is making sure of it. He wants the Wrestling back in World Wrestling Entertainment. That title's gonna mean something again. Besides, we could always put you on SmackDown! -- that's where the good young workers are."

"Yeah... like Jose and Joel. Look at what they got -- a lot of nothing. They're wasted. Nah... I don't mind being part of TNA's star. No offense, Dave -- I enjoyed our match tonight -- but I'd rather live on the road."

"You sure?" I butted in. *Here was my chance to see what he was made of.* "I mean, you know you'll be given enough money to live on here. And seriously, you can see the world and meet all sorts of different cultures and customs wherever you go."

Punk thought for a second. "It's not about the cultures and customs. It's about your lifestyle. I mean, any environment where guys are free to drink and light up in the back -- it's not what I want. At least in Nashville, Jeff keeps a tight rein on that sort of thing. But I don't want to be around drugs or alcohol at all. It's against my philosophy."

"Your... you have a philosophy? Oh, this'll be good."

"Oh, yeah... it's all the rage. It's about being what I call straight-edge. Basically, you don't do anything like drugs, sex, or booze. You keep yourself clean and live a happy and healthy life."

"That's just fine, man, but... do you need to avoid temptation?"

"Yes. I don't... my dad was into drinking and stuff. He went through hell. I'm not stupid -- I know alcoholism is genetic. If I get near that stuff, I'll end up like him. I just

want to be a clean, all-American kid."

At this, Batista began to chuckle. We all turned to him as he explained. "Look at yourself, Punk. You've got a ton of tattoos all over your arms. I mean, nothing wrong with tattoos, ya know, but... how does that jive with who you are?"

Punk rolled his eyes. "I get this all the time. Look, I'm the same person whether I have the tats or don't. I like them, so they stay. I could explain the meaning of them to you if you want."

"Just one," I said. "What's with the Pepsi logo? You hard up for sponsorship money? You know, like those guys who do the Golden Palace tattoos?"

"No! I'm not selling out. This is cuz my finisher's the Pepsi Plunge. It's a nasty little thing too. Didn't get the chance to do it tonight, of course, but it's my calling card. You know, plus all those guys getting liquor logos on their arms -- I just wanted to have fun with it. It's who I am."

"Who are you? You sound really grounded in your life. I mean, most guys I know who don't touch anything are very faith-based. Are you, too?" *Okay, I know the answer, but does she?*

"Faith?" Punk's eyebrows arched, and he looked at me like I was a child in special education. "Faith's for weaklings. You can do everything some church on a hill tells you to do without being part of it. God didn't give me my mind, my body, or my lifestyle -- I worked hard at it. I can account for everything on my own."

"Except your life. I mean, after you die, what then? You're dead. Doesn't that scare you?"

"Maybe, but I'll live a lot longer the way I'm going than you ever would."

I turned to Shawn, almost begging him to step in. He got the message and cleared his throat. "You know, kid, I used to think that too. I thought I was just living for this world. But you know what -- if we're only here for this world, we're all pointless. Life isn't pointless. Our intelligence isn't pointless. Therefore, there's gotta be more than this. Right?"

"No," he said bluntly. "Our legacy -- our intelligence -- is our progeny. The better our children are, the better we have been. Right? I mean, Shawn -- look at what you've started. Look at your nephew, for example. He's an arrogant little prick. He kept telling us he was so damn cool because he was going to the WWE. Well, screw him -- I hope he enjoys his life, and he's out of mine. But what does that say about you when your legacy is embodied by people like Michael Shane?"

"Hey, wait a sec--"

"Shawn, hold up," Batista said as we cut him off. "He's got his opinion, and we have ours. But the fact is," he said, turning to Punk, "a man is judged on his own actions. Shawn's been clean, sober, and a good man since I got here. That means something to me."

"Good for you, pal. Now lemme tell you who he was. This guy was the worst fucking offender in the history of politics. If you didn't like him, or he didn't like you, it didn't matter if you were Bret Fucking Hart. You meant nothing. You might as--"

"Phil, wait," Nora finally piped up. "Can't you be friends? For my sake? It doesn't matter who I hang around with. What matters is us. Right, Phil?" She placed her head on his shoulder and brushed her hand along his face for emphasis. Phil bit his lip, then seemed to smile.

"Yeah... I'm sorry. Shawn, I'm just... well, it's hard for me to like people who aren't willing to accept me."

"Dude -- we didn't say we didn't accept you. We want to accept you, but more than that, we want to help you. All you have to do is believe... it can't be that hard."

"Well... I don't want to feel like I'm weak. Like I can't do this on my own. The point is, I can do it on my own. I have done it on my own for ages."

Shawn shook his head. "You think you have. Would it surprise you to learn that supernatural forces tinker with the world every day, and people take credit for their doing?"

"Yeah, because there is no Heaven or Hell. Well, not in the literal sense -- I've had some serious hell in my life with my dad."

"And who do you think guided you to accept this... this... what did you call it..."

"Straight-edge? I did that. I saw what my father went through and decided to do the opposite."

"And do you know how many people go the other way? Why were you saved from that ignominious fate of continuing your father's legacy?"

Punk didn't reply. Nora looked up into his eyes, seemingly wondering for herself what his answer would be. I gave Batista a sideways glance. *He's stuck. He can't or won't take credit.* Finally, he took a deep breath and began to speak.

"I see what you're getting at. You want me to see that God took me down this Straight-Edge path. You want me to admit that God has kept me clean. Well, no way. God doesn't exist. I know he doesn't. If there was a God, why did I have a father who drank all the time and beat me for it? If there was a God, why would people be killed by some lowlife shooter who doesn't know them? If there was a God, why were 20 men able to take out three thousand in His Name? And if there was a God, why did Nora -- poor, sweet girl that she is -- find herself in the mercy of that fucking predator? Do you know that Rob Black wants to hire him? Is that something a God would allow?"

There was an uncomfortable silence. I knew the truth -- that God was there at the end of the day, and that good would triumph over evil if only because it had to -- but to say it would sound clichéd and preachy. Just as Punk nodded his head, Nora spoke up, though.

"Phil... God made you better than your father. God brings evil men to justice. God rescued me from Darren. And you know what? Yeah, people have to suffer for Him to work, but He does work! If there was no God, why is Darren in jail?"

"Cuz of the cops. Cuz of Austin. Cuz..."

"Wait," Nora said, almost in tears as she reminisced. "You know, when I was in trouble... when I finally admitted what had happened... I felt an angel on my shoulder, guiding me to come forward. And as I thanked Austin for helping put Darren away, and as I thanked Jericho for devising the plan, I felt angels smiling on me. You may not believe they exist, because your life hasn't had the problems mine has. They do -- and I know it -- and I want you to accept that I know it. The fact that you accept me for who I am means everything... it's another blessing... almost another angel."

She hugged Punk tightly and kissed his cheek. I could see the anger and confusion swap places inside him. He didn't know what to think anymore. "I... well... look, it's... Nora, you're a wonderful girl. I want to make you better. I care for you enough to do that. I just... guys, can we talk alone?"

Shawn nodded, then motioned to us. The three of us walked off to Shawn's car, ready to continue the journey.

Monday, January 05, 2004, 08:31 AM
Memphis, TN

I woke up slowly, trying to figure out my surroundings. I was back in Memphis, in the hotel room, whereas the previous night I was in Tupelo working a house show. *I must be one of the people who went ahead for RAW.* I searched for my glasses and my stuff, then sat up in bed. As I did, I heard a grumble from across the way.

The grumble turned into words -- words I understood, though barely. I replied in the same language, then realized who I had to be. I popped out of bed and walked into the bathroom, turning on the light and confirming my suspicions.

I was a rising star. I was an exciting addition to RAW. And I was bilingual -- *Bonjour, Monsieur Rene Dupree.*

TWENTY-THIRD WEEK

Monday, January 05, 2004, 12:28 PM
Memphis, TN

Où est Shawn, quoi qu'il en soit? Ah, droite, il est probablement toujours avec l'équipage d'exposition de maison en Tupelo. Je devine que qui veut dire ce M. Grenier et je devrai trouver notre chemin par la ville jusqu'à ce soir. C'est quatre Lundi droits que j'ai été parti de l'équipage, cependant.(1)

Wow, I just had a stream of consciousness in French. Sweet.

I walked through the lobby, wearing the French garb my character was associated with. *Might as well live the role now.* Sylvain came up to me as we grabbed a taxi and made our way to an early Heat practice at the Pyramid. He was more comfortable speaking his "native" French, which was no problem for me, as I found out earlier.

"Rene," he said apprehensively, "nous supposez-vous volonté avoir une allumette aujourd'hui? Depuis le tournoi, nous avons la sorte de un siège arrière. Savez-vous pourquoi?"

"Pour être honnêtes, Sylvain, peut-être nous étions à la télévision trop tôt. En outre, nous sommes jeunes avec beaucoup de potentiel. Notre moment viendra."

"Mille excuses, monsieur. C'est simplement qu'I... Je suis nerveux au sujet de ma carrière. J'entends les chuchotements dans le dos, avec l'énonciation de personnes je ne suis pas mériter de ce que j'ai, et de la façon dont elles m'ont renvoyé pour mon amitié avec M. Patterson. Je veux m'avérer que j'appartiens, et cela je ne suis pas simplement ici parce que j'adapte M. McMahon de rôle créé. Est-ce que c'il est si difficile de comprendre?"

"Ah, aucun... pas pour moi," I hastily said. "Regard, Sylvain, nous sommes à la plus grande compagnie dans notre profession. Notre ciel est la limite. Ni l'un ni l'autre de nous n'ont atteint 25 ans. C'est un temps pour se réjouir dans ce que nous avons et pour ne pas s'inquiéter de ce que nous pourrions devoir accepter."(2)

"Hey, guys," the cabbie yelled back, "you better not be paying me in frog money!"

"Sir, you misunderstand us," I said to the man, a gruff city guy who probably had a limited education. "We're not really French. My friend here is from Montreal -- he's a Canadian. It's easier for him to talk in French because he grew up speaking it. We just pretend to be French for TV."

"Ah, that's fine," he said, before doing a double take. "Hey -- you, you're... aren't you those resistance guys from the rassling company?"

"Oui," I said, half-bowing. "I am M. Rene Dupree, and this is M. Sylvain Grenier. And it's pronounced re-zis-TAHNS, by the way." I smiled, hoping he'd get the joke.

"Whatever, Renny. Listen, I was hopin' to get tickets to tonight's show, but I don't know if I can afford them on my salary. You know what to do about that?"

"One moment, sir. I will see if we can think of something." I turned to Sylvain and winked. "Le monsieur pense que nous pouvons lui obtenir un billet pour le ce soir sur un prix réduit. Au cas où nous faire ainsi? Après tout, il nous donne ses services sur le chemin à notre destination."

"Je suis sûr qu'il y a des billets qu'ils veulent donner loin ainsi ils peuvent emballer le bâtiment. Peut-être si nous obtenions un pour lui, nous pourrions obtenir notre tour sans coût. C'est en valeur un essai, n'est-ce pas?"

"J'aime votre manière de la pensée, Sylvain. Faisons-le!"(3) I turned back to the cabbie and explained. "Well, sir, I'm sure we can get a ticket for you if you let us go for free on this ride."

"It's a deal," he exclaimed.

(1) - Where is Shawn, anyway? Oh, right, he is probably still with the house show crew in Tupelo. I guess that means that Mr. Grenier and I will have to find our way through the town until tonight. That's four straight Mondays I have been away from the crew, though.

(2) - "Rene, do you suppose we will have a match today? Since the tournament, we have sort of been given a back seat. Do you know why?"

"To be honest, Sylvain, maybe we were on television too soon. Besides, we are young with a lot of potential. Our time will come."

"A thousand apologies, sir. It is simply that I... I am a little nervous about my career. I hear the whispers in the back, with people saying I am not deserving of what I have, and how they resent me for my friendship with Mr. Patterson. I want to prove I belong, and that I am not just here because I fit the role Mr. McMahon created. Is that so hard to understand?"

"Oh, no... not for me. Look, Sylvain, we are in the biggest company in our profession. Our sky is the limit. Neither of us have reached 25 years of age. This is a time to rejoice in what we have and not worry about what we might have to put up with."

(3) - "The gentleman thinks we can get him a ticket for tonight on a reduced price. Should we do so? After all, he is giving us his services on the way to our destination."

"I'm sure there are tickets that they want to give away so they can paper the building. Perhaps if we got one for him, we could get our ride without cost. That's worth a try, isn't it?"

"I like your way of thinking, Sylvain. Let's do it!"

03:44 PM

After finishing our practice session, I walked backstage with Sylvain. A crowd had formed around Jerry Lawler, who was back for the night for RAW in his hometown. He hadn't changed much in the month since his dismissal, still bragging about how big he

was in Memphis and saying he could get any lady he wanted. *Once a philanderer, always a philanderer.*

I approached him as he was talking with Jim Ross about the RAW product. "Pardonnez moi, Monsieur," I said, opening with just enough French that could easily be understood, "But would you mind giving me an autograph?"

"I'd be delighted," he said with a smile. "You know, there's a lot of weird stuff going down on the show nowadays. I kinda miss seeing you guys to kick around."

Ross got a smile on his face. "I think we can fix that," he went off to find Brian Gerwitz. I looked at Lawler, who was smiling his most devious grin.

"What does he mean by that?"

"Oh, he's probably going to get me included in tonight's show somehow. I thought as much -- they always try to give me a pass through on their stopovers here. It's a tradition."

"Well, sure it is, but... but you're not employed by the WWE, are you?"

"That's all right. I've been doin' a bit of thinkin'. You see, some of the stuff I said was misguided. Maybe I am a little outdated for an announcer. That's cool, though. I don't mind the easy life. I run a nice little promotion out of here in my spare time to keep the local boys interested. People seem to like it, and it stays mildly solvent with our spot shows, so I really can't complain."

"But don't you miss the road, the travel, the... the life?"

"Oh, a little, but not as much as I thought I would. Memphis is my home, you see. I wanna live out my life here. I guess my time had come. You can't be in the ring forever, though I admire guys like Flair and Hogan who are trying," he said with a wink.

"Yeah, it is odd how they are able to keep going, n'est-ce pas?"

"Exactly. But some people just have the capability. I can't go more than a few minutes anymore without feeling out of place. My big offense doesn't count around here. I can punch well, sure, but without the piledriver -- I might as well hang it up. Hey, I'm secure in what I am. My place in history is guaranteed. I figure I can do what I want now."

"Isn't that still a little selfish?"

"Selfish? Hey, I've earned it!" As he spoke, Nora walked by. She gave him a perfunctory glance, then walked on, not even pausing to say hello to us or him. "Well, how do ya like that? I got her in the door here, and this is how she thanks me."

"Well, with all due respect, M. Lawler, perhaps if you had been a little more respectful to her once she got here, she wouldn't think so little of you."

"Yeah, yeah... it's that punk boyfriend of hers," he stammered out, perhaps unaware of the irony. "He's making her into some mindslave. Like she doesn't want to have any fun anymore, because she's afraid of disappointing him. I've heard the talk. The Mid-South guys know all about it. He's poison for her."

"Why? Because he wants the right thing for her?"

"You call being a prude the right thing? You gotta have a little fun. Back in my day, we weren't so damn concerned about someone giving us the moral stare or thumbing their nose at us. We did what we liked. It was the times! But now, it's all this I'm-better-than-you stuff. Geez, just be yourself. Don't pressure me to change."

"That's not how you always were, was it? I remember Shawn telling us about how you helped him get into religion after all the trouble on the road."

"Yeah, I know, I know... I'm not a total idiot." He sounded almost agitated now. "But that church stuff is overrated. This is the life, Rene. This and no other. You gotta live it to the fullest."

"So it doesn't bother you that you go through wives like tissue paper or that people think you're a scandalous man?"

"Nah, let 'em think what they want. It's just fine with me."

As I pondered his statements, and his connected fall from grace, Jim Ross returned. "Guys, I got a deal. It goes down on Heat. Listen..."

07:33 PM

Our "decidedly French" theme began as the boos rained down upon us. We emerged, carrying the French flags with us and holding our noses high at the rest of the Memphis crowd. We entered the ring and waved the tricolore for everyone to see. I took the microphone and went to address the crowd, then turned to notice something that had been in the corner of my eye.

"Sylvain, look who is here," I said, pointing to a seat in the front row. "I think we have a legend in our midst. Someone who fancies himself for royalty, perhaps?"

The camera turned to show Jerry Lawler in his front row seat, conveniently dressed in his usual kingly coat and crown. A huge "Jerry!" chant broke out as I got out of the ring and approached him. I shook his hand, with Lawler approaching it nervously.

"So, it is Jerry Lawler -- we meet again, do we not? Well, I see you are a civilian tonight. Such a shame, too -- it would be a pleasure to make an example of you, King. For just as our forefathers stormed the Bastille and liberated our land from royal oppression, we with to storm the Pyramid and liberate ourselves from your stupidity."

The crowd was absolutely hating us now. Before Lawler could respond, though, Tommy Dreamer's music hit and he came out. He had on the flag-motif WWE shirt and the tape on his hands. He was, as always, ready for a fight, and tonight he was to face me in one.

I climbed back into the ring as Dreamer charged. I collided with him, conveniently sandwiching the referee in between. As the ref collapsed, Sylvain added shots to Dreamer's back with the butt of the French flag. We stomped away as a USA chant began, but the chant became disorganized cheering when Lawler hopped the railing and removed his coat and crown, revealing his wrestling outfit underneath.

Lawler chased us out of the ring as the referee slowly got back up. He talked to the timekeeper, then to the men in the ring. He came out to us and repeated what he said. We smiled and nodded, then jumped into the ring as the referee told Lillian Garcia.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Garcia, "I have been asked to inform you that tonight's match between Rene Dupree and Tommy Dreamer is now a tag team match! It will be La Resistance versus Tommy Dreamer and Jerry the King Lawler!"

The crowd went ballistic as we stared each other down. I pointed to myself, indicating I wanted to start. As Grenier headed to the apron, I charged Dreamer and tackled him. Lawler tried to help out, but the referee cut him off. I pounded on his weakened back, then slapped on a camel clutch. Dreamer screamed in pain, but made it to

his knees and was carrying me to the corner. I jumped on his back to put him back down, then dragged him to our corner to tag in Sylvain.

Sylvain continued to stomp away at Dreamer, then whipped him into the ropes. Dreamer came off with a clothesline attempt, but Sylvain ducked it, then caught him with a kick to the jaw on the rebound. He skipped back over to tag me in, and I hit the prancing kneedrop to Dreamer's back. I whipped Dreamer into the corner and slid out of the ring, then grabbed Dreamer's legs to trip him up. *Well, it's in his contract, right?* I pulled him wishbone-style into the post as the crowd groaned in pain. I climbed back in and tagged Grenier in.

I grabbed Dreamer in a piledriver position as Sylvain climbed the ropes. The crowd began to buzz as we called to each other in French. However, before we could execute, Dreamer flipped me over his back, then turned around and caught Grenier with a fist as he came down. We both crawled after Dreamer, but my last-second lunge wasn't enough. Dreamer got the tag, and Lawler was the legal man.

Lawler pounded away on both of us as we took turns getting up, getting hit, and falling back down. I approached him, but he grabbed me by the hair, then got Grenier as well. He reared back, and I put my hand up to block skull-on-skull contact. We took the double noggin-knocker and fell flat again. Lawler covered Sylvain, but I broke it up at two. Dreamer came back in, and we proceeded to go all out.

Dreamer took Grenier while I backed Lawler into the corner. *They won't notice I'm no longer the legal man, I hope.* I pounded away at Lawler, who sold the punches at first, but gradually seemed to be getting a second wind. The crowd rallied behind him as Grenier and Dreamer brawled around ringside. Lawler began to stare at me as I landed another right. He didn't flinch -- instead, he pulled down the strap as the crowd grew to a crescendo. It was my turn.

He blocked my shot, then began unloading right hands on me. I staggered all around the ring, actually falling back into the opposite corner. He continued hammering me as I fell to the ground, where he stomped me a few times. He climbed to the top rope as I looked up at him and waited for him to jump off. He connected with the fistdrop and covered. In his hometown, he got the three-count. The crowd cheered wildly as "Great Gate of Kiev" played with the win. I slowly rolled out of the ring and let Lawler and Dreamer share the spotlight.

- The SmarK RAW Rant for Jan. 08 / 04.

- Live from Memphis.

- Your hosts are **Jim Ross** and **DDP**.

- RNN! This week, the "OrTron 2500" contains highlights of the "travesty" that was the **Kru/Evolution** main event. **Orton** vows that in tonight's title match, things will change. That's good. He also says that **Michael Shane** will beat **Konnor** to keep the Kru out of the Rumble. His guest tonight: **Ivory**, who explains that **Trish Stratus** is jealous of her title reign. With **Molly** not interested and **Lita** not fit to wrestle (aw crap, they ARE

continuing that!), it leaves her with a shortage of challengers. She promises, however, that Trish can have ONE MORE CHANCE if her team wins tonight. No embellishment. Trish, of course, objects to the stipulation and WE HAVE A CATFIGHT! Orton tries to separate them (well, it's heel heat), and Trish kicks Ivory onto and through the barstool. Good heat segment.

- **Road Dogg** and **Ron Killings** watch backstage and play up their title shot. They also wish **Konnan** good luck on their behalf.

- **Michael Shane** v. **Konnan**. As a reminder for the five of you who tuned in late, if Konnan wins, all of **3 Live Kru** enters the Rumble. Shane dropkicks Konnan to start, and they head outside, where Shane slams Konnan's head into the announce table. Back in, Shane gets two. A suplex sets Konnan up for a kneedrop, and then Shane works off of an armbar. Konnan leverages him for two, but Shane flips Konnan over and nails a rana, then a baseball slide on the way out. Konnan ducks a crossbody, and Shane SPLATS on the ground. In the ring, Konnan gets a carpetmuncher for two. Tequila Sunrise, but Shane makes the ropes. Shane flips out of a slam attempt, then German suplexes Konnan for two. Shane goes up top, but the Picture Perfect Elbow misses, and Konnan gets the rolling clothesline and modified Gory Special (called the 187 by **Page**) for the pin at 7:42. Hey kids, Michael Shane just carried his first match! **1/2

- Hey, **Jerry Lawler** is at ringside! **Booker T** brushes off an interview with the **Coach** to talk to him. And really, wouldn't we all? Booker and Lawler reminisce about old times and stuff, but **Kane** attacks. The announcers point out that Lawler helped train Kane. But wait, isn't he a psychopathic pyromaniacal quasi-undead brother of... oh, screw it. I'll let it go just once. Anyway, looks like we have ourselves a main event.

- Non-title: **Christian** v. **Chris Benoit**. Benoit goes medieval to start, hitting the rolling Germans one minute in after solid CANADIAN VIOLENCE~! Christian flips out of the third, then gets a wheelbarrow suplex for one. Christian comes back with the CHOPPING and sends Benoit into the corner, then hits the move called "Rear Naked Stretch" in the videogames for two. Christian gets a lariat and a suplex for two. Benoit punches Christian right in the face to cue the comeback, then tosses him and hits a tope suicida. Back in the ring, the swandive gets two. Benoit goes for the Crossface, but Christian scrambles to the ropes and checks his reflection in the title belt. Funny stuff. Benoit brings him in the hard way, then drops some elbows. Christian blocks the Crossface again, then elbows out of a headlock. Unprettier is blocked, and a double clothesline leads to a double KO. **Chavo Guerrero** then hits the ring and unloads on Christian for the DQ at 8:14. They were just getting into a groove, too. **3/4 Chavo and Christian brawl to the back as we go to commercial.

- During the Break, **Christian** tossed **Chavo** into a set of boxes backstage (cardboard can be abrasive, you know -- sorry had a **Schiavone** moment), then DDTs him on the concrete. He cuts a promo about how the title means everything to him (another one of those, I see) and how he'll defeat Chavo to prove he's the best man on RAW. Nothing we haven't heard a million times.

- Dream Partners Match: **Triple H** and **Ivory** v. **Shawn Michaels** and **Trish Stratus**. Ivory's got some weird dreams. Men and women pair off to start, and Ivory whips Trish into a Hunter clothesline, drawing him INSTANT heel heat. Nice to see you work on your heel tactics, Hunter. Well, it is Memphis... anyway, Ivory goes to work on Trish and those two have a matchlet. Ivory with a suplex for two. Trish gets a handstand rana for two. HHH powerslams Trish, and Ivory gets two. Ivory with the carpetmuncher for two before Michaels saves. Michaels saves... there's a joke in there somewhere. Discuss. Trish bounces off into a rana on Ivory, and the men come in. This counts as a hot tag, I guess, because Michaels goes to town on HHH. HBK with a slam and elbowdrop, but Ivory distracts the ref. HHH gets KICK WHAM, but Michaels backdrops him out of the PEDIGREE. **Michael Shane** re-appears and dives off the top, but HHH eats the crossbody. Hunter yells at Shane, then turns around into a Superkick for the pin at 10:44. HBK may be in touch with Jesus, but he's not a miracle worker. *3/4 **Evolution** do a massive beat-down of HBK after the match, but Trish has her title shot.

- HBK throws out his mystery challenge again. He says there's one man he regrets he's never met, and he wants to meet him at WrestleMania. He demands an answer by the Rumble. HBK v. **Rock** would be pretty cool, actually, and all indications are that's where this is headed. No one on the internet seems to have any idea of anyone being signed recently, and with all the big names headed to the rumoured Showcase match, Rocky's really the only big player left. I'm sure he'd do it, too. Heck, HBK/Rocky would be a draw. But I digress.

- World Tag Team Titles: **Randy Orton** and **Batista** v. **3 Live Kru**. Orton and **Road Dogg** start, with Dogg getting the funky punches to floor Orton. **Killings** adds a dropkick and bodypress, then sends Orton outside for a brawl. Orton reverses the throw into the STEEL steps and Killings plays Ricky Morton. Batista enters and powerslams Killings for two. MAIN EVENT SPINEBUSTER gets two as the announcers note all four men are confirmed entrants in the Rumble. Orton enters with Play of the Day and the Owen Kick. Indian Deathlock, but Dogg bulldogs Orton to break. Batista picks Killings up leg-first and dumps him over the top, then throws him back in. That's impressive. Orton with the figure-four (WHOO), but Killings reverses to break. Orton clips Killings to stop the hot tag, then works the leg some more with Batista's help. Miscommunication leads to a double clothesline, and it's a hot tag for Road Dogg. Both men go flying off of clotheslines, but the ref is bumped. Orton comes in with the title belt, decking Killings, but the ref is still out. Dogg grabs Orton and hits a piledriver, then throws Killings on top. Twenty seconds later -- and trust me, in Memphis a piledriver CAN knock you out for twenty seconds -- the ref comes to and counts three at 9:02. BUT WAIT! **Eric Bischoff**, official buddy with **Evolution**, enters and declares that the piledriver has been illegal in the WWE for going on three years now, so the faces are DQed and the title stays. Dusty Finish, but an acceptable one. Match was okay, with the heat really adding to it. **1/2

- An AWESOME video package recaps the **Benoit/Kane** story and prepares us for the Rumble.

- World Title: **Kane** v. **Booker T**. I think the winner is known here just based on the video from earlier, but so what? Booker dives out onto Kane to start, then tries to whip him into the steps, only to get reversed. In the ring, Kane press slams Booker into the corner, then uses a boot choke. Booker goes for a big chop, and Kane no-sells and gets a choke lift for two. Booker ducks a clothesline, then gets an inverted DDT for two. Kane powerslams Booker, then gets the JUMPING LARIAT OF DEATH for two. Booker trips Kane, then pounds the back of his head. No dice, as Kane stands up with Booker riding piggyback and falls backward for two. Kane with a sideslam for two. Shoulderbreaker, then a flapjack for two. Kane gets the goozle, but Booker slaps it aside and goes low. Axe kick sets up the spinaroonie... straight into the chokeslam for the pin at 6:58. **Benoit** runs in and gets chokeslammed as well. Then **Lawler** hops the rail and tries to attack, and HE gets chokeslammed. Kane sets off the pyro to end the show. *3/4

The Bottom Line:

Pretty much what you'd expect from a stop in Memphis, with some southern tag action and a serious heel push for the champ. No real complaints, as even Konnan the Barbarically Bad gave his working boots for this week, and the result is an episode of RAW as good as you'd expect it to be.

Until next week, BUY THE BOOK!

12:03 AM

Sylvain and I were in our hotel room, watching tapes of last week's RAW and SmackDown! to pick up pointers in tag team wrestling. As we watched, I noticed Sylvain taking notes, while I tried to ascertain who Lindsay would have been from the characteristic movements of each wrestler.

"Rene, j'étais curieux au sujet de quelque chose," Sylvain said, getting my attention. "Combien de lutteurs gais pensez-vous là êtes-vous dans le WWE?"

I didn't quite know how to respond. I knew Sylvain was one -- his friendship with Pat Patterson was pretty much universally questioned as to its nature -- but beyond that, I didn't think it wise to mention anyone else. "Autre que vous? Je ne pense pas qu'il y a n'importe qui ouvert à son sujet. Pourquoi demandez-vous? Pensez-vous là est-vous un autre homme gai autour ici?"

"Ah, parce que je pense là sont d'autres. Shannon Moore, par exemple, est probablement gai."

I was floored. "M. Moore? Queest-ce que vous a donné cette idée? Il n'est jamais montré aucun signe d'être intéressé par aucun d'entre nous. Vous ne pouvez pas être sérieux!" *Je veux dire, avez-vous raison et toutes, mais toujours, comment avez-vous su?*

"Nous pouvons le dire. Ou au moins, je peux le dire. Vous savez, je ne m'occuperais pas de voir si son calendrier social est libre. Il n'est pas facile trouvant quelqu'un quand vous êtes sur la route toute l'heure. Il est encore plus dur pour moi, vous savez. Bien, je suppose que je ne devrais pas penser trop cela."

"Naturellement, Sylvain. Vous trouverez la personne pour vous. Il y a quelqu'un pour chacun, même un lutteur professionnel Canadien-Français gai." *Maintenant, si seulement il y avait quelqu'un pour une âme morte attrapée entre le Ciel et la Terre, je serais placé. Oh bien, cela a lieu pour un autre jour.*(4)

(4) - "Rene, I was curious about something. How many gay wrestlers do you think there are in the WWE?"

"Other than you? I don't think there's anyone open about it. Why do you ask? Do you think there's another gay man around here?"

"Oh, because I think there are others. Shannon Moore, for example, is probably gay."

"Mr. Moore? Whatever gave you that idea? He's never shown any interest in any of us. You can't be serious!" *I mean, you're right and all, but still, how'd you know?*

"We can tell. Or at least, I can tell. You know, I wouldn't mind seeing if his social calendar is free. It's not easy finding someone when you're on the road all the time. It's even harder for me, you know. Well, I suppose I shouldn't think too much about it."

"Of course, Sylvain. You'll find the person for you. There's someone for everyone, even a gay French Canadian professional wrestler." *Now, if only there was someone for a dead soul caught between Heaven and Earth, I'd be set. Oh well, that's for another day.*

Tuesday, January 06, 2004, 02:55 PM
On the road to Huntsville, AL

Shawn was busy navigating some of the back roads of the South as Stefani, in her assignment as Randy Orton, and I rode along, discussing our plans and getting to know each other.

"So, Stef," I asked, "what's your story?"

"Story? What do you mean?"

"Well... how did you die? What happened to you since then? How long have you been doing this?"

"Oh, I see. Well, I'd say I've been doing this for about 15 years now. Yeah, that's about right... this year would be 15 later on. As for how I got here... well, I was part of the Bay Area's social elite. You know, the people who helped bail the city out with charity balls and such. I'm used to getting my way, so this whole thing was a bit of a shock, as you can imagine. It was October, and it was a bright afternoon. I was headed to the park to watch the World Series. Everyone who was anyone was gonna be there... and, well, I never got to the stadium."

"Your car crashed?"

"Not just mine. Everyone's. I was already running a little late, even by my standards. My husband and son were giving me some grief about how we'd miss the game at this rate -- and with the A's winning, it was important, because we might not get another chance. Well, at that moment, I felt the road get a little bumpy."

"Well, doesn't that happen?"

"Not when you're not moving."

I paused to think about what she just said. "N... not moving? What do you mean?"

"Come on... don't you remember?"

I thought for a few seconds. *15 years ago, World Series, A's... holy c... wow.* "Oh, I remember now! Wasn't that Series put on hold for a week or so because of a big earthquake?" Then it hit me again. "And... I guess... you were in it."

She nodded. "I was. I never stood a chance. We were under an overpass, and the thing just fell right on top of us. I never said goodbye to my family or to my friends. It just happened. Everything was gone."

"Yeah... that happens like that. It's not... it's not fair. But you know, I guess..."

"Yeah, yeah, that's life. No need to tell me, okay? I've been doing this for longer than you have. Well, you wanted to know how I got here... so how about you?"

"Hardly as dramatic. You see, I..."

Before I could begin, Michaels slammed on the brakes. The traffic had slowed to a stop, as police cars were strewn about the road. A group of detectives had gathered in the center, and cars were honking for miles behind us.

"What's wrong, Shawn?"

"I'm not sure yet... hey," he called out. "Hey, officer! What's the holdup?"

The officer walked over to talk to Shawn. "Sorry, buddy... the road's closed for a few hours while we clear up a crime scene. We got a dead body in a car behind the wheel with a bullethole in his skull."

"Damn."

"Yeah, my thoughts exactly. No sign of struggle, either. The car crashed into a guardrail, but hardly fast enough to kill the driver. He was shot out, no mistake."

A detective appeared, breathless, and approached the officer. "Hey, Sarge," he said, "take a look at this here." He produced the bullet. "This sucker was found on the passenger side. Blew right through the guy, but given its quick stop I'd say the shooter was a hundred or so feet away."

"That far? What does that mean?"

"I dunno, but we got police scanning the woods trying to find a shell casing or any indication of where it came from."

Shawn turned to us. "Wow... one shot jackpot. And from that distance... fella must've seen a deer and missed. I mean, what else could it be?"

As we spoke, a patrolman emerged from the woods by the highway, breathless. He held up a card and handed it to the detective. The detective studied it, then wiped his brow. He waved his hand in a circle, causing detectives to scatter.

"Hey, pig, what's the fucking deal," yelled a motorist ahead of us. "I got a place to go here!"

"Yeah, and we got a dead body that was just sniped, so cool it, bub," the detective yelled back.

SNIPED? Oh... my... God... As the word seemed to permeate through the line and

people got out to talk to each other and spread news of the delay, Stefani turned to me. "Wow... poor guy. Not some freak of nature or a crime of passion -- just some psycho with a scope."

"I know... that... that's..." I found myself at a loss for words, hoping that I could think of something to hide my fear. Just hearing the word sent me into a bit of a frenzy. While I tried to remain calm on the outside, my insides were churning faster than I could imagine.

"Andy?" Stefani seemed genuinely concerned. "Hey, buddy, what's wrong? Why you so scared? The dude's a hit-and-run. He ain't coming back for anyone."

"I... I know... b-b-but he's... supposed to be a DC guy... what's... what's he doing here?"

"I guess he's expanding his territory. I mean, he got someone in South Carolina just a couple weeks ago, remember?"

"Y-y-yeah... I just wish he wasn't.... wasn't here."

"Well, he is, okay? So you're just going to have to deal with it. Besides, it's not like this guy was anyone you know. It was just some poor fella." She did a double-take as I covered in my seat. "What's got you all worked up? Flashing back or something?"

"You can say that... I mean... well, I..."

Stef put her arm around me. "What's wrong, kid? You wouldn't be so freaked out if there weren't something."

"There is. R-r-remember how I was gonna tell you how I... how I died?"

"Sure, what about it?"

"I died... like he just did. The same guy, the same out-of-nowhere shot... he didn't hear a damn thing. One minute happy, the next minute dead. That's how it went."

"Wow... I'm sorry, man. I didn't... I didn't know. You gonna be all right?"

"Sure... sure I am... I'm just gonna need a while to calm my nerves."

05:48 PM

We were finally on our way again. I had spent the hours waiting trying to relieve the fear and trauma in my mind. Stef hadn't spoken a word, keeping her distance. Shawn, meanwhile, just listened to the news, hoping to hear that they caught the shooter. No such luck.

"All right, let's get out of here and into Huntsville," Shawn said as the line moved again. He took a quick exit and headed to the nearest highway, knowing he would have to deal with traffic, but not really caring if it meant safety. I took a few deep breaths. I was still feeling like a nervous wreck, and would continue to feel that way -- I figured -- until we got to Huntsville.

"Andy... you gonna make it?" Stefani looked at me. "You seem pale."

"I... I'll be fine. I just would rather keep the number of times I die as low as possible," I said, adding a forced chuckle at the end.

"I understand. Once is enough for everyone. Well, some people aren't so lucky, but that's their problem. Anyway, you were asking what I have done since I died, weren't you?"

"Yeah... like, you couldn't have been working on Jeff for that long, so how many missions have you had?"

"Let me see -- this is my 6th. So far, I'm 3 for 5 in saving people. Although I don't like my chances this time -- none of those people were possessed, and I've heard stories."

"You have?"

"Yeah... once those guys get you, you're gone."

"But... if that's so, why am I here?"

"Well, it's not strictly true that being possessed is the final straw. In fact, at least one person I know has pulled off the miracle."

"Ben?"

"Yeah, actually. I didn't ask him how he did it, but he said it nearly cost him everything -- to say nothing of Daniels."

"D-d-daniels? You mean, he..."

"Haven't you seen what Gabriel does?"

"Sure, I have, but... I mean, I just thought that once you went somewhere, you didn't go back."

"Not always. See, Ben has been through that Hell Machine before. He says he was seconds away from being taken out for good when Gabriel saved him. He knows he's lucky to be alive, but... I think the whole thing left him a little bitter." *No kidding... he was definitely not in a good mood.* "Anyway, he told me what goes on after you're rescued and revived."

"He did? Tell me."

"Well, someone who faces down a demon and defeats him gets a free ride into Heaven right then and there. But you see, Ben didn't want that."

"He didn't? Why not?"

"I asked him that too. He said he only had a few more years to go until retirement, and if he was guaranteed entry, he wanted to be able to fix things on Earth some more. So, his spot is on hold."

"Wow -- that's awesome. And what of Daniels? Is he okay?"

"Sure. He's back in his body now... a little more aware since his near-death experience, sure, but all is good. I'm sure he'll be a good man for his years."

I began to think. "Seems kinda unfair for the guy, doesn't it? I mean, didn't you say that Daniels was captured too?"

"That's what I was told. Wrong place, wrong time -- you should be able to relate to that."

"Don't remind me," I said firmly, shuddering to make my point clearer. "Let's just move on, then. So... now that Jeff's saved, I suppose you can tell me who you reported to each week."

"Ah, the intermediary. Would it shock you to learn it was Dusty himself?"

"Really. No it wouldn't actually. The guy's a good man. Got a good head on his ample body. And his son -- another good family. Too bad he never really got to know him."

"I know... he talked about that all the time. He wanted his son to do well, but he was never there. I can't imagine what it must be like to be without... your..."

She stopped. A tear seemed to form. Beneath Orton's cocky veneer, a human, regretting side came through. It was as though Orton had ceased to exist, and Stefani was

merely wearing his body as a costume.

"You miss your husband and kid, don't you?"

She nodded. "Up until a year or so ago, she was with me every step of the way. When she turned 18, she... she moved on to her own assignments. I miss her all the time. And Danny -- my husband -- I know he's out there somewhere. I just hope we can reunite some day, where it counts."

I offered my consolation to her, just as she had for me earlier. "No, no... I'll be fine. I just... I want to get it out of my system... it's always hard to talk about this... don't you miss your family?"

"I missed my old life for some time. I can't talk about losing a child, because I just don't know. But... this is my new family. Shawn's in it. You're in it. The people on SmackDown!... yeah, they're in it too. And I wanna welcome you to our family. You'll love being here. I'm sure of it."

She sniffled. "Thanks... I appreciate that."

11:54 PM
411mania.com

Hey Wids, I just got back from the event at the Civic Center. Big crowd -- nearly 10k, and I'm sure they all paid from the heat they gave. Awesome show, too.

Dark Matches:

Julio Dinero d. Some Guy -- Julio got a few TNA chants before the match. He won with a swinging rana. Decent enough match, but boring.

Johnny Jeter d. Colt Cabana -- Cabana's a Mid-South guy. Awesome match. Jeter cheated to win, hitting Colt with a belt (apparently an OVW title of some sort). Jeter makes an AWESOME heel and needs to be called up soon.

Velocity:

Zach Gowen & CM Punk d. Los Maximos -- wild match. Punk is pretty over, and I hope this leads to a contract. Gowen won with his Sharpshooter -- crowd popped huge for it.

Hardcore Holly d. Nova -- Holly got the monster pop of a lifetime being from Alabama. Crowd cheered him constantly and even when he cheated. Holly won with the Falcon Arrow.

Nunzio d. Adam Windsor -- Hey, remember when Dory Funk was praising this guy at 1wrestling? Yeah, Windsor's okay, but nothing big. Nunzio won with the jumping armarbar thing he does. No one cared.

SmackDown:

Billy Kidman d. Rob Van Dam to retain the US Title -- Holy f*cking damn! These two tore the house down in the opening match! Long match, too -- about 16 minutes. Finish came when Kidman rolled away from the 5* and went for the Unprettier. RVD pushed out, the two smacked heads HARD, and Kidman staggered into the ropes. RVD was flat on his back, and Kidman got the SSP to win -- but barely. The two shook hands afterward. Fantastic match.

Stephanie comes out. She replays the finish of the three-way from last week and says the champ won't win like that. Rhyno storms in and wants a rematch, so Stephanie gives him one.

Paul London d. Goldust -- Just painful watching poor Dust ride out his contract like this. Still put on a nice match, but London got most of the offense. He won with the Bridge -- let the man do his SSP dammit! Nova helped beat Dust down, then both men said they'd be in the Rumble.

Team Japan d. World's Greatest Tag Team by DQ to retain the WWE Tag Team Titles -- OH YEAH! This is what I'm talking about! BIG heat segment on Tajiri, lasting 10-15 by itself. Haas is awesome, yelling with the fans and doing all the little things. These guys rock. Ultimo made me feel pain from his kicks all the way up in the rafters! Finish came when everyone hit everything, then Tajiri kicked both WGTT members in the head, but Matt and Shannon ran in and beat up the champs for the DQ. Crowd booed the finish out of the building. After a commercial break (I assume) Hardy demanded Team Japan for the Rumble, and all three teams brawled again. Crowd was exhausted.

Jamie Noble d. Rey Misterio to retain the Cruiserweight title -- Crowd was dead for this match, but they gave it a good effort. Noble's just not really a Cruiserweight type -- they need someone else to have the title. Like London, maybe? Anyway, Noble won with a powerbomb.

Undertaker clears the ring! He talks about how he's the best in the WWE's history, but that he's never won the Rumble. He says he'll take care of that this year. The usual stuff, but the crowd loved it.

Brock Lesnar d. John Cena -- Cena's rap was a little flat. Brock was totally over, and he's scary-looking. He tossed Cena around all over the place. Cena hit the Throwback to start the comeback. Ref bump, and Brock uses the chain to win. Cena is not happy.

Eddie and Hogan have a tense staredown in the back. Both men claim they'll beat Angle and win the title. Crowd loves them both, and Eddie getting the rub is good.

Kurt Angle d. Rhyno by DQ to retain the WWE World Title -- crowd wasn't expecting a title change here, and so they didn't get one. Rhyno pounded on Angle a lot and screamed. HUGE "Rhyno sucks" chant went up. Angle got the Germans, then gored Rhyno!!! That draws Eddie out for the massive beatdown. Cena makes the save, and I

think the show ends here.

After the show, Angle and Cena called out Hardcore Holly again. The three of them did an AWESOME rap talking about Alabama and how cool it is. Crowd loved every minute of it. Dawn Marie came out and berated Holly about being with these guys and not attacking them. So Holly slapped her and spanked her. Crowd loved it. Everyone left, thanks for coming, blah blah.

All in all, an awesome show. Two big-time matches and a lot of fun stuff in between. I can't do the biggest pop/heat thing, but it was kinda funny that Eddie got a bigger pop than Hogan when they were together, then drew intense heel heat at the end.

Thanks for the site, Widro. Love it!
RobbieV4Life

Wednesday, January 07, 2004, 10:33 PM
Knoxville, TN

Sylvain and I were stopping here, along with some of the RAW crew, on the way to the house shows. All during the day I felt somewhat useless, because I was still panicky from the sniper incident. I didn't normally feel this strong, but this time seemed like an exception.

I'm not supposed to be such a nervous wreck. I just want to get through the day -- through the week -- and on to my next body. If only I knew why this more than anything else.

Maybe it's because I saw the victim. I saw what happens in the aftermath. I remember being scared with the rest of the state a year ago. Now I was scared by myself.

I can't imagine what that guy's family is thinking. It was just an ordinary day, and now their family member is gone. There's no way he can come back, and they're left behind. It's a shame.

It's what my family must have gone through. Do they still remember me? Do they care for me? Am I out of their mind? The schedule says we'll be back in DC in two or three weeks, so I can always find out. But it doesn't seem right. I'm scared.

Am I forgotten? I wish I knew. I wish I could see my family interact again. But they're gone forever from my life -- well, at least until we meet again in Heaven. Are they still happy? Are they healthy? How do they feel? What do they think of me?

I wish I could've said goodbye. Stefani was right there with her family all the time... they died with her. She knows she'll see them again when it's all over. She got to watch over her daughter as she grew up behind the scenes. She probably still sees her husband on a regular basis. That's one advantage of everyone being either all alive or all dead. It's something I don't get.

I just hope that, when my time comes, I'll be able to see my family. I didn't get to say goodbye. I want to be able to say hello.

Friday, January 09, 2004, 03:53 PM
Oshawa, ON

"Fichu il! Rien!" yelled Sylvain as he searched his bag of items. He frantically threw clothing out onto the locker room floor as he began to dig deeper. We all stared at him as he shouted louder and louder. Everyone looked at him as Kevin Nash came over to investigate.

"Fish oil? What, your joints bothering you, Sylvvy?"

I pulled Nash aside as everyone laughed -- except Sylvain, who legitimately looked like he was going to blow a gasket. "M. Nash," I began, uncertain what his attitude would be, "he's swearing. Rien means damn. I think he lost something."

"Oh," he said, glancing backwards over his shoulder at Sylvain -- who, by now, was literally holding his travel bag upside down and looking at it. "You're no fun, Rene. Man, I was just tryin' to lighten the guy up."

"Now's not a good time to do that. He doesn't often get in this kind of mood, and I think it would be best just to let him be."

Sylvain threw his bag down to the ground. "BAISEZ-LE TOUT!" he shouted, causing some of the Canadian members of the locker room to raise their eyebrows and noticeably flinch.

"What did that mean?" Nash asked me.

"You don't wanna know," I replied. "Baise has two meanings in French. One of them is kiss. I think he was using the other definition."

"Sounds bad," Nash commented. "I'm not that familiar with French, unless it is baising."

"I guessed as much," I said somewhat disgustedly. "Do you take anything seriously?"

"Me? Not this," he said, gesturing around him. "Are you kidding? Wrestling is a joke, man. No one cares about us. Why should I?"

"I would expect you to show a little pride in your work, sir."

Nash smiled. "Spoken like a rookie. Look at Foley, man. You think people gave a shit about him when he was bleeding buckets and putting on classics with Terry Funk and Tommy Dreamer? Hell no. You think people cared when he almost died at King of the Ring. Hell, I watched that with the boys in WCW, and we cared, but the fans on TV... they forgot in two months. You know what made him a star? Socko. He basically became a star because of a two-bit ventriloquist act that put him in the center of the biggest story they had."

I shook my head. I knew what he said made sense -- *where was Mankind going before Socko took off? He was in the I-C title ranks, as I recall. But then he was thrust into the main event at Surv... wait a second. It's more than that. It has to be.* "You simplify things, non? He had to make it work. He could not just be accepted. You give Vince too much credit, certainly."

"Yeah, maybe I do. Don't get me wrong, Foley's a good egg. He's what we all should be. Well, except in the looks department. There I set the standard. I mean, look at me. You know anyone with my kind of sex appeal?" I thought better of answering.

"Exactly. But looks aren't everything."

"Well, what is?"

"Connections. You see, we're just actors. Some of us are prima donnas and some are yes-men. Some of us are great, some of us try hard, and some of us are lucky. But what we all got in common is that our fate is in someone else's hand."

"Unless you have creative control," I reminded him, hoping to get a smile out of him. Fortunately, I succeeded.

"Yeah, but I don't anymore... I wasn't around to drug Stephanie and marry her in a Vegas shotgun wedding. But that's okay. You know, I've done enough to make people's lives hell. Funny how karma bit me in the ass with that ol' leg."

"You know, a lot of people felt that way. I still hear people who will laugh at your misfortune."

"That just bothers me. It's cruel, man. I mean, sure, I brought some of this on myself, and it's okay for them to give me shit about WCW... dude, yeah, WCW sucked at times, I admit it. But c'mon -- I coulda been confined to a wheelchair and they laugh at me over it! You don't think that hurts?"

"I know it does... it has to." I could tell this had been something he didn't feel comfortable talking about before.

"Look, people expect me to laugh these things all the way to the bank! They were laughing at me that night! My body was shot on live TV. I thought I would never wrestle again! You can't possibly know what it's like to see everything you like to do stolen from you at the last second. But you know what? Screw them. Seriously... they don't know me, and they'll never meet me, and if they tried to take me on, I'd hurt them."

"You would? M. Nash, you're an old man with a busted leg. Do you really think you could last more than five seconds in a legitimate event?"

At the sound of these words, I saw him get angry. He picked me up and, against my wishes, pinned me against the wall. "You doubt me now, kid? You doubt me?"

"No, no!"

"Good." He set me down and turned to the rest of the locker room, which was staring at us after hearing me hit the wall. "Don't worry, boys," he said. "I'm just establishing a rapport here." He turned back to me. "Listen... no one seems to think I'm anything more than a joke. Sure, I'm defensive. You would be too if you had people every day falling over and grabbing their leg for you while crying in mock pain. That was the worst moment of my career -- maybe my life. People MOCK it. Pieces of shit."

As he spoke, Sylvain approached. "Pardonnez moi, monsieur Nash, but... do you have... um... happen to know where my hat is?"

"Your beret? I haven't seen it, kid."

"Oh dear... I must have left it in the hotel! Rene! Je suis dans la merde profonde!"

"You're what?" Nash turned to me for a reply.

"He says he's in deep... um, trouble. Sylvain, do not worry. Go talk to M. Patterson... I'm sure he has one."

"Oui, oui," said Sylvain as he hastily exited. As he left, Kev called out after him.

"Get on your knees and beg if you have to -- he'll like that!"

The entire locker room groaned.

11:58 PM

On a plane bound for Halifax, NS

"Ladies and gentlemen, please return to your seats and fasten your safety belts. The Captain has informed me that a severe patch of turbulence is up ahead."

The wrestlers groaned and returned to their seats. Sylvain buckled up, then grabbed his book -- L'Etranger -- and began to read. I tried to get an early night's sleep, hoping that nothing serious would happen. This wasn't my day, though.

The plane tossed a little, which the wrestlers expected. However, eventually, the plane began to dive -- at least, it sure seemed to. I looked around to see if anyone else was feeling what I was. There were a few murmurs of confusion. Orton gulped. I leaned back and waited for the worst. Eventually, I felt the plane seemingly righting itself, but the buffeting of pockets of air continued.

Sylvain put his book down, as though he could not concentrate on fiction with reality around him. "What is wrong?"

"I don't know," I said. "I think the pilot just descended to get out of turb..."

I couldn't finish my thought, though, as a red emergency light flashed in the front of the cabin. Wrestlers commented among themselves, with most almost immediately putting things away. I saw Konnan and Killings staring bewilderedly at the light. I turned to the nearest person I could find -- coincidentally enough, Nash.

"What's going on?"

"The plane's seriously in trouble. We're gonna have to make an emergency landing -- or maybe even crash. Dammit -- of all the places to die, I'm gonna go down in Quebec!"

"Hey, watch that," Sylvain shouted. "I grew up there!"

"Guys... now isn't the time to discuss this..." I stared at the red light and hoped it would turn off. I felt the plane rock in the wind, slowly descending. I closed my eyes and gripped the armrests with all my might. I waited for the thump of the ground beneath me, and prayed it would be the wheels and not the belly.

As I sat there, I felt a slap on my shoulder. It was Nash. "Hey, buddy... Shawn said for me to give you this. He thinks you should use it."

I looked for a second as Nash handed me the Recovery lamp. I looked around. "Um, what about... uh... am I the only one?"

"Nah... Orton's supposed to get it too. He said he thought you two would get apprehensive if the plane got in trouble... which it is."

I looked around. Orton was sitting with his hands behind his head in crash position. "I understand," I finally said. As I blew into the lamp, the noise of chaos dwindled, as did my sensation of panic. I began to realize what Shawn was doing. He was making sure we didn't die twice.

"Stef? Did you make it?"

"I'm over here."

I turned to my right and saw her lying there. She was dressed in a green and gold

A's jersey and tight jeans. Blood covered her limbs as she lay there. She didn't move, except to speak. She just lay still, almost as if she were in a coffin, except with her arms at her sides.

I got up and went over to her. "Are you all right? You look like a corpse."

"I know," she said. "I should. I got crushed by a piece of freeway, you know."

"Oh yeah... so... this is how you are in the afterlife? That's pretty rough, man."

"Only during Vacation. But I just stayed here all week and rested. You'd be surprised how therapeutic it is just to lie still and talk."

"I know... I guess. You suppose the plane landed okay?"

"I'm sure it did. I've never been on one that crashed yet, and I had to be a pilot once. That wasn't fun."

"Nerve-wracking?"

"Definitely."

I seemed lost for things to say. "So... you basically can't move?"

"Not at all. I'm stuck here. It's not as bad as it sounds, but I still don't like being here more than a day at a time. I'm going to be a little antsy tomorrow."

"I can imagine. Then again, I've had to spend four or five days out of a week here before."

"You did?"

"Yeah... but then, I had a reason..."

"What was it?"

"Um... no, you wouldn't understand."

"Try me, darling."

"All right, here it goes... well... long story short, I was Nora one week and gone by Wednesday."

"Nora?"

"Yeah -- Punk's girl -- Molly."

"Ohhhhh! Oh you poor dear! You must have been terrified!"

"Completely. And to be honest, I still feel a little bad about it."

"Why?"

"I... I was in a position to stop it. I tried to get Nora to tell me what it was and couldn't. And then it happened again."

"Andy... have you talked much about this?"

"As much as I can. I see Shawn pretty regularly to speak about it."

"Andy, I'm sorry it happened. I would hug you if I could. But you gotta realize, that's what here is for. It's supposed to cleanse you."

"Yeah, and physically it did. Mentally -- no. Nothing can. I don't want it erased. It happened, it's something I did and something I have to find a way to use. I just... don't know how." I walked over near her head and sat down. "This never happened to you, did it?"

Stefani smiled. "I can't say it did. I guess I was lucky. Like I said, everything in life was pretty much mine to have. Now I'm back to square one." She smirked. "Kinda like Paul, you know?"

"Paul? Heyman?"

"No, no, Saint Paul the Apostle! You know how his life went, right?"

"Oh yeah."

"Well, that's the way it was for me. I didn't give a damn about the world before I died. I was lucky to be alive still. I had to spend a week in here just healing. Closer to two weeks, actually... but that's because I died on a Tuesday. Anyway, after that, and after I saw what lay in wait for me in Heaven and in that... that museum park... I realized I was better being an instrument to help others I never got the chance to help in person while I was alive. Maybe dying was the best thing to happen to me."

"I've heard that a few times. I certainly wonder if it was for me. I'm living more now than I did when I lived. At the very least, since getting this -- this job, I feel more capable, more powerful. It's kinda funny, because I'm still not sure what I'm doing differently."

"Me neither. I'm just trying to be a person."

"You know, maybe that's it, Stef," I said with a smile. "Maybe it's that we are in a position now where... where we know what we're supposed to do. We realize that... every little thing counts."

"Yeah, I know... it's funny. I was told an offhand comment I made three jobs and eight years ago got me to crack a 10-year-old case and get the woman to convert. I had no idea."

"Some of us never do. Maybe the best things come in the strangest packages, you know?"

"I guess so. Like this lamp here. I'm sorry, Andy, but... I was tired as Randy, and I'm still tired now. Let's talk some more tomorrow."

"Sure." As I sat down and watched her eyes close, something Nash said resonated in my mind. *"But what we all got in common is that our fate is in someone else's hand." A similar thing was expressed by Undertaker back in the beginning, wasn't it? This idea that being a wrestler means that there's a higher power who you place your trust in. It makes sense, though.*

After all, wrestling is its own universe, and its gods are those who dictate its every action -- the writers. We can hope that good things will befall our characters, and that we can steer clear of being in a bad situation, but in the end, it's not our call. Fate -- the stroke of a pen -- dictates how a wrestler does in the ring.

But in both cases, you can make your own luck. You have tools, strengths, weaknesses, abilities, reasonings -- everything to be a good wrestler, just as you can be a good person. Just as you have to talk to the bookers, and they will decide, you pray to God, and He decides. In the WWE, Vince makes the final decision. Vince plays God with the WWE every day.

Hopefully, that's the last time I compare Vince to God.

But still, a man with that power must have an ego. How can you not and still survive? So what happens when you find yourself needing to adapt to outside forces? You try to change them. If something doesn't go as you like it, you do everything in your power to fix it. After a while, it must be easy to lose your sense of perspective and reality.

And now, I have two months to get him to realize that he's not God. He needs to accept the direction set for him, without question, without complaint. This may be the hardest thing I am ever asked to do.

But if St. Paul can change, so can Vince.

Sunday, January 11, 2004, time unknown
Recovery

I hope we landed.

The same thought ran through my head over and over again. I couldn't help it. There was always a chance I'd wake up tomorrow and be out of people to be. The entire show could have self-destructed. There was no way of knowing.

Stefani was asleep -- or, at least, she had her eyes closed -- right next to me. I examined her bloody body. I began to think back to myself and how I died -- quickly and painlessly. I had no idea if she was the same. I couldn't imagine suffering.

Suffering. Having to live through the pain echoing in your entire body as you are helpless to stop it. Entering a phase where death is no longer an unpleasant end but a welcome diversion. It's terrible. Why would anyone go through that who didn't have to?

Wait -- Someone did.

Stefani began to groan. I rolled over to face her as she blinked her eyes repeatedly while trying to return to consciousness. "Sleep well?" I asked as she took a deep breath.

"Yeah, I think so," she said. "It's nice to be asleep for me, actually. Better than being here. I get to be as I was... free to move and free to enjoy life."

Something sounded odd about that. "Enjoy life? Don't you enjoy it every day?"

"I enjoy being able to move around. I enjoy being able to live as a human being. I don't enjoy having to do it as someone else. I don't enjoy always putting on a fake face and handling someone else's problems. Even after 15 years, I look forward to Heaven. It's when I'm me."

My heart sank from her words. "I'm sorry to hear that. I'm sorry that you feel that way. Maybe it's because I haven't been doing this that long, and the memory of death is in my mind still, but... but I love being given a second chance. I love that my time isn't over. I can still write a legacy."

"Hey... that's all right, but... it's not enough. It's not the same. As far as everyone's concerned, I am through. 1959-1989. That's it. That's all... like you. Your days are over. Why don't you get bothered by that?"

"You wanna know why not? Because my days are NOT over. They won't be over until I say they're over. I lost people to Hell. I saw people who quit standing there, frozen for all eternity. I felt it creep up my body and leave me half-dead. And I worked with someone who refused Heaven and wound up being captured and destroyed. That doesn't leave me."

Stefani seemed nonplussed. "Andy, it's all for naught. Look at yourself. Apart from a stupid hole in the head, you're perfectly normal. You know what I have to go through until it's over? I have to be motionless, paralyzed. I wear the same stupid outfit, adopt the same stupid posture, and feel the same stupid detachment I have had every time for 15 years. You tell me... is that fair?"

I didn't think so. But that's how I am. I don't even know if I have a body anymore unless I'm dreaming. I can barely feel it. I sure can't move it. I want to express feelings with it. When my husband or daughter sees me next time -- if we ever work together again -- I want to be able to hug her, to kiss him, to... I can't do any of that."

I saw tears form in her eyes that she couldn't wipe away. I heard sobs come up

from a throat attached to a body she couldn't calm down. I began to feel sympathy. *It must be a strange, awful feeling, being conscious of oneself, yet unable to affect anything in the world around you.*

"Stef, I... I can't pretend to know your helplessness. I don't want to feel it. I don't want to sense it. I can only say that... well, it's the way it is. I'm terrible with cheering up right now. I just don't know what to do."

"There's nothing you can do," she said. "Just pray it never happens to you."

"Couldn't Ben be sympathetic? He... he was captured, right? I'm sure he knows the feeling."

"I never talked to him about it. He said on the very first day that he wanted it to be buried in his past. That may have been what hurt him the most -- made him so difficult to get along with. I hope he hasn't ruined his shot at Heaven. All I know is... he left as soon as Jeff was saved."

"So you don't know what happened to him?"

"I assume he went to Heaven, but I don't know. Besides, it's not like I was too fond of him. I mean, I still have Danny, and I have my daughter."

"I never assumed... what brought that to mind? I mean... I didn't think you loved him or anything."

Stefani chuckled. "Oh, I've seen them come and go. So many people start having a relationship on the job. It's funny... most of them never last. Oh, sure, they think they will, but absence makes the heart go wander, kid." I winced. "Oh, hit close to home?"

"Well, yeah. I'm currently... you know... seeing someone over on SmackDown!."

She rolled her eyes -- probably the most complex emotion she could express. "Oh, don't worry bout it, kid. I mean, maybe you two will last, but... well, it's not like me and Danny did. We got something special, you know? Seven wonderful years together. You can't top that."

"Unless you complete each other."

"Pardon?" Stefani's surprised reaction surprised me. I didn't know how to break it to her, but apparently she hadn't noticed something for 15 years. Even through the glasses, it probably never occurred to her.

"You ever seen someone -- either another person or a co-worker -- who had a hole in their body? I know at least one person here does."

"A hole? You mean, like a bullethole?"

"No... a hole in the shape of a heart."

She began to think. "I've seen one or two, where the coloring changed there. And yeah, it was heart-shaped. But... what of it?"

"Well... those people are... they're linked to someone. See, how it was explained to me was that they and the other person enter Heaven together, and on earth, they stay married -- no divorce. They keep each other sane -- they make each other perfect, I guess."

"C'mon... you make it sound normal. I bet it almost never happens."

"Maybe, but it does. And as for you and Danny... I... wait, I'm saying too much." I looked away in shame. I didn't know how to tell her the next part without hurting her.

"Are you saying that we... we aren't in love? Is that what you're implying?"

"No, no! You might be. You probably are. I would bet on it. But you're... look, I don't know the full significance of it, and I don't pretend to. All I know is the people I've

talked to who've been like that have been devoted, in love, at peace -- just wonderful couples. I don't think you need it, though. It's like... like sainthood. There are millions of people in Heaven who never got the designation from some Pope."

"Okay... just checking." I could tell she didn't seem to trust me after what I said. "Andy... I... what do you think of me?"

"Of you?" I had a million thoughts. It was just a matter of figuring out what to say. "Well, you're certainly experienced. You've done a great thing with Jeff. You seem willing to talk to people and enjoy company. But the truth is, I don't know you that well. You're a stranger still... to some degree. Truth is... I don't know... there's something different about you."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean... how'd you ever get me to help you with Jeff? That shouldn't have happened. We should've never interacted. All those other people -- they should've been separate from your group. It was a two-person job, not twelve! So how did you manage to do it?"

She smiled. "Well, I just asked for help. I knew something big was happening, and I asked God to provide backup. I never knew he'd come through. He... well, He's ignored me before along those lines. Besides, it wasn't like you all did any progress. At least, not like Ben did. His was the deciding factor."

"It was? Who was he?"

"B.P.," she said matter-of-factly. "You know, the towelboy? He was really pissed about being a lackey, too. But he made the final impact. I could tell. His words resonated the most." She chuckled to herself. "Strange, isn't it? Sometimes, the last man you expect makes the biggest impact."

"The mouse roars," I added.

"The last is first," she said correcting me. "But enough philosophy. I'm bored."

"So what do we do? You can't exactly do anything other than talk."

"I know... but I'd like to rest. Actually, more to the point, I'd like to get out of this outfit. I've never been in Recovery with someone else... could you help me?"

I had to think about what was just said. "Could I what?"

"Oh, it's nothing... I just feel kinda constricted. My daughter always talked about being able to run around in her underwear -- four-year-olds are so funny," she said. "But I... I guess it would be nice."

"But I... you're asking the wrong guy."

"Oh, come on, Andy, I'm not saying you should do me, I just want to get out of this dirty, bloody outfit! Is that so bad?"

"Well... tomorrow... you'll go back to work without..."

"Tomorrow I'll be in someone else's clothing, remember?"

I gulped. "You sure you want me to... I mean, me..."

"Andy, if I could, I would've done it by now. You're not scared of anything, are you?" She paused, then seemed to realize what I was thinking. "Oh... your girl. I see. This is more personal, I guess. Oh well... I guess I can wait. I just feel so..."

"I know what you mean," I said. "You're basically an invalid. You can't do anything on your own. I'm sorry. But you have to think about who you ask to do what. However, let me try something else." I bent down and lifted her up, setting her in a seated position against the wall of the room. "How's that?"

"Hey, this is fun," she said. I turned her head from side to side to show her the whole place. "Wow, I've never seen so much before. This is cool."

"See? Freedom comes in many forms," I said with a wink. "Now, you still want to get out of that outfit?"

She smiled as she began to close her eyes. "I think I can wait another few years."

I sat back and began to ponder everything we talked about. Her comment about people being in relationships all the time stuck with me. I knew I had to talk about it soon. I wondered if I'd ever get the chance as my eyes began to get heavy.

I was dreaming.

I walked to the center of the Tunnel, wondering why I was called here. Usually, this didn't happen unless there was a purpose. I waited for my purpose as I stared into the distance -- by SmackDown!'s entrance to the Tunnel. Soon, it became clear.

Lindsay emerged from the other side. She saw me and walked up to me. We hugged for a long time without either of us saying a word. Finally, she spoke. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too."

"It's funny," she said. "I've had other people I've really liked, and after a while I forget them. But... it's been a month, and... I know we fought, and I'm sorry, but... I never realized how I felt."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean... when you kept doting on me and worrying about how I'd handle things, I thought you were just being a nice guy, or even... I thought you were trying to impress me. I didn't think that these were genuine, honest concerns. I... it was..."

"Lindsay," I said, "you don't have to convince me. I worried about you a lot. I wanted to... well, the person I'm working with can't move while in Recovery. She wanted me to help her loosen her shirt and stuff... and I couldn't do it. I refused."

She nodded. "It's funny," she said. "Owen's had to counsel me on how I feel. I told him that while you were gone I was feeling lonely -- and I've spent weeks in Recovery alone and not felt that way. I told him I... I wanted to see you again, and he said maybe you'd be here. I've... I don't know what to say."

As we kissed, Stefani's words bounced into my mind. I pulled away slowly. "Lindsay," I said, "I don't know what we mean to each other. I mean, I'm sure people hook up all the time. But... right now I think we might be right. I just wish we weren't separated like this."

"I do too," she said. "But... but we have to pull through. Maybe soon, we'll be able to get to see each other again. I want to. I love you. I love you more than I've loved anyone else. Andy, I... I keep thinking of you when I'm with other guys as a Diva, or when I'm seeing someone's wife back at home. I wished you were Phil when I was Nora. It... it's so strange."

"But... Lindsay, it's... when this is over, we'll move on. We'll have other people."

"No, don't say that, Andy. I'm sorry I ever told you you were doting over me. It's driven me crazy. I can't stand being away from you. I want us to be together. I'm sorry."

"Thank you." We gave each other one last kiss for the next three minutes before

returning to our separate lives, though not before exchanging one last glance as if to say, *I'll never forget you.*

Monday, January 12, 2004, 08:37 AM
New York City

I woke up with a start as "Sexy Boy" played. I looked around quickly to see what was going on. I must've been heard, because soon afterward, the music faded out. I thought someone had turned down the volume, but instead, the screeching tires of Razor Ramon's old theme started up. I tried to bury my head in the pillow to make it go away.

After a few minutes, I heard an unmistakable voice calling out to no one. "Oh yeah, baby, the HBK is back in NYC. C'mon, Mikey, get up!"

I rolled over slowly. "Shawn, please, gimme some time to adjust."

"Adjust? What's with ya, man? Aren't ya thrilled to be in the Big Apple?"

"It's not that... it's that I... well, put some glasses on."

He nodded his head, then put the glasses on. "Ah, I get it," he said with a smile, "Well, Andster, prepare to be the Next Showstoppah this week! And don't worry, kid -- I'll teach ya how to walk the walk and talk the talk."

"Are you always this perky in the morning?"

"Generally."

"Great." I rolled back over in bed, now knowing I was in for a fun week as Michael Shane.

TWENTY-FOURTH WEEK

Monday, January 12, 2004, 02:56 PM
New York City

"Let's go, boys, let's go." Eric Bischoff seemed more businesslike today than usual. We all attributed it to his being in Madison Square Garden, but something else was slightly amiss. It was as though he had a lot on his mind as he dropped off the schedule of events for the day.

I went to Shawn as he came back from reading the list. He seemed to be shaking his head a little. I could tell something was on his mind, but I wasn't sure what it was.

"Uncle Shawn? You seem upset."

"I am," he said. "I was afraid that he'd... well, it's not important. I mean, it's just wrestling."

"Talk to me, Uncle. I wanna know what it is."

"Oh, it's... they're doing a face turn tonight. I'm not sure it's the smartest one in the world to do, either."

"What are you talking about?"

Shawn simply pointed me in the direction of the list. I walked over apprehensively, hoping it wasn't something I would regret. Right on the top, I saw the item. It made my stomach turn just thinking about it. I ran off to find Eric.

The writers were sitting around and trying to think of new ways to present the ideas for tonight's show. Gerwitz in particular was excited about the goings-on at MSG, because "something big was always happening -- people expected it". While I couldn't help but agree with him, I thought something was wrong with what they were expecting this time.

"Mr. Bischoff, can I speak to you for a second?"

"Sure, Michael," Eric replied. He strolled out of the room, his usual swagger amplified by his trademark Cheshire cat grin. "What's up?"

"The big thing going on... with Hunter... you sure it's a smart idea? I mean, it leaves us without a real star right now."

"Michael... you have me. I'm your big star. I'm the mouthpiece. I'm the guy who gets you where you belong. Don't panic... soon you're going to be the mouthpiece and the leader of the group. When the time is right and the public is ready, I'll step aside and let you handle the reins. Trust me."

"But it's... I don't know... Uncle Shawn seems worried about something else."

"Well, he can tell me about it. He's a big boy. Now, Michael, don't you worry about this. Heck, if you looked down, you'd see we had it all covered. So just relax and let the flow come to you. You play a big part tonight yourself."

His words, his smile, and his pat on the back reassured me that whatever concern Michael Shane may have had was unnecessary. However, it was the concern Shawn Michaels voiced that made me wonder if something beyond what Eric could see was afoot.

After all, Bischoff isn't exactly known for long-term planning.

09:03 PM

As the fireworks from the opening shot off and the stage around me cooled, I looked into the ring from behind the curtain where a nervous Randy Orton waited for his cue. Behind me were Eric, Batista, and HHH -- all of us about to perform the angle that would either sink or float wrestling on RAW. I had no idea why it was happening, but I knew it had to happen. Orton began.

"Welcome, everyone, to a super-special Madison Square Garden edition of RNN. As you can see, the place is set and ready, with extra chairs tonight. That's because we have very -- and I do mean VERY -- special guests. You see, rather than taint the show with the presence of someone unhealthy like a 3 Live Kru or even a Booker T, it is my decision to have only the finest appear. So without further ado, I present to you the group that will change wrestling as we know it -- Evolution!"

Motorhead's Evolution theme played as all of us walked out together. HHH headed to the apron as Eric Bischoff stood beneath us, flashing all 32 teeth at once or at least trying to. I climbed to the top rope as Batista stood in the background. HHH entered the ring, with Bischoff not far behind. We all waited for Orton to continue.

"Look around you, gentlemen. Look at the twenty thousand people. Remember this moment, for you won't see it again until two months' hence at WrestleMania. However, when that time rolls around, you will see the greatest men standing right here, showing you the clear path to the future of RAW and of the WWE. You have Michael Shane, who lives, breathes, and most likely bleeds wrestling. You have Batista and myself, the current tag team champions and stars of our own opening news show right here on RAW. And the mastermind behind it all -- the greatest thinker there has ever been -- a man who for two years was the invincible force that drove sports entertainment to its very pinnacle -- Eric Bischoff, guiding our path to..."

Naturally, Orton didn't get much further. As soon as Bischoff was mentioned as the leader, HHH turned his head and faced Orton. He grabbed the microphone out of Orton's hand and began to stand close to him. "Did I hear you correctly?" Hunter spoke with fire in each word, even going so far as to drop the gratuitous "uh" syllable to indicate how serious he was. "Did you say Eric Bischoff was the leader of Evolution? I created Evolution, dammit! I gave you a place of honor! You will consider me the leader!"

Orton slowly got the microphone back from HHH. He composed himself, then stared directly into Hunter's eyes. "Are these the actions of a leader? Direct your attention to the OrTron 2650 and see what kind of leader you really are."

Footage from two weeks ago played of Triple H interfering in the main event against Road Dogg and Ron Killings, but with his interference backfiring. That match led to 3 Live Kru getting a title shot last week. It also showed last week's match with Shawn Michaels, where HHH lost. As the footage showed, the crowd began to buzz a little, sensing perhaps where this was going. The mic found its way to me during the video footage. I smiled and looked at the greedy man who would be king. It was my turn to rip him apart.

"You see, Hunter -- I can't even call you the name you want to be called -- you

made two big mistakes. And those mistakes led to title shots for other people. You're supposed to be getting us title shots! You went and announced your entry in the Royal Rumble a week before the rest of us -- we had a deal to go in all at once! But you had to be the spotlight! You had to be the star! You had to flex your muscles and be the big man! Evolution is supposed to be about all of us working together to build the future! Do you remember that speech? Do you?"

"You watch it, punk! I let you into this group after you passed the test. You helped me, I helped you. That's teamwork. Now all of you seem to be thinking that teamwork leads to success. No! Success leads to success! I am a success at levels none of you can even imagine! And for you to question my leadership... have you all lost your minds? I've done more around here than..."

He couldn't get any more out, because Eric Bischoff cut him off. "Triple H... you've made a big mistake. You see, under your so-called leadership, you won the World Title, but we have gone nowhere. I entered this group for Survivor Series because you agree to take out a common foe. What I saw was someone going soft. Apparently you feel you've got it made. You think you own this joint. Well, I got news for you, buddy... if you're so certain you're the man around here, show it... on your own."

With that, Batista kicked HHH in the gut and landed his Sit-Out Powerbomb on him. I scrambled to the top rope and positioned my hands like Kevin Nash did, framing HHH in my sights. I then dove off for the Picture Perfect Elbow, landing it in HHH's heart. The crowd seemed confused as to who to cheer for until they burst into a huge ovation. We continued stomping HHH, unaware that the ovation was for Shawn Michaels and Booker T entering the ring.

I celebrated, only to turn around into a series of rights from Booker T. Michaels double-clotheslined Orton and Batista as Bischoff dove for cover. I was sent off the ropes and nailed with a superkick on the dead run by "my" uncle. I lay flat in the ring as HHH got up and saw me. He picked me up, ready to deliver the Pedigree, when Orton and Batista mounted a counterattack, sending Booker out with a Conchairto and hitting HHH in the back. I slowly pulled myself to my feet as both sides brawled. Eventually, Bischoff gave the signal, and we all headed to the back.

"Hey, Evolution," shouted Michaels, getting everyone's attention. "Yeah, Three Stooges, I'm talking to you. It looks like you think you can beat HHH -- like you're better than he is. Well, I got a proposition, boys. How about you see if you can beat him with fair odds? Look in this ring here and tell me if you want to continue the fair fight!"

We turned to Eric and nodded. "All right, Shawn," shouted Eric. "You got your match. I'd normally save something like this for the Rumble, but since you guys will get your hands on each other then, too, now's as good a time as any. So get ready, HBK, because tonight, In That Very Ring, you, Booker T, and that selfish worthless Triple H will face the future of this industry, EVOLUTION! And Shawn, the future will be here sooner than you think."

10:49 PM

Evolution's theme played again as we entered the ring to a chorus of boos. Eric

Bischoff led the way, smiling like a thief in the night. I followed him, with Orton and Batista guarding my back. As we got into the ring, Orton and Batista posed with the tag belts on each corner, while I bounced on the middle rope and taunted the crowd. We all waited for our opposition.

"Can you dig it, sucka?" *Oh, yes I can.* Booker T emerged from backstage, staring at his hand at the entranceway. He set off his pyro, then walked to the ring as the flames climbed by the entrance. He waited at the entranceway for the next person to come out.

"Sexy Boy" played as the crowd climbed to their feet. Shawn Michaels emerged, dancing and prancing around the stage, proclaiming his greatness to anyone who would listen. He marched down to the ring and danced a second time as pyro went off for him onstage. I didn't wait any longer. I dove over the top rope and onto both men, as the tag champs backed me up. We pounded on Michaels and Booker and hoped to capitalize on our advantage before HHH arrived.

Too late, though. "The Game" started up and HHH ran to the ring. I dove for cover as Hunter cleaned house on Orton. Booker sent Batista over the top rope right next to me and followed him out. We controlled with a 2-on-1 until Michaels dove off the top turnbuckle onto the pile. This left Orton and HHH in the ring, and HHH was ready to finish the match early. Thankfully, I snuck into the ring and clipped Hunter before the Pedigree could do damage.

I was escorted to my corner by the referee, allowing Batista to hit a spinebuster on HHH to further the advantage we had. I jawed some with the crowd as Orton began to work on HHH's leg -- *hopefully, JR remembers the torn quad.* After a while, Eric called me into the corner to discuss strategy. As we huddled, Orton tagged in Batista, and the tag champs went to work with a double-team neckbreaker.

I returned to my corner slowly as Orton joined me. Batista slammed HHH hard and covered for two. He punched away at HHH, then tossed him roughly into the turnbuckle, charging in with a clothesline. He watched HHH fall flat on his face, then tagged me in. I immediately pounded away on Hunter's leg, then grabbed him and slid out of the ring towards the post. As the referee admonished me to stop, I wrapped his leg around the post and put my legs over his, bending backwards. HHH screamed in pain from the ringpost figure four while the ref counted, then pried me off. I jawed with him before returning to the ring and bringing in Orton.

Orton cockily stared at HHH, then grabbed his leg and threw it to the mat. HHH screamed in pain as Orton taunted him some more. He picked HHH up and bounced off the ropes, ready to land a dropkick to Hunter's knee. Somehow, HHH lifted his leg in time, causing Orton to fall flat on his face. Hunter then dropped himself onto Orton to knock the wind out of him, and the race was on. I got the tag, but so did Uncle Shawn.

Shawn began to punch me off my feet several times in a row. He added shots for Orton and Batista as well, bringing them into the match. As Batista got the ref distracted, Booker T leaped off the top and gave me a missile dropkick. Shawn went to cover, but Orton dragged him off and began slugging it out. I took advantage by cheap-shotting HHH back off the apron, but he soon returned and the melee was on.

In the chaos, I managed to escape to the top rope. Orton superkicked Michaels, and I dove off with the Picture Perfect Elbow. However, Booker T went up the same turnbuckle and landed the Houston Hangover onto my back, then stared at his hand, indicating a Spinaroonie was imminent. Orton tried to cut him off, but HHH cut HIM off

and sent the both of them over the top. Finally, Batista caught Booker right after the Spinaroonie and powerbombed him for the legitimate pinfall decision. The crowd was not happy.

As the cameras stopped rolling, Eric Bischoff smiled a million-dollar smile. HBK and I were unconscious next to each other. Booker was slowly getting to his feet, upset at the turn of events. Batista and Orton laughed and smiled at Booker and HHH, who stood with rage in his eyes. It wasn't over.

12:15 AM

"Hey, Uncle Shawn," I finally asked as we were about to turn in, "why were you so upset about tonight?"

"Oh... I don't like the idea behind turning HHH."

"But... it gives us more time in the spotlight, doesn't it?"

"Who are you kidding, kid? He's gonna toss all three of you at the Rumble probably. Or at least you -- you make good fodder. Besides, that's not what bothers me."

"What does, then?"

"It's almost WrestleMania, and faces go over at WrestleMania."

"Oh, c'mon, Uncle Shawn, is that all? So what? We have bigger things to worry about. What about Vince? We have until WrestleMania to talk him into going to church and listening. Haven't you forgotten why I'm here?"

"I'm sorry, Andy... I guess I did. I wouldn't worry, though. If Vince is meant to be saved, he'll be saved. God will find a way. We just gotta keep on trying."

"Yeah, I know... you're not really in the mood to think about his now, are you?"

"Not really, sorry." He turned off the light. "Maybe tomorrow."

Wednesday, January 14, 2004, 12:55 PM
Stamford, CT

After a long practice session for the Rumble, the WWE headed to lunch to try to regain our strength. Shawn and I were seated at a table with HHH, Randy Orton, Batista, Brian Gerwitz, and the newest addition to the RAW roster, Alexis Laree, who debuted on Monday. She seemed slightly starstruck given the circumstances.

"Wow, I just can't believe you all are so nice to me," she said, practically gushing. "I mean, most of the girls seem to take to their own table... why invite me here?"

HHH shrugged it off. "Just thought you'd like it. You know, Vince is saying you've got a future, so it's worth seeing if you can handle yourself. You know, if you have the Look."

"Well, it's awfully nice of you to try me. I must admit, having all these men going out of their way to make me feel comfortable -- why, it's a girl's dream."

"Don't worry about it, Lex. Hunter here just wants to make sure you're not better looking than Steph."

"Shawn!"

"Sorry, it had to be said."

As HHH fumed, Randy Orton stepped in to fill the gap. "So, you got any fun stories from your last few weeks out on the indy leagues?"

"Well, I just got finished doing an outstanding angle in NWATNA. They're so excited about where it'll go, even if I'm not involved. See, Raven -- you remember him, right? -- he's trying to manipulate me and all, and Lash -- LaRoux, I mean -- was just trying to be a nice guy -- okay, he was hitting on me -- and so Raven made him run the gauntlet of the Gathering and stuff. So anyway, January 7 comes around -- it's my last show and all -- and I'm the ref for a match between the two. Well, Raven's got the match won, but he keeps picking Lash up, and I'm all, Let him go already, you beat him.

But no, Raven's trying to prove a point or something, so he tells me to go to the top and hands me Lash. He wants me to add the final exclamation point on the match, you know? Show I never really cared for Lash. Only the problem is, I do care for him. I want to care for him. But the whole thing's sort of creepy, you know -- he's got almost like a hypnotic control. Anyway, I got him up there, and rather than deliver any move, I just sort of let him recover while I stand there. And when he's healthy, I lose control -- well, sort of -- and he just starts pounding on Raven, wham wham wham, ya know?

So anyway, it's a slugfest again, and it's still not perfectly clear whose side I'm on. And they're at it again, and now Lash has the pin, but he doesn't cover. He wants me to prove I'm my own person. So he asks me to kick Raven right where it hurts, you know? But I can't do that either -- I mean, Raven's still the only authority I know, my father figure. So I'm stuck between two poles, not really reacting to either one, and Raven's up again. Now the two of them are just desperate to get me to do something, but I'm the referee, and I gotta pick a winner. Crazy, isn't it?

So anyway, after a few minutes of this, the two are going at it with some leather belt. It's clear that I can make either one of them drop the belt and give the other the advantage, and really, they're both kinda looking at me. It's like a tug of war for my sensibility, right? Well, I just forget all that and seem to crumble, almost shrink up like a violet, right? And as they both put the strap down and look at me, I just roll out of the ring and walk away. Which is kinda bad since I'm the referee and all, see?

So anyway, both men get out of the ring. Lash is pleading with me to get back in, and Raven's ordering me to continue the match. But the way I tried to show it, it's just... I don't want to do something just for them, I want it for ME. And it just seemed that they both expected me to support them, not myself. So I just pushed them both aside and walked to the back, and... I dunno, the match may have continued, but I didn't care."

HHH seemed indifferent. Shawn was listening, but seemed to be anticipating, as if sure the story didn't end there. "Hang on," I piped up. "So you just leave? That's it? We don't get to know whose side you're on? You've left those two fighting over nothing?"

"No no -- it's not that bad," she added hastily. "You see, end of the show, Raven and Lash find identical notes in their hangouts, right? And they're supposed to read it at the same time -- but of course, we had to film this ahead of time to make sure it worked. But anyhow, here's what the note said: I cannot follow you. I cannot support you. Your anger has left me as a prop in your game. I am not a prop. As long as I'm here, I cannot feel human. My destiny lies elsewhere."

"Wow," Shawn finally said. "That's a gutsy move for any woman in wrestling."

"I know... so many women are cardboard cutouts nowadays. It's so frustrating. I wanna portray someone with depth, with feeling, with MEANING. But they're so hard to find nowadays. Anyway, now while those two are off blaming each other for running me out of the NWA, I get to enjoy the greener pastures of the WWE. So it's all working out for the best, I'd say."

"At least something had a happy ending," I said offhand. "Especially after the--"

I cut myself off. I began to wonder if I had any business knowing about this. Shawn gave me a sideways glance as if to tell me not to blow my cover. Alexis seemed to wince at even the thought of that night. Batista seemed flat out confused. "What happened?"

"No... I won't... Do you want to...?" I was hoping Alexis would bail me out of this one.

"All right... I might as well say. Last show I'm doing for this group in Philadelphia, and, you know, it's Philadelphia, so we got the usual You Sold Out chant. Standard fare, right? Well, not this night. You see, some asshole in the back row decides to doll it up a bit by making fun of my looks. And, you know, if you've seen me in the ring, you know I wear a lot of makeup and a lot of revealing stuff... but he was... well, it... it was kinda personal..."

Alexis seemed to want to avoid the words. Batista looked at me, as I tried to signal to him not to press further. Shawn gulped -- he wanted to help, but what could he say? He didn't "know" either. Thankfully, HHH took care of it for all of us.

"C'mon, girl, what could they say to you? It's not like they give a shit one way or the other. So you joined us. Big deal. You don't have to put up with those flunkies again. They're too poor to get into our events. Besides, what could they say that would hurt you so much? Not like you've had a past, have ya?"

Alexis shook her head, trying to look down at her lunch. "I haven't. But you see... my boyfriend worked for the Hardy Boys down in North Carolina, so... I know them pretty well. I know Matt, and I know Lita. And... well, she'd told me what had happened just a couple weeks earlier, and... you know, everything was just clouding my mind then."

"I don't understand."

Alexis buried her face in her hands, trying to hide the tears that would normally come at a time like this. I wanted to cover for her, but I first had to check with Shawn for a sign that I could. A subtle nod from my "Uncle Shawn" let me know I could try to talk.

"Hunter, do you know what Matt thought of her? Do you know how he was talking about her? Up on the Mattitude site, he was making veiled references to her that were... well, they were mean. They were crude. They were... slanderous, really. And maybe that's what happened here, that she heard the same thing and... and it hit a nerve."

HHH laughed. "Oh, come on, you're not saying that you took something like being called a slut personally, are ya, Laree? Please! I hear that all the time! My wife gets it all the time, and she doesn't care! Don't be so insensitive. Unless, of course, you have something to hide..."

Alexis wound up her hand to slap HHH, but he caught her wrist and wouldn't let go. As she struggled to get free, he kissed her right on the lips, then let her go smiling as we all sat in shock. Alexis threw her chair halfway down the cafeteria, making such a loud clatter that everyone stopped to look at her -- and at us.

"You insensitive fucking prick! Just because you think it's ok doesn't make it ok for everyone! You wanna show me that you feel like cheering me up, you... you treat me with respect! It hurt me, and it hurt Amy! Now you laugh at me! You little bastard! How the fuck did you ever get to marry her?"

HHH was too shocked to reply -- we all were -- as Alexis stormed out of the cafeteria, leaving her lunch tray behind. We all watched silently as she slammed the door behind her. Slowly, Nora got up and walked after her. The rest of us waited for some invisible, inaudible clue indicating that the din of the cafeteria would return.

When it did, we all glared at HHH. "What?" He said, oblivious to the gravity of the situation. "The freak overreacted. Is it suddenly my fault? Besides, I was tryin' to calm her down. Deep down, she's just trying to make a name for herself her first time through here."

"Why you little son of--"

Shawn physically restrained me from lunging over at HHH. He had to know how I felt -- *her pain is my pain, and I saw how he felt about it; I want him to feel our pain* -- but he also was HHH's friend. I sat back and bit my lip as Shawn spoke on my behalf.

"Honestly, Hunter, forcing your lips on a woman -- that's just not cool. That's the sort of shit that gets you arrested. You realize she could take your whole family to the cleaners for sexual harassment? You're a McMahan now, Hunter. Don't you forget, that means everything you do reflects on everyone in this company. Now, cut out the playboy shit and be a man."

After a few long minutes, I got up and cleared my place, then headed back to the gym. Along the way, I saw Gail and Nora consoling Alexis. I sat down beside the girls, hoping to add a few extra words of encouragement. However, Gail's motions behind Alexis's back made it clear: this was girl time, and I was to keep on walking.

04:44 PM

"Michael?" Alexis had come up behind me, her makeup adjusted, her eyes slightly redder, but all in all in better shape than before. I smiled as I saw her and hugged her quickly, so that she would know I was on her side. She patted me on the back as she returned the hug. "Thank you."

"Any time," I said. "Look, I don't know what's wrong with HHH, but... he's not representative of the kind of people in the WWE, I want you to know."

"Thanks... I'm sure he isn't. He's just -- such a bastard. I don't know how he got as far as he did."

"I don't either." *Well, yes, I do -- I've looked deep into his soul, and trust me, girl, it's not pleasant. Deep within his heart lies only a passion for more. More money, more power, more fame -- more everything. But I can't tell you I've seen this. I can only speculate about my uncle's best friend.* "It's odd, though. Ever since he married Stephanie, he's been pulling more of this crap. I think he figures himself invincible."

"I hope not," she said with a shudder. "That bastard needs a kick in the nuts, and I'm just the girl to do it."

"Easy, girl, easy -- it's not as simple as it sounds. Hunter's a ruthless individual.

You do anything, and he pays it back ten times over. Why do you think I'm always by Uncle Shawn's side? Cuz we're family, sure, but he's my guide. He knows what Hunter lets go and what he holds onto."

"He's like an anti-angel."

"A what?"

"Oh, sorry, Michael. It's like he avenges people's wrongdoings, but instead of these wrongdoings being against humanity, it's against him and him alone. Like he IS humanity -- the only humanity that matters."

I rolled my eyes. "It's a shame... you'd think that with all the stuff he gets in the WWE, he'd be happy. He's the heir to the fortune -- well, through Stephanie anyhow. So he's just got it all coming to him eventually. There's no need to go grab it. And yet, he does."

"Some people -- Jeff Jarrett used to be like that."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah... he was always about defeating Vince and about being the champion of wrestling and all that crap -- oh, trust me, he was bad. But over Christmas, he announced he had seen the new light. From what little I saw, I think he has. He's certainly a lot easier to get along with."

"That's awesome."

"I think it is, anyway. Always nice to see little Christmas miracles. It's kinda weird they don't come during other times of the year, though, don't you think?"

I smiled, thinking of Nora's rescue and of my own love. "Well, it depends on what a miracle is," I said. "For some, just living is a miracle. For others, it's a series of simple, explainable, human events that combine in just the right way to produce a complete change in their life. It varies from person to person."

"Well, what's your definition of a miracle?"

"Mine? Life after death. The idea that there's a Heaven and a Hell, and that everyone goes one place or the other to spend their immortality."

She laughed. "You're so silly and sweet. I like that. I think I'll get used to being here."

12:33 AM

"God... God, can You hear me? It's Andy.

I... this last weekend, I was alone in that dream place. And... well, I got to see Lindsay again. We both kinda realized that -- well, forget what anyone else says about what love or affection or a relationship is. I've never felt this way about anyone before. I wish I could... I want to... I wish I was alive, God.

You see, if we were alive, then... then we could be married, and we could pledge our lives to each other. We do that now, and... and it's kind of an empty promise, You know? So... well, I know You can't restore my body or my life or anything, so I guess what I'd like is...

Well, if You could arrange a way for us to be together. I wanna go to SmackDown! I want to leave here to be with her. I know you can arrange it next week,

God. Just allow things to fall into place. I'll be at SmackDown!, and I'll be with her, and we'll both be happy. It's the way it has to be, right?

I mean, I love her. So if You can arrange it, please, I beg You... let me be with her. Let me be on SmackDown!. I hope it won't spoil Your plan to bring Vince into Heaven.

Amen."

Thursday, January 15, 2004, 03:36 PM
Stamford, CT

I searched carefully around Titan Towers. Something told me that there was a problem, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Ever since I died, I had developed a sixth sense about these things -- as though October's heat and cold hadn't yet rubbed off on me.

As I headed up to the Tape Room on the 4th floor, Terri Runnels entered the elevator. She was headed where I was, which made things easier. She was hiding her face from me, as though trying to conceal something. I thought little of it. *After all, it's a short ride up to the fourth...*

THUD!

...well, that just made the ride a little longer. The room was dark for almost fifteen seconds before emergency lights turned on. The floor indicators were all off. I couldn't see where we were. Terri was looking up as well, more panicked. However, I couldn't help but notice the stain of a tear within her makeup.

"Well," I said, trying to start conversation, "looks like a power outage."

"Damn," Terri replied. "I didn't mean to be here more than a few minutes. This is fun." She sat down. "Well, might as well get comfortable. Sit down, kid."

I did so. "You're awfully cavalier about this," I said. "I mean, I hope the cables hold up on this thing. And does Vince or anyone else even know there's people in here?"

Terri laughed. "Don't panic. Last thing we need is for the air in here to be used up faster."

"Air... used up? You mean, this thing is sealed?"

Terri laughed. "No, silly, it isn't. See that vent up there? We'll be fine. Man, you are jumpy, aren't you, Michael?"

"A... a little."

"Don't think about it, kid. This has happened to me before. For all the money Vince makes, you'd think he'd update the elevator service in here."

"I suppose." I took a deep breath. "So what was gonna bring you up to the tape room?"

"Oh, I was just collecting some personal highlights. We're leaving soon, you know."

"We?"

"Yeah. Dustin's contract is almost up. He doesn't really want to renew it right now, and, well, I want us to spend more time together. This whole move to SmackDown was to help me stand out as an individual -- well, they say. Really, it was to keep us

apart."

"Keep you apart? Why?"

"So that they could show us how bad it would be if we didn't sign a long-term contract. It was a negotiating ploy."

"That's stupid."

"That's Vince."

I guess so. "So what'll you do? I mean, do you have enough money saved up for Dakota's future?"

Terri shook her head. "No, not yet. But Dustin will probably do a lot of indy work to make ends meet. He's always in high demand. Already, Jeff wants him to come in and do a few TNA shows."

I wondered out loud. "Is he in demand or is Goldust?"

Terri smiled. "No, he is," she said. "Remember, he's a Rhodes. We could make a killing in Florida if we wanted to. Atlanta, Texas... there's enough places to go."

"Awesome. Do you think MLW will talk to him?"

"Who?"

"It's a place I worked," I said as I began pumping Michael's brain for details. "They mainly do shows in Orlando. Got weekly TV on the Sunshine Network and everything. Talk to Terry Funk about it; he works there too. Or at least, he did when I left. Maybe he retired."

We both laughed and continued the small talk as we waited for the elevator to begin again.

- The SmarKDown! Rant for Jan. 15 / 04, Taped Jan. 13.

- From the Mohegan Sun.

- Your hosts are **Michael Cole** and **Tazz**.

- Opening match, WWE Tag Team Titles: **Team Japan** v. **Paul London** and **Nova Tajiri** and Nova start, as the announcers wonder what will happen at the Rumble if there's a switch. That pretty much guarantees there won't be, but let's pretend. Nova gets karate rushed and sent flying out, but London stops the baseball slide. **Ultimo** in, and Nova gets a DDT and tags in London. Standing moonsault gets two. London gets a dragon screw (oh, the irony) and standing legbar, but Ultimo makes the ropes. Ultimo with a drop toe hold, and the two work a headlock into a pinfall reversal sequence. Nova breaks it up, and the two do a modified Poetry in Motion (Stinger splash instead of leg lariat) to Ultimo to make him mask-in-peril. Nova with a sort-of Fameasser for two. London with a Northern Lights suplex for two. Tajiri distracts the ref, allowing the challengers to get a combination Hart Attack / DDT that you really should see to understand. It gets two for London. Nova in, and a swinging neckbreaker gets two. London misses a crossbody, hot tag Tajiri. Everyone gets kicked in the mush. Tajiri goes up top and gets a spinkick as **Mattitude** wander to ringside. Ultimo dives out onto them, leaving Tajiri alone. Nova gets the Kryptonite Crunch, London gets the London Bridge,

but Ultimo barely dives in to save. Asai DDT by Ultimo, but **Shannon Moore** distracts the ref as **Matt Hardy** climbs the ropes for a legdrop. **Paul Heyman** shoves him off as Nova uses the tag belts to reverse the pile for two. Tajiri pastes Moore with a superkick, so London hits a German on the floor on him. Nova up top, but Moore shoves him off and a huge brawl erupts at 11:54. Admittedly, a three-way dance at the Rumble would be awesome. Fun match up until the ending. ***3/4

- **Undertaker** runs into Stephanie backstage. They recap the last week, when **Eddie Guerrero** cheated to win. He demands a match with Eddie, but **Rhyno** interrupts and wants a rematch with **Angle**. Elegant but obvious solution: a tag match. We have a main event.

- **Test** v. **Ron Simmons**. Simmons pounds away to start, and a powerslam gets two. Test goes low to take over and starts pounding away in kind. They head outside, where **Dawn Marie** (remember her?) distracts the ref and Test WAFFLES Simmons with the ring bell. Good night! Back in, it gets two a few times. Test with the pumphandle slam and a tilt-a-whirl for two. Simmons gets a shoulderblock to cue the comeback. Test sends Simmons into the corner, but the Testdrive is countered into a quasi-Stunner for two for Simmons. Dawn Marie distracts Simmons to allow Test to recover, but he runs into a Spinebuster for two. Blind charge lands straight into the Big Boot for the pin at 5:49. Fun little power match. **1/4

- **Kurt Angle** and **Hulk Hogan** discuss the main event at the Rumble backstage. Angle declares that the belt means everything to him, and Hogan shows respect for the title by saying it's the same one he won all those times. Technically, he's right. Angle then becomes incensed, wondering if Hogan thinks he can win it one more time. Hogan says if he didn't, he wouldn't be going for it. Angle then holds the belt tighter than ever, saying it is his verification in the WWE. He walks off, refusing to even let Hogan look at it. Hogan seems confused. Brilliant segment, as Angle's heel turn is progressing nicely. And the bald head only adds to the Gollum-like character he's developing.

- Handicap match: **John Cena** v. **Matt Hardy** and **Shannon Moore**. Wait, John found a partner...

- Handicapped match: **John Cena** and **Zach Gowen** v. **Matt Hardy** and **Shannon Moore**. Yeah, like you weren't thinking the same thing. Cena punches down both Mattitude members and sends them to the outside, then tosses Gowen onto them. He follows as Moore throws Gowen into the STEEL post. Hardy and Cena brawl by the announcer's table as Moore works over Gowen's leg on the inside, making him the ultimate face-in-peril. And you thought **Spike Dudley** was good in that role. Hardy with a suplex and floatover for two. Mattitude gets the real Poetry in Motion (with Matt playing himself and Shannon playing **Jeff**), then point to the sky which gets a huge pop from the ladies in the audience. Sheesh, even in death he's a chick magnet. Gowen flails away at Hardy, who calmly slams him down for two. Moore goes up top and gets a moonsault for two. Hardy with the legdrop for two. Miscommunication on a double team allows Gowen to escape, hot tag Cena. Throwback on Moore gets two. Top-rope fallaway

slam (dubbed the "Remix" by **Cole**, so that's what I'll call it) gets two. Hardy breaks up the F-U, so Gowen sends him outside... where **Nova** and **Paul London** attack to get even for earlier that night. In the ring, Cena gets the F-U for real for the pin at 8:13. Hardy and Moore beat up Gowen for fun, but London and Nova save and we have a face turn. And a nice one, too. **Team Japan** enters to set up the a possible three-way next week, but Hardy motions to the back... and **A-Train** makes his less-than-anticipated return to beat up everyone. Zach jumps on his back to slow him down, and the faces eventually clean house until **World's Greatest Tag Team** run in and leave the faces laying. Match was a backdrop to set up the melee at the end, but if this is the 10-man next week to simulate the Rumble, I'm all for it. John who? **

- Winning Team Enters the Rumble: **Goldust, Billy Kidman, and Rey Misterio** v. **Hardcore Holly** and **Los Maximos**. Goldust and Holly brawl off to the back early in this one, which is good because they can't keep up with the other guys anyway. AND WE'RE OFF! **Jose** and Kidman fly at each other with stereo forearms, which sends Jose back to the ropes where Rey 619s him. **Joel** drops him off the top rope to the floor, then climbs into the ring and dives on him. Jose follows, then tosses Rey in for two. What's this near fall doing in my spotfest? Los Maximos deliver a double suplex, then Jose goes up top, only to get superplexed by Kidman. Rey with a rana on both Maximos in turn, then Kidman gets a facecrusher on Jose. Joel delivers a seated dropkick for Kidman, then Jose crossbodies Rey for two. Rey with an armdrag on Jose, but Joel javelins Rey into the post. Referee has no control over this one. Kidman German suplexes Jose, then Joel in turn. Double DDT by the Filthy Animals, then Joel gets the Hop-Up Rana for two. Jose hits the turnbuckle from a drop toehold, then Rey brings back the Bronco Buster to the back of Jose's neck while Joel gets a gutwrench suplex on Kidman. Rey dropkicks Joel's knee, allowing Kidman to go up top for a rana, caught by Joel and almost reversed to a powerbomb, except it's Kidman. Rey gets a springboard legdrop for two. Jose gets a corkscrew moonsault on Kidman for two. Kidman hits the Unprettier, but Hardcore Holly returns and nails the Falcon Arrow for two as Rey saves. Holly tries his own powerbomb on Rey for two. Kidman dives off the top with a DDT on both Maximos, getting two on both at the same time. Holly has Rey set up for a low blow, but Goldust returns and low blows Holly, then gives him Shattered Dreams. Kidman pins Holly with the Shooting Star Press at 10:04. Now THAT'S insane. ***

- **John Cena** raps about **Rhyno** backstage, but Rhyno gores him.

- **Brock Lesnar** v. **Rob Van Dam**. Crowd is desperately trying to recover from the last match, so Brock slows it down with some matwork. RVD breaks out and kicks away, then hits a monkey flip off an Irish whip for two. Brock gets mad and clotheslines RVD down, then gets a 270 German for two. Dragon suplex gets two. RVD blocks an overhead suplex by landing on his feet, then moonsaults Brock (who is landing on his back, as per usual) and stomps away. RVD gets a REVERSE monkey flip out of the corner, then hits a camel clutch (!?). Brock picks him up on his back and drops him for two. That's why Rob never does that. Brock continues the punishment by slugging Rob down, then gets a triple powerbomb for two. Rob gets the stepover enzuigiri to flatten Brock, but the five-star hits the ref on the way down. Stupid ref. Brock FLATTENS RVD with a chairshot,

then an F-5 finishes at 7:01. Match was all RVD bumping for Brock. **1/2

- **Eddie Guerrero** and **Rhyno** argue over who will win the Royal Rumble.

- Main event: **Kurt Angle** and **Undertaker** v. **Eddie Guerrero** and **Rhyno**. All four men slug it out to start, and Angle sidesteps a Gore attempt and snaps Rhyno's neck on the ropes. Eddie pounds away at Taker, but Angle drags him off and beats on him in the corner. Eddie drops Angle's neck on the bottom rope, and Rhyno straddles him for two. Rhyno with a throw suplex for two. Literally, he doesn't drop, he just tosses Angle. Eddie in with a slingshot senton for two. La Majistral gets two. Rhyno with a powerbomb for two. Eddie and Rhyno go for a Spike Piledriver, but Angle wiggles out and the heels collide. Eddie cuts off the hot tag, and Rhyno uses the CLUBBING FOREARMS OF DOOM on Angle. Eddie gets the Gory Special 2000 for two. Rhyno and Eddie hit the POWERPLEX~! for two. Rhyno with a legdrop for two. Taker is getting antsy on the apron. Eddie goes for another Frog Splash, but Taker chokeslams him to the floor instead, then throws him back in for two. Angle with a desperation DDT on Rhyno, hot tag Taker. Rhyno gets slugged out into a dragon sleeper, but Eddie breaks. Taker with the chokeslam on Eddie, but Rhyno GORES Taker out for the win at 9:41. Not bad. **1/2 Angle and Taker argue in the ring as Rhyno smiles an evil grin and Eddie yells Viva Guerrero and stuff.

The Bottom Line:

Solid wrestling all up and down the card. The Angle heel turn is progressing quite nicely, and even if it means another month of Angle/Hogan, it's worth seeing the transformation. I don't know why Goldust was in the six-man except to get him in the Rumble, and that ten-man next week is going to be a cluster and everyone knows it, but at least I'll enjoy the Rumble preview stuff.

Until next week, BUY THE BOOK!

Saturday, January 17, 2004, 08:44 PM
Madison, WI

Motorhead's Evolution theme played as the crowd exploded in a round of boos. We emerged from the back, arrogant and proud, with Eric Bischoff leading the way. Lillian Garcia announced the elimination rules, 4 on 4 match, which meant Bischoff himself would be a part of it. He didn't seem too worried, as all of us went through our entrance, then looked to the ramp so that our opponents couldn't surprise us.

The bombs whistled through the air as the fireworks headed to the stage. Bubba Ray and D-Von, carrying the usual assortment of weaponry, headed to the ring. They set the table up just outside the ring, then waited, choosing not to enter to face us. As they waited, Motorhead struck up again. This time, though it was for HHH, who got a huge ovation upon his entrance. As he took his time, I was able to think about this match.

Wow. Here I am, main eventing a house show in Wisconsin. I'm Michael Shane. I'm a young young man with a long future ahead of me, and already I'm a WWE main eventer -- at least around here. I'm in a red-hot stable, and with some awesome tag team partners. We are the future of the industry. I guess the next few weeks will determine if our future is now. Although, knowing that guy across the ring from us, we'll have to wait a year or so.

We all waited for the last bit of music to start. When none was apparent, HHH took the mic. "Hey, what gives, Eric? I thought this was 4 on 4."

"Oh, yeah... that reminds me. You know, I really should've told you this earlier. You see, we were having a little trouble finding someone for you with everyone so gosh-darn focused on the Rumble. So, really, the 4 on 4 match will only remain that way for another 30 seconds. If no one claims that last spot in 30 seconds, it's 4 on 3. Good luck, Hunter."

"You know damn well, I can't find anyone in 30 seconds!"

"Too bad." Eric grinned ear to ear as he crossed his arms. On the scoreboard, 30 seconds counted down. HHH fumed as he looked on desperately in the back. 15 seconds. The Dudleyz shrugged their shoulders, then took their place on the ring apron. 10 seconds. HHH thought of charging Evolution on his own, but I stepped up to meet him. 5 seconds. Eric laughed into the microphone. 1 second...

"STAND BACK! THERE'S A HURRICANE COMING THROUGH!"

Eric Bischoff gulped. The crowd cheered. Hurricane, who had previously teamed with the Dudleys to gain entry into the Royal Rumble, strode down the entranceway and headed to the ring. As he posed on the turnbuckle, I climbed up after him and tried for a back superplex. Hurricane landed on his head, but as I got up, HHH kicked me in the gut and prepped for the Pedigree. Thankfully, I was saved when Orton dove in off the top and tackled Hunter. I quickly tagged out to Batista as Orton was being escorted away.

Batista clubbed the back of HHH as the Dudleyz and the Hurricane watched. He taunted HHH, then tagged Orton in. The duo did a variant of the Demolition Decapitation on HHH, but D-Von broke at two. HHH fought back with a kneesmash on Orton, then brought in Hurricane. HHH climbed to the second rope as Hurricane got on his shoulders. Orton staggered to his feet, and Hurricane dove off with a crossbody, nearly getting three before Orton kicked out.

Bubba Ray Dudley tagged himself in and pounded away on Orton in the opposing team's corner. He then threw Orton into our corner, following with an avalanche before we could tag in to replace him. Bubba added a shot to me, whispering "c'mon in" as he did so. I entered, and as the referee argued with me, D-Von climbed the top rope. How the ref couldn't hear the crowd screaming -- or Orton, for that matter -- is beyond me, but it was about to be table time.

D-Von headed to the outside and slid the table into the ring. As he did so, however, Earl Hebner cut him off, trying to slide the table away. Batista used the distraction to powerbomb Bubba Ray, and Orton climbed on top. Hebner turned around and counted the pin, eliminating Bubba Ray. As Orton stood back up, though, Hurricane hit the Shining Wizard on him. D-Von then entered the ring, and D-Von and Hurricane did 3D on Orton. Hurricane covered, and Orton was gone, too. Three on three now, and it was my turn to enter.

I attacked Hurricane right off the bat, tossing him corner to corner. I charged in,

hitting him with a dropkick as I did so. Hurricane fell to the ground, and I slapped on a front facelock, pulling him to his feet. I suplexed him, then headed up top. Unfortunately, HHH shook the ropes, and I took the cue and landed seat-first on the turnbuckle, yelling as I did so. Hurricane went up to the top rope and hooked my arm, preparing for a superplex. I went with the momentum and flipped over, landing on my back and screaming in pain.

Hurricane held his arm out, signalling for a chokeslam. Unfortunately, Bischoff clotheslined him from the apron, which caused Hurricane to stumble to his back. I waited for him to get up, then planted him with a superkick. I climbed back up to the top rope, and this time, I held my hands out to frame the shot just right. I dove off, hitting the Picture Perfect Elbow. The ref counted, and I got three. D-Von charged in, but I sidestepped him and he ran off the ropes. I superkicked him, then fell on top for another three. HHH was alone against three men.

He stood in his corner as I mocked his bad leg a few times. I then tagged out to big, bad Batista, who stood opposite HHH and waited. That turned out to be a mistake, as HHH speared him down and began punching away. Batista stood up soon after, but HHH connected with a kneelift. Batista staggered off the ropes, opening the way for a spinebuster. Batista was in serious trouble against the relatively fresh HHH, as Hunter ran through all his offense with the crowd getting louder. Finally, a Pedigree put him away. As the Pedigree landed, though, I ducked outside to get a chair. On the count of three, I was on the top rope, flying through the air.

CRACK! The sound of steel upon skull reverberated throughout the arena. I landed the chair shot right on Hunter's nose, and he fell flat like a ton of bricks. Instantly, Hebner rang the bell, DQing me, but that didn't matter. Hunter was easy pickings for Bischoff. I walked to the back after smiling an evil smile. Batista was slowly getting to his feet. I helped him to the back while watching the results in the ring.

Bischoff slowly stepped through the ropes and smiled. He stood at HHH's head and acted like the Rock, even pretending to remove an elbow pad. He bounced off both sets of ropes, then did HHH's pose before landing the elbowdrop. Unfortunately, all this did was wake HHH up. The slaughter was on.

Sunday, January 18, 2004, 01:35 AM
Milwaukee, WI

I was busy watching the replay of Heat on the local satellite dish. On it, Rene Dupree had just beaten Tommy Dreamer with the help of his Resistance tag partner, Sylvain Grenier. Dreamer demanded a rematch just before the Royal Rumble, saying he would find a partner to take them both on. He dared La Res to get hardcore, and when they accepted, they called for a flagpole match -- basically making the flagpoles weapons. Dreamer gleefully accepted.

Shawn Michaels emerged from the bathroom, all ready for bed in his HBK boxer shorts. He hopped into the bed and turned off the lights. "Hey, Andy, had a fun week?"

"Fun as it could be under the circumstances," I said with a shrug.

"Whaddya mean?"

"Well, having you around all the time was kinda weird. And given how Hunter treated Alexis -- that just wasn't cool."

"Is that still bothering you? Why?"

"Because I know how she felt, Shawn. I've known it for a month and I haven't been able to tell anyone. It's been really eating away at me, you know?"

"I see... I guess I should've asked for more detail when ya first told me."

"I'm not sure it would've done any good. But to see her make an example of Hunter like that... that was awesome."

"I don't know if I'd call it awesome, but it sure was fun."

"Yeah... Shawn? How do we get through to Hunter? I mean, I was Hunter and I couldn't really change him. He may be the biggest thing working against us right now."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, he's got Vince's ear. And he's of this world -- demons like that, I figure, cuz humans are so much more prone to saying the wrong thing."

"Look, Andy -- I have Vince's ear too. So does Paul. We're doing everything we can right now. Trust me, if there's a problem, you all will be the first to know. As it stands right now, I think we have Vince's demon a little weaker personally. Like he just accepted giving Test time off after the Rumble."

I looked at him, mildly confused. "Why is that such a big deal?"

"He wanted the time off to get married. Vince wanted him on the road. Never mind that Hunter and Steph got all sorts of time away from the camera, mind you -- Vince needs to keep those midcarders in their place."

"That's stupid."

"I know it is. But that's Vince for ya. Thankfully, we all changed his mind. So, after his Heat match with Holly and the APA, he's got the time to prepare for his wedding, then the honeymoon -- I think he's not due back until WrestleMania."

"That's really nice."

"Yeah, I think so. I mean, basically we told him he wouldn't be missed cuz he's barely a midcarder, and let's face it, he could stand some time in OVW anyway. So, he'll get a few weeks off, you know? It'll all be in good fun, I'm sure. Anyway, we need to get to bed. I'll see you tomorrow, Andy."

"No," I replied, "you won't."

"Wha?" Shawn propped himself up on his left arm and looked at me. "What do you mean?"

"Well... I asked to go to SmackDown!."

"You... why?"

"I miss her."

"Ah, Lindsay. Well, I wish you the best of luck. You and she could probably stand some time together after so long away from each other. Besides, I'm sure Stefani can handle being with Owen or the new guy."

"I hope so... although I doubt I'll care much."

Shawn rolled his eyes. "You people are all alike, even after death. Well, enjoy your life, man."

"Thanks."

I dreamed. Oh, did I dream.

I stood at the RAW side of the Tunnel, ready to dash to the other end. As I walked faster and faster, I waited for a sign of someone to appear to take my place. Nothing. I stopped halfway to the other end. Still no one emerged. I began to get nervous. *Was my wish granted? Where is Owen?*

I saw a figure emerge from the other side. I couldn't make anything out at first, but then I noticed it was a female figure. *Is this the new person? What's going on?* I decided to sit and wait. Soon, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I looked up.

"Lindsay!"

"Andy!"

We hugged and kissed for a few minutes. Soon, we both were too excited to breathe. "What are you doing here?" I finally asked.

"I... well, I have great news for you, Andy!"

"You do? So do I!" I prepared to tell her the great news, only to hear the same thing I said back from her, in unison:

"I'm coming over to see you!"

We both stopped. We spent a full minute just staring at each other, not sure what this turn of events meant. Finally, she spoke up. "Wait a minute... you... were sent over there... to... oh no. Oh no... Oh how did this happen? I screwed up. I so screwed up big time."

"Wh-- what do you mean, Lindsay? We'll be together, right?"

Lindsay sat down, depressed. "No... no we won't."

"Why? We both asked to be with each other, didn't we?"

"I didn't. At least, not in those words. I asked to be sent over to RAW."

"Yeah, and I asked to be sent over to..." Then it hit me. When I prayed, I may have intended that I spend time with Lindsay, but somehow my request hadn't been specific enough. Neither had hers. Rather than ask to be with her, I asked to be on the other show. When we both did this, we were swapped for each other. "Dammit." I sat down and buried my head in my hands. "I can't believe this."

Lindsay began to laugh. "If only one of us hadn't been so eager... maybe Owen would be here, trading places."

I chuckled as well. "Or Stefani."

"Yeah," she said. "How could we have let this happen? Oh, man... God works in mysterious ways, doesn't he?"

"He sure does." Our laughter kept us from crying all over again. "So... Lindsay... now what? We're... we're stuck without each other again. What's going to happen?"

"I don't know... maybe we will spend time together soon. Maybe we won't... it's not up to me to say. I'm just sorry it happened this way."

"Yeah... me too." A tear came to my eye. "I'm gonna miss you, Lindsay."

"I'll miss you too. More than ever. Maybe some day we'll be re-united... if not here, then in Heaven. Andy, I love you. I don't want to be apart ever again."

"Me neither." We kissed again. I slowly got to my feet. "I'm sorry, Lindsay. I let you down. I guess... I guess this is goodbye again."

"Yeah..." her eyes glistened from the tears forming. "I'll see you when I can, Andy. I hope we shall come together and never part soon."

"Me too. I love you, Lindsay... goodbye."

"Goodbye." She got up and slowly, dejectedly, began the long walk to the RAW side of our dream chamber. I turned around and shuffled my feet as I headed to SmackDown!. I got my wish -- and yet, I regretted it.

Monday, January 19, 2004, 07:44 AM
Duluth, MN

The radio blasted with some 80s synth rock. I slowly rolled over to my side and hit the snooze button. I looked around. I was alone in the room -- in fact, my room was a single. *Hey, I'm a big shot today!*

I stared at the medallion next to my glasses. It showed a tiny crucifix dangling from a chain. Seeing it brought back memories of my first Communion and how I wore something like on that day. I looked around some more. A tiny teddy bear sat in the corner of the room, with a yellow jersey on which lettering once stood. A blinking red light by the phone got my attention. I pressed a button and heard the messages.

"Hey, it's Zach. Just wanted to let you know it's a done deal. I got Jamie at the Rumble for the Cruiserweight title shot. Thanks for sticking up for me, man. I knew I could count on you. See ya tonight. Bye."

I smiled. *The guy's gonna be on the big show. Good for him.* I rolled out of bed and slowly got to my feet. Years of wear and tear seemed to scorch through my system as I stood up. I looked towards the large mirror opposite the bed, and all was explained.

I had years of wear and tear. I had ages of experience. And this week, I could be a champion, or just another old man. I was going Hollywood. I was Hulk Hogan.

TWENTY-FIFTH WEEK

Tuesday, January 20, 2004, 10:45 AM
St. Paul, MN

I slowly walked down and took my seat in the front of the auditorium. As I waited for the RAW showing to begin from the previous night, my thoughts drifted back to the house show we had run in Duluth at the same time. The main event was a face Kurt Angle against a heel Eddie Guerrero. The one thing I remembered more than any other was that the crowd seemed ready to cheer Eddie and boo Angle. When I came out to save Eddie after the match and start a three-way brawl, the crowd was cheering for all three of us. Chants of "Eddie", "Angle", and "Hogan" rang through the arena.

That was a weird reaction. I know what the plans are for the Rumble, but how well will they be received? With all the Philadelphia fans, can I even get them on my side to begin with? It all depends on them, whether this works out or not. One thing I do know is that the second part will take care of itself as long as the first part works out. But that first part...

As I thought, Kurt Angle sat down next to me. "You ready for tonight, Hulk?"

"Yeah, brother... just gotta work a few kinks out of my talk, dude. After what happened last night, I'm not sure how we're gonna be able to play this off."

"Hogan... don't get so worried. You're Hollywood Hulk Hogan. You're the biggest star of all time, you know. If we can't make this thing work around you, it'll never work. So don't worry. Tonight's going to be awesome."

"It's not just tonight, though, Kurt brother. It's the Rumble itself. Philadelphia fans are not big Hulkamaniacs, and really, I don't think they have been. I just gotta hope we can get it together, bro."

"Hulk... I was in the ECW Arena a few times in my life. It doesn't hold more than a couple thousand. There will be 20,000 in the Spectrum. We have nothing to worry about. They'll do the right thing."

"You sure, little man?"

"I'm sure, big guy."

"Well, I hope you're right."

Stephanie then yelled to get our attention. "Okay, guys, this is their last chance to impress before the Royal Rumble. I expect everyone to be thinking of ways to do better -- especially those of you in the 10-man tonight. Paul, you got everything ready?"

"I sure do," said Paul, who winked at Stephanie.

"All right, then... let's show the footage. Remember, this is what we have to beat."

- The SmarK RAW Rant for Jan. 19 / 04.

- Live from Green Bay, WI.

- Your hosts are **Jim Ross** and **Diamond Dallas Page**.

- RNN opens things up. **Randy Orton** brags about kicking **HHH** out of Evolution last week, then preps the "OrTron 2700" with footage of the IC title feud. For the record, if you don't know exactly why HHH turned face, you might as well hand in your smart card right now. Either that or you're ten times the optimist I am. Orton welcomes **Chavo Guerrero**, who enters to a great ovation. Chavo promises that **Christian** will run out of places to run at the Rumble. He may be a hit-and-run artist, but that won't fly in Philadelphia. Orton questions whether Chavo is trying to outdo Uncle **Eddie**, and before Chavo can address that, **Christian** emerges. Christian hits the Unprettier onto the belt on Chavo, then yells at him about being a wannabe. Christian says that on Sunday, he will prove he's no longer a sidekick, and that he can own the spotlight too. Awesome bit.

- Backstage, **Ivory** is polishing her belt when **Alexis Laree** emerges. They argue about the match, but Ivory crosses the line calling her a "two-bit wh--" WHACK! Laree knocks down Ivory, and rightly so. What lout wrote THAT into the script? Are they trying to make Philly hate them? Ivory wins the catfight and walks off.

- **Christopher Nowinski** and **Rodney Mack** vs. **Tommy Dreamer** (subbing for the "injured" **Rob Conway**) and **Maven**. Winners get an invite to the Rumble match, which would bring us to 26 guys. Mack and Maven start, and the haterizing begins immediately. Maven with a dropkick for two, followed by a suplex. Nowinski uses the FACIAL APPLIANCE OF DOOM as a cheapshot. Mack with a cobra clutch slam for two. Nowinski in, and a belly-to-belly gets two. Football tackle gets two. Mack returns, but the Blackout is broken up by Dreamer. Nowinski tries a clothesline, spear by Maven, hot tag Dreamer. Punching abounds. Dreamer takes a groin to the post, as per his contract, and Nowinski gets a Double Arm DDT for two. Mack up top, but Maven shoves him off into a Dreamer rollup for two. And now **La Resistance** make their presence felt, cracking Maven with the French flag for the Mack pin at 5:53. Entertaining crap. ** La Res then destroy Maven, who does the stretcher job. The announcers wonder who Dreamer will pick now as his partner for the Rumble.

- **Kane** wanders backstage, and bumps into **Chris Benoit**. They jaw about the World Title match on Sunday. Less talk, more asskicking for Benoit, dammit! How hard is this to understand? Anyway, Benoit promises that Kane's arm will be broken at the Rumble. Kane counters by saying that he burned Benoit, but now he'll destroy Benoit. Good segment, despite the bad talkers involved.

- **Big Show** v. **Kevin Nash**. Well, they can't all be winners. Nash does stuff, Show does stuff, Chokeslam finishes at 3:08. If you've seen one Nash/Giant match, you've seen this one. 1/4*

- Royal Rumble rundown:

World Title match: **Kane** v. **Chris Benoit**

I-C Title match: **Christian** v. **Chavo Guerrero**

Women's Title match: **Ivory** v. **Alexis Laree**

Royal Rumble Entrants, RAW side: **HHH, Shawn Michaels, Booker T, Michael Shane, Batista, Randy Orton, Konnan, Road Dogg, Ron Killings, Hurricane, Bubba Ray Dudley, D-Von Dudley, Christopher Nowinski, Rodney Mack, TBA**

- Christian/Chavo ought to be an awesome match if given the time, and Kane/Benoit will not suck. The Women's match is a throwaway, of course, while the Rumble is the Rumble -- even when it's bad, it's good.

- Intercontinental Title: **Christian v. Hurricane**. Now, wouldn't it be something if Hurricane won this and caused everything to be screwed up? Huge-ass brawl to start, as both men tour ringside and meet the STEEL steps. Christian gets sent into the Spanish announce table, and Hurricane dons the CAPE OF DOOM and dives onto him -- NOT breaking the table. Ouch. Back in, Hurricane chops away and gets a rana for two. Christian goes low to stop it as we take a break. We come back with Christian continuing the offensive with a DDT for two. Diamond Dust gets two. Christian hits the Rear Naked Stretch for two. STF by Christian (!), but Hurricane makes the ropes. Christian uses Eye of the Hurricane for two. Unprettier, but Hurricane shoves off and hits Shining Wizard on the rebound. Kneelift gets two. Superplex leads to a Double KO. Christian rolls over for two. Christian jumps over the top rope, slamming Hurricane's neck into it, then climbs back in with a flying elbowdrop for two. Flying clothesline is ducked, Sugar Smack gets two. Chokeslam attempt is broken up by Christian, who rolls Hurricane up for two. Hurricane and Christian collide in mid-air for another Double KO. Hurricane rolls over for two this time. Hurricane tries a suplex, but Christian reverses and we get a pinfall reversal sequence. Christian pops out of it and hits a facecrusher on Hurricane. Unprettier finally finishes at 14:51. Tougher than expected outing that got Hurricane insanely over. ****1/4 **Chavo Guerrero** emerges and chases Christian away, then raises Hurricane's hand. Time to bust Hurricane out of the midcard maybe?

- **Molly Holly** is talking to **Terri** and **Trish** backstage, which is always dangerous. Trish mentions that it's a man's world out there, and maybe Molly should stick to getting the Women's title. Molly gets indignant, but before sparks can fly (darn), Terri casually mentions that the Rumble isn't complete yet. Molly gets a fire in her eyes and cuts her best promo yet, saying that she's tired of women being seen as lesser. She wants to prove you don't have to be a musclebound freak to get respect. **Jazz** or **Chyna**, you decide. She declares she'll take the last spot in the Rumble, and she'll win it for all the women out there. I don't know if they will buy this, but more power to them.

- Alleged Main Event: **Evolution and La Resistance v. Triple H, Shawn Michaels, Molly Holly, and Dudley Boyz**. This would be the mandatory lead-in to the Rumble, I guess. A huge brawl triggers HHH's entrance. **Shane** beats on his uncle as **Orton** and **Batista** battle the Dudleyz. HHH manhandles both Frenchmen single-handedly, but gets blasted by Orton with a clothesline. Molly dives onto Batista, but Shane superkicks Molly. **Dupree** has Michaels in a figure-four as **Grenier** stomps at him, but **D-Von** breaks and preps Grenier for 3D. Batista spears **Bubba** before the move can hit, but Molly completes it anyway. Dupree grabs Molly and kisses her (poor Molly), so Molly latches the TESTICULAR CLAW~!. Orton tosses Molly over the top, but HBK

superkicks Orton. FINALLY the match starts to resemble a tag match as Batista slams HBK and everyone else clears. Batista clubs down HBK, then brings Dupree in for a double spinebuster. Prancing kneedrop gets two. Grenier in with punches and a DDT for two. Orton hits Play of the Day for two. HBK escapes the RKO, but Batista distracts the ref and the tag to D-Von is false. The tag champs use the opportunity to give HBK 3D. Orton covers for two. Shane hits a sort-of Fameasser on HBK, then a neckbreaker. Molly protests, so Grenier tries to come in, but the ref catches that and all hell breaks loose again. Dudleyz get the Wazzup on Dupree (BALLS OF STEEL~!), but D-Von table-fishing is interrupted by Batista, who powerbombs him on the floor as we take a break. We return with Grenier holding the chinlock on HBK as replays show La Crepe getting two. Batista hits the SITOUT POWERBOMB OF DEATH, but HHH saves. Shane frames the elbow, but misses. Dupree in, and he BARELY cuts off the tag. HBK is taking an utter shitkicking here. I love it. La Resistance with a double suplex and double elbowdrop for two. Grenier gets a clothesline and backbreaker for two. Orton with a figure-four for the hell of it, but Shawn kicks him off. Shane dives in with a crossbody (illegal switch) for two. Grenier returns, but Shawn backdrops out of piledriver attempt and FINALLY it's the hot tag to HHH. Frenchmen go flying left and right, and Shane takes his version of the Holy Shit bump. Orton cuts off a Pedigree attempt on Shane, and EVERYBODY INTO THE POOL as it's total BONZO GONZO! Molly gets the Molly-Go-Round on Shane, but Batista tries a powerbomb, only for D-Von to clip and get Molly a cover for two. HHH Pedigrees Grenier, then Dupree, but Orton saves both times. Molly goes for a DDT on Shane, but Orton runs in from behind and RKOs Molly to get the pin at 27:04. Not as good as other 10-man tags, but Shawn bumping for 50 is always fun. **1/4 The brawl continues after the match, with **Eric Bischoff** walking down to observe. HBK has issues with him, allowing Shane and Batista to GROIN him into the post. Sweet Shane Music knocks him down, but HHH spears him post-nip up. Miscommunication leads to D-Von and HHH coming to blows, and everybody runs in for the Rumble Preview moment. **Booker T** stands tall at the end.

The Bottom Line:

Typical pre-Rumble show, with a huge main event emphasizing how chaotic the Rumble can be. Christian/Hurricane is worth the price of admission by itself, of course, but Show/Nash was a waste of time. Rumor has it Nash is going to be put out to pasture soon, and that can only be a good thing. HHH as a face, however, worries me.

Still, LET'S GET READY TO RUMBLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLLE! Where's Michael Buffer when ya need him?

09:48 PM
Minneapolis, MN

Kurt walked out from behind the curtain, carrying the WWE Title belt with him as I watched on the monitor backstage. Jim Ross was ready to give the orders as to when

to come out. The crowd began chanting "You Suck" at Angle -- *hmmm, it sounds almost malicious now* -- as he took the mic, his WWE Title almost Velcroed to his shoulder.

"In just three days, I prepare to face the legendary Hulk Hogan at the Royal Rumble. Hulk Hogan, you have a historical presence here in the WWE. Everyone agrees that you were the pioneer of sports entertainment. But Hogan, why do you think you can still hang with the big boys? Look at you -- you're 110 years old now! Do you honestly believe you're still a star? Do you honestly imagine you can carry the load of a WWE Champion? Well, I'll admit -- maybe you can. You've done a lot in your career, and it seems you're only getting better. But you know something -- you don't have the desire that I do. Oh, it's true. It's true.

You see, Hogan, I live, breathe, eat, and sleep the WWE. This title never leaves my side. It is my family -- my life. I take this thing everywhere I go -- you can ask the other talent! I shower with this thing, I go to restaurants with this thing, I do everything. Why? Because I believe in my craft. Hulk Hogan, when Hollywood came calling, and they wanted you to make movies, you jumped at it. The title was a passport to you -- a means to an end. Hogan, this is my end. This is what I live for. My medals and my belt are the most precious things I own. They define me. And on Sunday, you will see what happens when you try to take a man's existence from him. It won't be pretty."

"Voodoo Child" struck up. The crowd went crazy as I got the cue from JR. I walked out of the back, slowly heading to the ring. I played some air guitar on the way, then approached the steps in time with Jimi Hendrix, chopping that mountain down with the edge of my hand. I stepped through the ropes, then took a second microphone from Tony Chimel. We stared down as flashbulbs went off. I spoke.

"You know something, Angle..."

I stopped. A "Hogan" chant permeated the arena. An idea entered my mind. As much as I wanted to do a Hogan promo -- as much as I wanted to show off my impression, crafted through years of being a Hulkamaniac -- I decided this wasn't the time or the place. *This is about the WWE Title. I have to be more serious.*

"Nah... Angle, I'm not gonna treat you like any other man. I'm gonna lay it out straight. And the straight story is this, dude. What you have right now is what I want. When it comes to being a champion, you know a lot -- I won't deny it. But when it comes to leading the industry, being a hero, and having millions of sports entertainment fanatics hanging on your every action, you don't know half of what ol' Hulk Hogan knows. You wanna know how I got to be here at my age? You wanna know how come I'm the oldest man to successfully defend a WWE Title? I'll tell ya, Angle. It's simple. It comes from 25 years in the business, dude. It comes from living, breathing, and exuding professional wrestling. And you see, Angle, you don't get to the top like me, then go down easy."

"Hogan... you don't understand, do you? This isn't about the title for me. Maybe it is for you -- maybe you and all the Hulkamaniacs out there would love to see that 13th World Title reign. But for me, Hogan, it's about pride. It's about my life. Weren't you listening, Hogan? Don't you get it? This title is what makes me a superstar. It's what validates me. It's what completes me. It is... my... life! And I will fight for it with every ounce I have. I would rather die right here In This Very Ring than have my shoulders to the mat for 3 seconds or be forced to tap out. It's that simple, Hogan."

Duelling chants rang throughout the arena. We both looked around. I felt goosebumps running all over my body. Chills ran through my 50-year-old spine. I felt

like a man reborn. I slowly lifted the mic to my mouth.

"Angle... you're a fighter. I understand that. I respect that. But right now, brother... you have what I want. You have what everyone in the back wants. Everyone is hoping -- praying -- that I'm the man to take it from you, dude. When the time comes, this Sunday - - well, I'll admit, you may have your fans in Philadelphia, since it's your home state. But everywhere I go, I will have my Hulkamaniacs. And what they want more than anything else is one last run at the top for ol' Hollywood Hulk Hogan."

The crowd cheered. I looked around. "Hogan" chants drowned out anything else. Then, suddenly, an "Angle" chant started. Angle slapped my forearm to get my attention. I turned and looked at him.

"In that case, they should prepare to be disappointed. You see, Hogan, you were the best at one time. But your time has past. Your time is ancient history to these fans. Half of them weren't born when you debuted. 70% of them weren't WWE fans when you first left ten years ago. Almost all of them don't remember when you won the WWE Title last. The person you beat for that first title reign -- he was last seen fighting the Gobbledygooker. You are a legend, sure, Hogan. But you're also a fossil -- a relic of another time. So Hogan, at the Royal Rumble, you will see your legacy wrapped up with a red, white, and blue bow on top. I will defeat you. I can't destroy Hulkamania... but I can keep my WWE Title. It's true. It's damn true."

We stared each other down for a full minute as the crowd continued chanting. Slowly, I raised the microphone again. "Just keep believing it, Angle. But ask yourself, whatcha gonna do, Angle... when Hulkamania -- when the Immortal -- when the ageless wonder -- runs wild all over your red, white, and blue candy ass?"

I turned to leave, but Angle grabbed my free hand. I turned to face him. He had the microphone to his mouth. "How about this?" He pulled me in and lifted me for an Angle Slam. "Medal" played as the crowd went berserk with pictures and cheers. "You Suck" rang through the ears of everyone in the back as the credits rolled.

After the credits, I slowly got up. I looked around and picked up the microphone. "Well, now that that jabroni Kurt Angle is gone, how would you like a little Hulkamania to run wild right here in Minneapolis, Minnesota?"

The crowd cheered. I shrugged and began the posing. After five minutes, I left the ring and walked to the back as Tony Chimel thanked everyone for coming. The locker room greeted me and Angle backstage with applause. I smiled. *This is gonna be one hell of a main event, isn't it?*

Friday, January 23, 2004, 04:11 PM
Philadelphia, PA

Rob Van Dam was leading a group of through some back streets in Philadelphia to a street corner where a five-and-ten-cent store stood. I looked around at the inner city and pulled my jacket closer to my body. This place seemed unwelcoming for someone like me, and doubly so for someone like Hogan.

"And over here," said Rob, trying his best to be a tour guide, "is the general store where most of our fans would stop by before the matches began. I'm tellin ya, there'd be a

whole line of people halfway down Rittner Street. All of them would wanna get their hands on cheap pots and pans, cookie sheets, wooden pallets -- just about anything the store sold. They did great business when we came through."

He led us over to the opposite corner across the street. A car honked at us as it went by. We all turned around and looked. A man leaned out of the car and yelled, "RVD!!!" The car drove on as Edge and I looked towards Rob.

"Fans," he said with a half-shrug. "They never forget. Anyway, through these doors here is the place I made history. It's the place a short bald guy who was nothing more than a WCW manager struck a goldmine. It's where guys like Raven and Tommy Dreamer became icons. Gentlemen," he said, opening the door, "welcome to the ECW Arena.

Oh, well, it's not the ECW Arena anymore, since ECW is out of business. It's called the Viking Hall, and it's where the Combat Zone guys tried to be our successor. It's hard to run a promotion out of this building and be a big-time player at the same time, just because of the money involved. And... well, as you can see, it's a small place -- I've seen high school gyms bigger than this, to be honest. But it was my home for... oh, about 7 years, so it's cool."

I looked around. It certainly was a small place -- I couldn't imagine it seating more than 2500, and then only if it broke several fire codes. I tried to imagine the ring and rampway for a WWE show in here, but I had no such luck -- the entrance couldn't fit under the ceiling. Kurt and Edge looked around in wonder.

"Wow," said Edge, "this place is almost... it IS a high school gym. I bet I could sell this out by myself."

"Nah," said RVD. "It wouldn't be that easy. You see, the people who go to this place have special tastes. They like their wrestling a little more like pit fighting, I guess I'd say. Y'know, they talk about being where all the Radicals started their career, but honestly? They were just wrestlers -- they didn't draw here either. Raven and Dreamer and Terry Funk and Cactus Jack -- those were the stars, and they were brawlers."

I absorbed the atmosphere, and as I did, a second image came to mind -- not of the WWE in the Arena, but of the old ECW boys being there. I saw the 2000 people almost literally hanging from the rafters as people like Raven and Stevie Richards stood in the ring. I imagined Tommy Dreamer walking down the aisle, holding a Singapore cane up high as the crowd chanted for him to fuck Raven up. I imagined a wild, bloody match spilling into the crowds. I looked up at a crow's nest and saw the two of them hanging by their fingertips to the railing.

"Um, Hogan?" Rob got my attention. "Something on your mind right now?"

"Well, yeah, brother. I was just imagining what kind of show and what kind of crowd you dudes would have here, man. Just thinking about the atmosphere, brother... it's the kind of place I look forward to, brother, only on a smaller scale. It must have been special."

"Yeah... it's was a wild time, man. They love the people who give their heart and soul every night. They would cheer and chant and... man, you just fed off their energy. It was like... like a high you could never duplicate. Not that I'd know, of course, but it was awesome."

"Yeah... too bad I'll never see that here, man. I mean, even if we were in the Hall, dude, you know I'd be the heel here. I'm everything these guys hate, brother."

"Well... does that bother you?"

"I dunno... I kinda hoped I'd be a star, brother. A universally loved figure. I mean, I had that, dude. I would like it back."

Rob looked me in the eyes and smiled. "Hulk, it's real simple. You are wrestling. You made it a viable career. When it's your turn to ride off into the sunset for good -- I'm tellin ya, man, they'll retire your jersey. And yeah, these guys think it's cool to hate you, but they'll miss having you to kick around. I guarantee ya, every guy who's ever gotten into wrestling owes you. I know I do -- even if I've never fought your style."

"Serious? I mean, what do you owe me, RVDude? You aren't anything like me. You made your way here doing everything the opposite of what I did. You rode the wave rather than stirring the pot. You... you took it as an exercise rather than a job. Why do you owe me?"

Rob smiled again. "Hey, I may only be Rob Van Dam, but I wouldn't be pulling down millions if you hadn't come around. I'd still be here, or in another gym somewhere, and working three other jobs just to make ends meet. Now I get to tour the world. You know, I didn't tell ya, but... Survivor Series was a career highlight for me, man."

"Whaddya mean, dude?"

"Well... I can tell my kids I teamed up with the biggest name in professional wrestling history. I dunno if you'll be known that far down the road -- I'm sure I won't -- but... that's history, man. I've worked with Austin, with the Rock, with Angle here -- but I got to be with Hogan. That's history."

"Thanks, man... it's just so weird. Can you imagine if the WWE did this place?"

RVD shook his head. "Nah... it's best just to let it be. The times were fun, but... the future is where it's at, man. Maybe someone else will start up a fed here and make money. But today isn't the day."

Sunday, January 25, 2004
07:00 PM

As the show opens, we see Jonathan Coachman and Josh Matthews sitting in the press box, with the Royal Rumble logo behind them. Matthews opens the discussion.

"Welcome everyone to a special Royal Rumble Edition of Sunday Night Heat. I'm Josh Matthews and with me is the Coach, Jonathan Coachman. Coach, it's time once again for us to meet; it's been the third time we've had the honor of working the pre-game show together, and this show might be another memorable one."

"I certainly hope so, Josh, and certainly, tonight's Royal Rumble, exclusive on pay-per-view in one hour, looks to be a dramatic show. We have a full card from top to bottom, featuring of course the fastest 60 minutes in sports entertainment in the Rumble match itself as well as six titles to be decided tonight."

"That's right, Coach, and here on Heat we have two exciting tag team matches scheduled. First, from SmackDown, it's the APA squaring off against Dawn Marie's hand-picked

duo of Hardcore Holly and Test. Dawn has been a thorn in the APA's side for some time, and this is the latest in their rivalry."

"Also, from the RAW side, we have La Resistance going into a flagpole match against Philadelphia's golden boy, Tommy Dreamer, and a partner of his choosing -- so far no one knows who that's going to be!"

"All that comes later, but first, we want to show you highlights of what went down this week on RAW and SmackDown!"

A series of highlights is shown from RAW. The beating on Shawn is shown with everyone passing him off, up to the hot tag to HHH. A huge melee breaks out and ends with Randy Orton hitting the RKO on Molly Holly for the pin. During the aftermath, Michaels chases Eric Bischoff, but Evolution beats him down. HHH and the Dudleys make the save, but get into a brawl and 20 or so people run in to start the chaos. Booker T gets a Spinaronie and clotheslines HHH over the top rope to finish the chaos.

The clips go to SmackDown!, and show a ten-man tag featuring Zach Gowen, Paul London, Nova, and Team Japan against World's Greatest Tag Team, A-Train, and Team Mattitude. Gowen gets hit several times, but tags in Nova, who kicks away at all five heels. All ten men enter the ring and toss everyone out until it's Moore and Tajiri. Hardy sneaks in and hits a reverse Twist of Fate on Tajiri, and Moore sneaks the pin. Ultimo dives off onto all ten guys, then brawls off with Hardy and Moore as Tajiri smokes A-Train with a buzzsaw kick. We go back to Josh.

"Well, as you can see from those two matches, when you get a lot of people in the ring, it can be a bizarre and enlightening experience."

"Enlightening? In what way, Josh?"

"Well, Coach, if that's a preview of what could happen when the Rumble begins, you know you're in for a wild ride. Remember this -- you don't have to beat a man into oblivion or into submission to get the win."

"That's right -- all you have to do is throw him over the top and have both feet touch the floor and that person is eliminated."

"Exactly, but the thing that makes the Rumble so interesting is that it's the luck of the draw. Whoever draws the higher numbers -- the 21-30 -- is definitely poised to have a huge advantage over the first ten guys to come out, because those guys will likely be eliminated before you hit the ring."

"But remember, Josh -- there's been a winner at each position in #1-5, and no one has won after drawing #30."

"That's a good point, but it may be something that will happen eventually. It's like

waiting for five o'clock -- it will happen, but it's gonna take a while."

"It might just sneak up on us."

"You're right. By the way, you may have noticed in the SmackDown video package the fight between Team Japan -- Ultimo Dragon and Tajiri -- and Team Mattitude -- Matt Hardy Version 1 and Shannon Moore. Tonight, those two teams are going to square off for the WWE Tag Team Championships, and with Paul Heyman calling the shots for the champs at ringside, they seem to be overwhelming favorites."

"But don't forget -- Matt Hardy may have struck an alliance with the A-Train last week during the ten-man tag, and if the 6'8 behemoth interjects himself in this match, we could see a title change."

"It'll be interesting to see if Mattitude can be the first team to defeat Ultimo Dragon and Tajiri in straight-up 2 on 2 action."

"When we come back, Coach, we'll take a look at the two Heavyweight Championship fights as Kurt Angle faces Hollywood Hulk Hogan and Chris Benoit gets a rematch with the maniacal Kane."

"In addition, we'll have our tag team matches as the APA face Hardcore Holly and Test and Tommy Dreamer faces La Resistance, but who will his tag team partner be?"

07:17 PM

The WWE Slam of the Week, brought to you by Stacker 2's YJ Stinger: from SmackDown! on December 11, Hulk Hogan chokeslams and legdrops Eddie Guerrero to earn a title shot at the Royal Rumble against Kurt Angle.

Matthews and Coachman are shown in the studio. "Tonight, Coach, we get to see the WWE Title on the line as the ageless Hollywood Hulk Hogan goes for his thirteenth world championship against a current six-time champion in Kurt Angle."

"That's right, and both men appear to be more pumped up than ever before, though you have to wonder what is going through Kurt Angle's mind. He's almost obsessed with remaining the champion!"

"I know what you mean, Coach, and Angle's war of words with Hogan has become very intriguing the closer we get to the Royal Rumble, less than an hour away."

A video package of the various interviews both men have done is presented. It includes almost a full transcript of the Angle/Hogan showdown from the past SmackDown!, including a focus on Angle mentioning how he lives, eats, breathes, etc., the title. It ends

with a shot of their staredown, which fades into the motion graphic for the match itself, with Josh providing voice-over.

"Well, there you have it, folks. Two men who both want the WWE Title, and one match to determine the winner. Earlier today, our Matt Capotelli caught up with the challenger to ask about his feelings for this match."

The shot switches to Matt standing with Hulk Hogan (me). "Hollywood Hogan," begins Capotelli, "tonight you have a chance to make history one more time by becoming the oldest man to win a Pay-Per-View match for a World Heavyweight Championship. Only Kurt Angle stands in your way."

"Well, ya know somethin', Capotelli brother, I've been all around the world in my illustrious career, dude. And this place, Philadelphia, holds some special memories for me, brother. It was here, in front of a packed house, that I took a 450 pound man named the Earthquake, and I slammed him through a table in front of the entire world, little man. And now I come here, ready to make more history, against the WWE Champion, Kurt Angle, brother. Now Kurt Angle may have the Olympic medals, and he may have the history of being world champion, my man, but he ain't got what I got, and that's the power of these 24-inch pythons and the power of Hulkamania running through my veins, amigo. And when he tries to put my shoulders to the mat, I'm gonna take all that Brotherly Love right here in Philadelphia, dude, and I'm gonna look at Kurt Angle, and I'll ask him right to his bald little face, just whatcha gonna do when the Babe Ruth of sports entertainment runs wild all over you?"

"All right, there you have it. Hulk Hogan is ready and waiting for his shot at Kurt Angle. Back to Josh in the studio."

"Thanks, Matt. Well, it seems that Hollywood Hogan is ready for competition tonight against Kurt Angle, but can he hold up after all this time? He hasn't been in a match in almost a full month, Coach."

"Ring rust certainly will play a factor in tonight's match, but what's much more of a factor is the age and experience. Kurt Angle is almost a full generation younger than Hogan, and unlike in other matches, he has a large amount of experience at the top against the big boys. This isn't A-Train -- this is a polished main event wrestler."

"All right, also on the card tonight we have Kane and Chris Benoit in a rematch from Armageddon that came about due to unusual circumstances in that Armageddon matchup."

"It was supposed to be an Inerfno match, and even though Kane won, he was tapping in the middle of the match, which is how Benoit earned this shot."

"Let's take a look at what brought these two men to Philadelphia to face each other one more time."

A video package plays, highlighting first the Elimination Chamber at Survivor Series and showing about 10 different replays of the fireball that caused the title change. The wheel spinning is added, with it landing on Inferno Match, followed by a close-up of Kane's hand tapping. Bischoff is shown allowing one more match, as the two stare each other down and promise generally nasty things. This fades into the motion graphic for Kane/Benoit, with Coach doing voiceover.

"One more time, it'll be Chris Benoit vs. Kane for the World Heavyweight Championship. Earlier today, our cameras along with Diamond Dallas Page caught up with Benoit in preparation for this intense matchup."

The cameras enter a basement somewhere, with a similar set-up to Stu Hart's dungeon. DDP is in front as he approaches Chris Benoit being stretched by an indy talent. "Chris, if I may interrupt... a lot of people wouldn't exactly consider this the most ideal training site for a World Heavyweight title match. Why are you in the basement here?"

Chris escapes the hold and talks. "Well, I just wanted to get back to what made me a superstar. Being here reminds me of the Dungeon where I trained. It's the kind of intensity Stu Hart brought every day to my training sessions that I need to bring to tonight's World Heavyweight Title match. When Kane enters the ring, he will be facing a man who has been primed and ready for every possible obstacle. When tonight is done, I will be -- once again -- the World Heavyweight Champion. And if Kane thinks that won't happen... he'll just have to Prove Me Wrong." Chris returns to the stretches.

"There ya go, boys, it looks like Benoit's in the mindset of a warrior, and that's not a bad thing, that's a good thing. Back to you, Coach."

The shot initially goes back to Josh and Coach, but then goes to the motion graphic for each match as they discuss it.

"Thanks, Page. You know, we haven't talked about the other three exciting title matches tonight. The first one, of course, is Chavo Guerrero, fresh off his trade from Smackdown, going for the Intercontinental Title against Christian. That's one I'm looking forward to."

"In addition, we'll see Zach Gowen, who's living his dream, try to become the Cruiserweight champion as he faces Jamie Noble, who as always is accompanied by Nidia."

"And finally, Alexis Laree makes her debut in the WWE and can win the women's title against Ivory. Laree has been making waves around the nation, and in fact got her start right here in Philadelphia, so we'll have to see how things go tonight."

"And how can we forget the Royal Rumble itself? Fifteen RAW superstars and fifteen SmackDown superstars for a shot at a guaranteed place on the card at WrestleMania. There on the screen you see the 29 known participants in the Royal Rumble, but one slot

is once again open on the SmackDown side. Stephanie McMahon playing a wildcard in an effort to win the Rumble, Coach."

"An interesting idea, playing with the strategies of the other combatants, but will it pay off tonight? You can find out by ordering the Royal Rumble. Call your local cable or satellite provider to order! The Rumble begins in about 30 minutes."

"When we come back, it'll be SmackDown tag team action as the APA battle Dawn Marie's squad of Hardcore Holly and Test. Coach and I will have the call after this break."

07:31 PM

Howard Finkel is doing introductions as the APA's music hits. "The following tag team contest is scheduled for one fall. Introducing first, at a total combined weight of 560 pounds, Faarooq, Bradshaw, the A.P.A.!" The duo head to the ring wearing matching tights and slapping the hands of fans along the way. The Philadelphia crowd cheers them on as they enter the ring.

"And their opponents, being accompanied by Dawn Marie, at a total combined weight of 515 pounds, the team of Test and Hardcore Holly!" New Dawn Marie style music plays (it's in SDSYM and sounds kinda like New York nightlife with the trumpets and... oh, go look it up) as Test and Hardcore walk to the ring, with Dawn Marie leading the way and smiling like a cat that ate the canary. Both men get into the ring and stare down the APA, but before the bell rings, Bradshaw gets in a cheap shot and the match is on.

All four men brawl as the crowd chants "APA". Faarooq tosses Test through the ropes as Hardcore and Bradshaw slug it out. Bradshaw wins that, catching Holly off the ropes and in the Last Call. Bradshaw makes the drinking motion as Test tosses Faarooq into the steps. Bradshaw gets up and turns around, but Test boots him down. Holly covers for two. Holly picks Bradshaw up and clubs him a few times before whipping him into the ropes and hitting a clothesline. Test comes in, and he delivers a DDT for two. Holly and Test combine for a double suplex, then Holly props Bradshaw up against the ropes and hits his low punt. The ref admonishes Holly, allowing Test to snap Bradshaw's neck on the top rope. Holly goes for the Alabama Slamma, but Bradshaw rolls through it to his feet, then blasts Holly with a shoulderblock for the double KO. Both men crawl to their corners, bringing in Test and a riled-up Faarooq.

Faarooq clubs away at Test, then whips him into the ropes and lands his standing spinebuster. Holly gets a kick to the gut and a suplex for coming in, after which Test is hit with a powerslam for two. Holly breaks, and all four men go back at it. In the chaos, Dawn Marie hops on the apron and gives Faarooq a better look at her chest. Faarooq stares at the headlights, allowing Test to catch him from behind with a pumphandle slam for two. Test whips Faarooq in for the big boot, but Faarooq ducks and Test gets hit with

the Clothesline from Hell from Bradshaw. However, Holly tosses Bradshaw and hits the Falcon Arrow on Faarooq, **earning the victory for his team at 5:58.**

"Here are your winners, the team of Test and Hardcore Holly!"

The announcers look over the replay and discuss the victory. Coach mentions that this could earn Test and Holly a title shot at some point in the future. Josh scoffs at the idea.

"Still to come, folks," says a nonplussed Coach, "we will have the Flagpole Match, as Tommy Dreamer goes into battle with La Resistance, but who will be by his side? The answer after this break."

07:49 PM

"The following tag team contest is a no-disqualification Flagpole Match scheduled for one fall. Introducing first, coming down the aisle, from Paris, France, at a total combined weight of 485 pounds, the team of Rene Dupree and Sylvain Grenier, La Resistance!"

As La Resistance's decidedly French music plays, the duo head to the ring. Grenier is waving the French flag, while Dupree carries a bare flagpole with him. Both men are wearing the berets, trenchcoats, and epaulets that are part of their uniform, but also a pair of VIVE LA FRANCE T-shirts. They enter the ring, where Grenier waves the flag before disconnecting the flag and presenting it to Michael Cole at ringside. Cole, naturally, doesn't know what to do with it as Dupree and Grenier stand and salute, still wearing the T-shirts.

"And their opponents, introducing first, from Yonkers, NY, weighing 260 pounds, Tommy Dreamer!"

Tommy's hardcore rock music plays over the PA system as he storms to the ring, carrying an American flag on his flagpole. He salutes the flag, then disconnects it. A road agent helps him fold the flag properly, then it is presented to Tazz as Dreamer asks for a mic. As this is going on, Coach and Josh remind us that RAW and SmackDown present WWE Royal Rumble, live in just a few minutes and exclusively on Pay-Per-View. The Royal Rumble is presented by YJ Stinger, and the official theme song is "Away from Me" by Puddle of Mudd. Dreamer's music ends, and he speaks.

"Hey, frog-boys, listen up! I may be from Yonkers, but Philadelphia is my second home! And as I sat in the back thinking of who I could get to help me take it to the two of you, I realized there was a man who could help me. He's the only guy I could think of who was hardcore enough, who was crazy enough, and most importantly, who was SSSSSSSSSSSICK enough to do it!"

The crowd lets out a pop upon hearing the word "sick" emphasized, then goes into a roar

as an instrumental version of "Last Resort" plays over the PA. A familiar face to Philly fanatics appears from behind the curtain, carrying a mysterious burlap bag and a Singapore cane, which is close enough to a flagpole for government work. Finkel does the rest.

"From Philadelphia, PA, weighing in at 230 pounds, Sick Nick Mondo!"

A HUGE "CZW" chant strikes up as Mondo storms to the ring. The announcers point out the word "SICK" written on his head, and note that it's something Al Snow used to do. They note his "UNSCARRED" tattoo around his belly, and wonder if that's inspired by former ECW legend Perry Saturn. Then the match begins and all four men begin punching, kicking, and swinging their sticks.

Dreamer sends Dupree to the outside with a cross-check, while Mondo begins to school Grenier with his stick. Grenier is flat on his face on the mat, allowing Mondo to climb the ropes and hit a flying elbow onto Grenier. Dupree re-enters the ring (having disposed of Dreamer) and slugs Mondo to the ground. He works an armbar, but Mondo gets to his feet, forcing Dupree to do the same. This allows Dreamer to slam him in the back with the flagpole. Dreamer stands over a downed Dupree as the crowd chants "fuck him up, Dreamer, fuck him up!" The announcers are forced to cover the noise as Dreamer prepares to swing, landing a hard shot to Dupree's back, then another. Dreamer adds a Russian legsweep with the flagpole to Dupree, then holds the pole over his head, causing a "Sandman" and "ECW" chant to break out.

Grenier is on the floor, nailing a flagpole shot to Mondo's jaw, then another right between the "I" and "C" on his forehead. He returns to the ring, and La Resistance clothesline Dreamer with the cane. Mondo returns to the ring (having bladed in the interim, as per his contract) and begins slugging away with Grenier, then catches Dupree's clothesline attempt in a Northern Lights suplex. Dupree rolls to the outside to catch his breath, then goes fishing for more weaponry. He finds a table as Dreamer and Mondo hit a double big boot to Grenier. Dupree sets up the table, then wanders to another side of the ring -- just in time to catch Mondo, who dives over the ropes after him.

Dreamer, meanwhile, begins pounding on Grenier with the stick, then lifts him up for a DDT attempt. Grenier goes low to block, then lifts Dreamer and crotches him on the top rope. Dreamer howls in pain, while Grenier climbs the top rope. Mondo catches him and shakes the ropes, and now Grenier lands on the turnbuckle and is in pain. Dupree hits a slingshot suplex on Dreamer as Mondo gets a super Frankensteiner on Grenier. Both men cover, and both only get two.

Dupree and Mondo charge each other, with Dupree sending Mondo to the floor. Dupree then picks up Dreamer and delivers the prancing kneedrop and figure-four. Grenier adds flagpole shots to Dreamer. Meanwhile, on the outside, Mondo spies the table and gets a look in his eye. He grabs the bag he carried to the ring and opens it. He then spills the contents -- thousands of thumbtacks -- all over the table as the crowd begins to cheer and start a "CZW" chant.

Mondo breaks up the figure-four in the ring as Dreamer limps around and tries to get circulation back into his leg. Grenier clips the leg and tries a pin with his feet on the ropes. The ref gets to two before Mondo lifts Grenier off of Dreamer and hits a gutwrench slam. Dupree breaks Mondo's cover at two, then suplexes Mondo to the mat. He climbs the top rope, but Mondo follows him up and the two slug it out on top. Grenier recovers and grabs Mondo, but before Dupree can react, Dreamer hops onto the apron and shoves. Dupree is sent flying off the top rope and through the thumbtack table. This leaves Mondo sitting on Grenier's shoulders, and Mondo flips down and hits a Victory Roll on Grenier **that gets the pin and ends this wild match at 8:25.**

"Here are your winners, the team of Tommy Dreamer and Sick Nick Mondo!"

The crowd cheers hysterically as Dreamer and Mondo high-five and celebrate. Grenier heads outside to check on his fallen partner, and the camera shows his T-shirt is stabbed with dozens of thumbtacks. Coach and Josh provide one final rundown of the Royal Rumble card before thanking us for joining them and telling us to go watch the Rumble.

We get the series of clips highlighting the matches for tonight. We see Evolution take out HHH. We see John Cena and Rhyno in a pull-apart. We get Kurt Angle clinging to his title as Hulk Hogan looks on, confused. We see Chris Benoit making Kane tap and Kane tossing Chris into the fire. Another shot shows Mattitude retreating to the back, then Zach Gowen surprising Jamie Noble, and finally a series of punches thrown by various wrestlers, ending in a shot of the RAW ring as half the roster enters it.

AND NOW, World Wrestling Entertainment presents the 2004...

ROYAL RUMBLE

Puddle of Mudd's "Away from Me" plays as pyro goes off by the ton for the crowd. The cameras pan around and show the usual slew of signs all over the place. Josh Matthews's voice is the first we hear.

"Here in the city of Brotherly Love, some clean, old-fashioned hatred will decide which three men will leave tonight with a spot at WrestleMania in their grasp! Hello, everyone, and welcome to the sold-out Wachovia Center in Philadelphia, PA, as the Royal Rumble is underway! I'm Josh Matthews alongside Jonathan Coachman, and we have the honor of calling the Royal Rumble match, during which someone will earn their spot at WrestleMania just seven weeks away!"

"That's right, Josh. The rules are well-known by now: 2 men start, and every 2 minutes another man enters. You're eliminated by being tossed over the top and out. The last man in the ring wins it all and will get a World or WWE Title shot at WrestleMania!"

"But against whom? We'll find out tonight as Kane battles Chris Benoit in an Armageddon rematch for the World Title, while Hulk Hogan tries to make history by defeating Kurt Angle for the WWE Title!"

"And don't forget, Shawn Michaels has been laying down the challenge for someone to meet him. Who could it be? Will that person be here? Let's get it started by going to Howard Finkel!"

"Ladies and gentlemen, the following contest is scheduled for one fall and is for the Intercontinental Championship! Introducing first, from Toronto, Canada, weighing in at 215 pounds, the Intercontinental Champion, Christian!"

Christian emerges as his music plays, and the crowd boos him. He struts to the ring, belt around his waist, then rolls in. He removes the belt and hands it to referee Nick Patrick, then poses on the turnbuckle. He removes his garish sunglasses and waits.

"And his opponent, from El Paso, TX, weighing in at 210 pounds, Chavo Guerrero!"

Chavo Guerrero emerges in his Mexican flag motif tights to the sounds of the Lo Rider music. The crowd cheers as he sprints to the ring and climbs the turnbuckle. He reaches the top and does a backflip off, landing on his feet. He then turns around, where Christian smirks at him. The two men back off to their respective corners and wait for the bell to ring.

They lock up. Christian backs Chavo into the corner, but instead of a clean break, he slaps him across the face. Chavo holds his temper and shoots a funny look at Christian before they lock up again. This time Chavo backs Christian into the corner, and during his clean break, Christian fires off a sucker-punch. Chavo flips out and chops away at Christian in the corner. Chavo climbs the buckles and gets the 10 punches, then does a monkey flip on Christian. Christian keeps getting back up, but gets hit with an armdrag, headscissors, armdrag, rana, and another armdrag before finally deciding to stall for time. This doesn't work either, as Chavo flies out after him with a pescado and punches him on the outside. Nick Patrick gets the two separated, and Chavo plays to the crowd as Christian rolls back in.

Chavo hits a springboard into a senton as Christian tries to rest. He covers, but can only get two. He then sends Christian into the turnbuckle and follows with a running dropkick. Christian is dazed, so Chavo goes up top, but Christian recovers in time to duck the bodypress. Christian then tries an armbar, but Chavo handstands out of it and cuts Christian's legs out. Christian quickly gets back up, only to be met with a suplex and dropkick, sending him back out of the ring. Chavo climbs the barricade, but Christian moves and Chavo's jaw hits the apron. Christian rolls him back in and DDTs him for two. A suplex gets two. The rear naked lock with stretch gets another two. Christian appears frustrated, so he waits for Chavo to sit up and goes for a stump puller. Chavo gets to his feet, tipping Christian over backwards, and hits a Lionsault for two. Christian picks

himself up, only to find Chavo going for a rana, but Christian stops it and throws Chavo over his head and into the ropes. Christian rope straddles Chavo and gets two.

Christian then throws Chavo to the outside and follows. He tries to ram Chavo's head into the post, only to receive a drop toe hold into the stairs. Chavo tosses Christian back in and goes up top. A missile dropkick gets two. Chavo wonders what he has to do to win, then picks Christian up, only to receive a low blow. Christian goes for a DDT, but Chavo tosses him in a Northern Lights suplex for two. Christian staggers into the corner, and Chavo follows, trying for the Tornado DDT. Christian grabs him, however, and tosses him clear over the top rope and headlong into the railing. Chavo is out, and Christian simply rolls him back into the ring and hits the Unprettier. Patrick counts, and **Christian gets the three at 9:27.**

"Here is your winner, and STILL Intercontinental Champion, Christian!"

I walked around backstage, trying to loosen up my legs for my match with Kurt Angle. I passed Rene Dupree, who was smiling and seemingly in good spirits. *Geez, for a guy who just went through a table, he's certainly in a good mood.* "Hey, Rene, brother... what gives? There's no blood on your shirt or anything, man."

"Oh, M. Hogan, you do not think I would prepare for a stunt like that without a little extra insurance, n'est-ce pas?"

"What do you mean by insurance?"

Rene was about to answer, but we were both startled by someone shouting "AFLAC!" We turned and saw John Cena -- who I knew was Owen this week -- smiling and laughing, then walking the other way. We both shook our heads.

"Seriously, dude, what do you mean?"

"Well... after volunteering I wanted to make sure this gift I bought in the western part of town would come to good use. As it turns out, it helped me avoid all injuries. Pretty clever, non?" As he spoke, he lifted his T-shirt. Underneath was a black bulletproof vest. *Yup, that's clever.*

"The following contest is scheduled for one fall and is for the WWE Cruiserweight Championship! Introducing first, the challenger, from Livonia, MI, weighing 155 pounds, Zach Gowen!"

Gowen's music plays as he limps to the ring. He raises his hands to play to the crowd, but the crowd start booing. Zach looks around bewildered, then rolls into the ring and removes his prosthesis.

"And the opponent, accompanied by Nidia, from Hanover, WV, weighing an even 200 pounds, the WWE Cruiserweight Champion, Jamie Noble!"

Noble's rockabilly theme is playing as he emerges holding Nidia's hand. The two kiss at the entranceway as the crowd cheers their arrival. Noble rolls into the ring and yells a little at the fans. He then presents his title to referee Brian Hebner and stares Zach down. A "Break His Leg" chant starts up as the bell rings.

Noble and Zach lock up as Zach hops around to maintain balance. Noble tosses him into the corner, then stomps away at him. He picks Zach up and delivers a giant swing (four rotations, sending Zach flying out of the ring to the crowd's delight. Noble follows and begins to pound on Zach's back. He rolls Zach back into the ring and seems to be saying something to Zach as he applies a headlock. Zach pushes Noble off, and on the rebound, he hits a kneesmash to knock him down. Zach hits a single-leg legdrop, then works in a legbar. Noble makes the ropes. Zach continues punching away at the leg as a "Noble" chant starts up. Noble finally stands up and hits a drop toehold on Zach, then grabs him from behind and gets a reverse suplex as the crowd cheers.

Noble waits for Zach to get to his hands and knee, then dropkicks him out of the ring. Noble follows to the outside, but Zach tosses Noble into the steel steps, then rolls him back in. The "Break His Leg" chant starts again, and Zach delivers a "who, me?" look to the crowd. He waits for Noble to get to one knee, then delivers a roundhouse dropkick to the back of his head. He covers, but only gets two. He picks Noble up, then tries for a standing dropkick, but Noble catches him in a powerbomb for two. Noble slowly picks Zach, appearing to be saying something, and soon Zach hits a low blow. He rolls Noble up and puts his foot on the ropes, but still only gets two. The crowd boos Zach vociferously, and a "Gowen Sucks!" chant begins. Zach seems confused as to what to do, then climbs the ropes. He dives for a corkscrew moonsault, limbs flailing, but Noble escapes and Zach crashes to the mat to a huge pop. Noble then picks Zach up and delivers the Tiger Bomb, covering as the crowd chants along. **The pin is academic at 6:44.**

"Here is your winner, and STILL Cruiserweight Champion, Jamie Noble!"

I was waiting by the curtain as the two wrestlers returned. Noble seemed amused by something, and he and Nidia walked off without really mentioning anything. Zach, meanwhile, was limping back in tears. He could barely keep it together. I talked to him for a while as Paul was readying the next group to head out with him.

"Hey, little dude, what's wrong?"

"Those fans," he sobbed. "Don't they know I'm only 19? Don't they... realize I'm... I'm not ready for this?"

"Hey there, man... you're gonna meet your share of assholes in life. Look at me. I've been an asshole before," I said with a smile while showing him the "4 Life" hand signal. "Some people are just insensitive, that's all."

"But... but they all... I..."

"It's mob mentality, man. It's the same reason they all cheer for me. Look -- you gotta realize by now that some people think you're a freakshow. They're gonna tell you to get out of the ring, and say you're not good enough, but you gotta just shake it off, little man. Now look -- next week in Washington, I'm certain things will be different. You hear me, man?"

Zach looked up. "I... I guess so. I just... I'm sorry."

I began to remember when I was in his place. I remembered the feeling of helplessness as I struggled through my everyday activities. I knew I could never accuse him of not trying anymore -- not after seeing what everyday life was like. I also

remembered being in Mexico when he got beaten up. I thought of how he fought through it, and I realized that was the trick.

"Zach... they can't hurt you. You've been beaten on by life. By cancer. By some drunk Mexicans in a bar, dude. Words won't damage you anymore. And if people wanna throw a punch at you, just tell ol' Hollywood, and we'll bring the troops to your aid, you got it, bro?"

Zach smiled. "Yeah... I got it."

"The following tag team contest is scheduled for one fall and is for the WWE Tag Team Championships! Introducing first, being accompanied by Paul Heyman, from Japan, at a total combined weight of 385 pounds, the team of Ultimo Dragon and Tajiri, Team JAPAN!"

Dragon's oriental music played through the PA system as the crowd came to its feet. Tajiri stalked to the ring, while Ultimo stayed behind and hit the praying pose, setting off the pyro. Both men were given hero's welcomes as they entered the ring. Paul Heyman, of course, was equally cheered, and as he took the mic, a big ECW chant broke out.

"Gentlemen," he said, addressing the tag champs, "understand this. This is my home. This is the city I made famous. Tajiri-san, I gave you your first break right here. Asai-san, this is to me what Mexico City is to you. Please, make me proud, and give me a welcome homecoming. I want you to retain the gold."

The champs bowed and nodded. "And the challengers, from North Carolina, at a total combined weight of an even 400 pounds, Shannon Moore and Matt Hardy Version 1!"

A web browser appeared on the screen. The search for Matt Hardy Version 1 was entered. The search bar loaded to 10, then 30, then 70, then a full 100%. After that, Matt and Shannon enter, flashing the V1 hand signal, as we find out that Matt Hates Battle Royals and Matt Speaks Five Languages. Hardy and Moore enter the ring and flash the V1 signals to the crowd, who boos them and starts a "Heyman" chant for the heck of it. The bell rings to start the match.

Matt and Ultimo eventually start. They circle each other before locking up. Ultimo chops away at Matt out of the lockup, then backs him against the ropes. He whips Matt in, but Matt lands a clothesline on the rebound, bringing Tajiri in to hit a savate kick to Matt. Shannon enters now, but Tajiri catches him with a roundhouse kick, and Ultimo gets up and starts hitting palm thrusts on Matt. Both men whip Mattitude into each other, but Shannon ducks and Matt shoulderblocks Tajiri. Ultimo, however, climbs Matt's back and lands on the top rope, then flips off into a standing moonsault press for two as Shannon breaks. Shannon pays for it as Ultimo kicks him square in the face. Shannon rolls to the outside, where Matt talks strategy. This allows Heyman to knock their heads together to a huge pop -- which lasts until Mike Chioda dismisses Heyman to the back, to a large chorus of boos.

Matt re-enters the ring and faces Ultimo again. They lock up, and Matt backs Ultimo into

the corner. Matt then punches away in the corner and suplexes Ultimo out of it. Shannon comes in, and the two punch away in the corner before Matt exits the ring. Shannon gets a drop toehold on Ultimo, followed by a legdrop to the back of the head. He tags Matt back in, and the two deliver a double back suplex. Matt continues punishing Ultimo with a camel clutch. Ultimo makes the ropes as Tajiri leads an ECW chant. Matt then bodyslams Ultimo and pins him, but it only gets two before Ultimo bridges out. Matt tries a dragon sleeper, but Asai flips over and reverses, but Shannon enters and clotheslines Ultimo to break. Ultimo rolls outside, so Shannon dives onto him and tosses him back in. As he does, Tajiri grabs him and mists him, so Matt follows outside to administer a double-teaming. This allows Ultimo to climb to the apron and deliver the Asai moonsault onto the pile.

As everyone gets up, Ultimo returns to the ring and signals for the Asai DDT. However, Matt low blows him from behind and rolls him up, using the tights, for two. Matt reaches over and tags Shannon, who is still wiping the mist out of his eyes. Shannon applies a chinlock with one arm and cleans off his face with the other. Ultimo powers out with some elbowsmashes, then runs the ropes, but Moore catches him with a rana. He covers, but Tajiri saves at two. As Chioda tells Tajiri to leave, Matt comes in with a Twist of Fate. Shannon covers, but Ultimo gets his hand on the ropes. Shannon pulls Ultimo to the center of the ring and covers a second time, but Ultimo lifts the shoulder at two. Shannon looks on, confused, as the crowd chants "Nippon!" for the Japanese duo. Ultimo slowly gets to his feet as Matt is tagged in. Matt grabs the head and goes for a second Twist of Fate, but Ultimo grabs the legs and slingshots Matt into Shannon. With both men down, he tries to make it over to Tajiri, but Matt cuts him off at the last second and delivers a dragon screw. He covers for two.

Backstage, Paul Heyman was searching around. "What are you looking for, brother?" I asked.

"I brought a prop that I wanted to use. I just can't remember where it is."

"But... weren't you just kicked out of ringside?"

"That was an excuse for me to find this. Now, let's see, I could've sworn that... ah, here it is!"

He grabbed his bag -- in which, presumably, the prop lay -- then headed back to the gorilla position. "What? What is it?"

"You'll see, Hogan. It's an old friend."

Meanwhile, back in the ring, Matt holds Ultimo in an STF. Ultimo fakes tapping a few times, then starts to crawl for the ropes. Matt pulls him away, but Tajiri then buzzsaw kicks him straight in the mouth. Matt flops over onto his back, bleeding from the mouth, while Chioda escorts Tajiri away. Shannon enters and hits a neckbreaker on Ultimo, then places Matt on top. Chioda turns around and counts, but it's only two. Both men are slow to get up, but Matt is on his feet first. He kicks away at Ultimo, then sends him into the ropes. Ultimo ducks a clothesline, then flips over Matt's head and delivers a neckbreaker. Both men are down. Ultimo crawls to his corner as Matt does, but Shannon can't prevent the tag. Tajiri enters and hits a Karate rush on Shannon, absolutely levelling him in a neutral corner. He picks Shannon up and climbs the ropes, then delivers the Tarantula as

the Philly crowd goes wild. Matt breaks it, then begins to punch away at Tajiri. Ultimo returns and goes for a savate kick on Matt, but Matt ducks and Choida gets nailed square in the jaw.

At this point, Paul Heyman returns to ringside. Matt sees him and begins to shout at him, but that allows Tajiri to mist Matt. As Matt stumbles around blinded, he grabs the nearest person he can find -- Ultimo -- and DDTs him, then panics, certain he got Shannon. Shannon throws water in Matt's face to wash off the mist, and Matt gets over his panic attack. He tries to revive the ref, as he does, Ultimo positions himself next to Matt. Matt turns around as Ultimo backflips, and the Asai DDT connects. Ultimo goes to cover, but that won't count either. Shannon then runs in with a tag belt and clocks both Ultimo and Tajiri with it. He grabs Ultimo and lays him out, then climbs the ropes and delivers the yodelling legdrop. As he celebrates in the ring, Paul Heyman enters, having pulled something out of his tote bag. Shannon turns around and is nailed right between the eyes by a vintage 1980s portable cellular phone, which cracks in half upon impact. Shannon blades from it, then slowly tries to recover. As he does, Tajiri nips up and stands behind him. One buzzsaw kick later, and Tajiri covers as the ref crawls over. **The entire crowd counts to three as the champs retain at 15:44.**

"The winners of this bout, and STILL WWE Tag Team Champions, Team JAPAN!"

Backstage, Kevin Nash's jaw dropped. He began bouncing up and down in his seat, like an uncontrollable child. Pat Patterson entered the room. "Shawn, get out there. Hogan, Angle, get on deck."

I left my seat and slowly walked with Shawn to the gorilla position. As I did, I turned to him. "You ready for a wild finish, brother?"

Shawn, not knowing who I was, smiled. "Hulk, it ain't even started yet."

Shawn Michaels' music hits as he walks out, microphone in hand. He does his dancing and sets off his pyro, then calms down and looks into a camera. He lifts the mic to his mouth as an "HBK" chant starts.

"Now, as you all know, over the past couple of months, I've been asking someone if he would accept my invitation to one final match in the WWE. It's someone I've never met before in the ring, but I have met outside of it. I won't say we're friends or enemies, but we share certain beliefs, so I respect him for that. I haven't said who he is because, well, I didn't wanna get your hopes up. So I'm just going to tell whoever it is that they have one minute to accept or reject my invitation. If they don't, I'll consider it rejected."

He waits for a few seconds as the crowd buzzes. JR and DDP talk about how the Internet speculation has been running rampant as to this man's identity. After about 20 seconds, Evolution's music hits and Randy Orton appears on the ramp. He holds a microphone in his hand and smirks at Shawn.

"Well, Shawn, I must say I'm flattered. We all know that the man you want to have a special match against is none other than the newest superstar, the Evolution of wrestling,

Randy Orton. Well, I've given it a lot of thought, and I must say my answer is--"

"NO! You're not who I asked. Get the hell out of here, you newcomer! Leave!"

The crowd cheers as Shawn keeps waving Orton to the back. The "Na na na" chant starts as Orton looks around, furious. He drops the mic and charges the ring...

...as the lights go out. Flashbulbs go off everywhere. Michaels and Orton are seen in the flashes to be looking around, Orton in confusion, Michaels in confidence. Then, a thud is heard. The lights come back on as Orton lies prone on the mat, with a long black baseball bat lying beside him. The crowd begins to cheer as Michaels sees the baseball bat and picks it up.

"You're here, I see," he yells to the ceiling, the back, and nowhere in particular. "You did this. I know you're here now. So come forward. I wanna know if you'll do the match. Is it yes or no? Don't hide anymore. We need an answer."

The lights go out a second time, this time with a single spotlight appearing on the stage. As it does, an image of a black bird appears on the TitanTron. It is followed by the Crow Music playing throughout the arena as the crowd is on their feet. After about 15 seconds, **STING** emerges in the black and white with a microphone. He stares at the entrance as the lights go back on and show Michaels smiling from ear to ear.

"What'll it be, Stinger? The whole world wants to know. Is it yes... or no?"

Sting slowly lifts the mic to his mouth, but pauses for a "Sting" chant to start up. He smiles out of the corner of his mouth, then looks Shawn straight in the eye. "Yes." The crowd cheers long and loud. "Shawn... anytime... anywhere... it's SHOWTIME!"

The Crow Music starts up again as Sting slowly departs to the back. Shawn Michaels is jumping up and down as if he just won the title. Randy Orton finally gets to his feet and slowly walks to the back, barely able to figure out what happened. Shawn then hops over the top rope and walks to the back, using the bat as a cane.

I stood in the back as the participants from the previous segments walked backstage. The wrestlers were gathered in the aisleway to welcome Sting to the WWE and, in some cases, ask for autographs. I turned to Angle. "Can you believe we gotta follow that?"

"No sweat," Angle said. "Let's go out there and make history."

"The following contest, scheduled for one fall, is for the WWE Heavyweight Championship! Introducing first, from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, weighing 220 pounds, the WWE Heavyweight Champion, Kurt Angle!"

"Medal" played over the PA system as Kurt entered to a good reaction. It was Vince's idea to send him out instead of me first so that the crowd could get to see him as the heel.

Angle pointed to the sky as his pyro went off behind him. He then walked to the ring and twirled in the center of it. Reluctantly, he handed over his title to Tim White, who kept it as the music stopped. Angle stood in the center of the ring and looked around. The Philly crowd was divided, some chanting for Angle, some against him.

"And his opponent, the challenger, from Hollywood, USA, weighing in at 275 pounds, Hollywood Hulk Hogan!"

"Voodoo Child (Slight Return) was already playing in the Wachovia Center. As it started, all my worries about the plan disappeared. The crowd was in full voice for me as I walked down the aisle, slowly, conserving my energy as much as possible. I played some air guitar along with Hendrix, then continued to the ring. I chopped that mountain down with the edge of my hand, then ripped the Hulk Still Rules T-shirt right off and threw it to the crowd. The "Hogan" chants continued for a full two minutes after the music did and during the staredown. Finally, the bell rang.

We locked up. A little trash talking in the lockup followed, then Angle went to the headlock. I tried lifting him up, but he landed on his feet back in the headlock. I shoved him off. He bounced into the ropes and I levelled him with a shoulderblock. He bounced back up and charged in, so I grabbed his throat and powered him down, then added a pair of elbowdrops. I slowly got up and grabbed Angle in a slam attempt. He slid down my back, then started clubbing me in the back. I staggered around in pain as he followed me and put on a crossface chickenwing. I flailed my arm in pain before Angle made the mistake of jumping on my back. I fell back onto him as the crowd cheered. I slowly got to my feet and shook the pain out of my arm before backing him into the corner. I climbed the second rope and punched away as the crowd counted along. At 7, I bit him. Angle staggered out of the corner, so I gave him an axe lariat and covered, but only for two.

As we both got up, I crept behind him and began raking his back. Kurt yelled in pain as the crowd ate it all up. I clotheslined him over the top rope and followed. On the outside, I slugged him a few times, but he blocked and fired back. I staggered into position, and Angle grabbed my hair -- what there was of it -- and slammed me into the announcer's table. I remained doubled over by the table, amazed at my own lack of flexibility. Angle grabbed me and tossed me in the ring. The noise was so great I couldn't even think straight. All I could do was follow Angle's lead as he gave me a back suplex. I wiggled around in pain and took the stomps from Angle. He picked me up and chopped me in the corner, keeping the match basic. I reversed him and chopped away at him, then tried to throw him into the corner, only to get that reversed. I hit the turnbuckle chest-first and staggered backwards into the Angle Slam. Kurt covered. One. Two.

Not yet, Kurt.

I fiercely kicked out and got up to one knee, shaking the cobwebs out and staring straight at Angle. He became confused, starting to punch away, but that only made me stronger. I got to my feet, still ignoring his punches, and shook my arms violently. One more punch

-- "YOU!" from the entire crowd as I pointed. A nervous Angle tried another punch, but it was blocked. One. Two. Three. Into the ropes, and back out for the big boot -- but Angle caught the foot. I stood there, trying to maintain my balance, before Angle yanked, cueing me to fall on my back. He turned me over and applied the ankle lock. I struggled to the ropes, but Kurt pulled me all the way back. Tim White checked to see if I would quit -- which meant he missed Kurt placing his foot behind the bottom rope, hooking himself so I couldn't pull him away. I struggled, but couldn't move. I had no choice, and tapped out at 12:01.

But there was more.

Angle refused to let go as his music played. He continued pulling and twisting my leg as I tapped harder and harder and yelled in pain. Tim White tried to pull him off of me, but Angle just yelled back at him. I tried to pull myself free, but had no luck. Finally, Angle let go of the hold to give White the Angle Slam. He then re-applied the hold in the center of the ring. The crowd booed loudly.

Several other referees headed to the ring to try to pry Angle off. I continued yelling, sometimes adding, "it's broken, I think it's broken," to emphasize the pain. Angle let go, and I tried to crawl to the ropes as I heard referees go flying left and right. I looked to the announcer's table, where Michael Cole slammed his headset down and walked to the timekeeper's table to get the belt, then entered the ring to help restrain Angle. Angle calmed down and took his belt, ready to leave, while Cole and Tim White talked to Finkel. Finkel relayed the decision.

"Ladies and gentlemen, due to post-match activities, it is the unanimous decision of the SmackDown officiating crew to **reverse the decision by disqualification**. Your winner, as a result of a disqualification, Hollywood Hulk Hogan!"

That set Angle off. He charged the ring again and began pounding on the back of my head as I meekly covered up. I slowly rolled onto my back as Angle got off of me. Michael Cole and Jack Doan held him back, but Angle knocked Doan down and slammed Cole, then put HIM in the anklelock. This caused Tazz to try to pry Angle off of his buddy, and the crowd -- which normally would cheer someone beating Cole up -- took Tazz's side, booing harshly. It got worse when Angle suplexed Tazz on his head, then went back to Cole.

Their boos turned to thunderous cheers, though, as Eddie Guerrero emerged from the back. He dove into the ring and pulled Angle off of Cole. I rolled slowly to the outside as Eddie brawled with Angle. As I got back up to one knee, I peered into the ring. Eddie floored Angle with a brainbuster and, with the crowd cheering him on, climbed the ropes. He delivered the frog splash, and Angle rolled out of the ring. I slowly climbed back in.

Eddie stared at me, fists balled up, as though to say, "what, you want some too?" I stared at him, barely able to put weight on my foot. Finally, I extended my hand to him. He shook it. I pulled him in and thanked him with a hug, then raised his hand as "VIVA

GUERRERO" led into Eddie's new music. Angle left, a bitter, broken, and hated man, with Eddie Guerrero the new hero.

Slowly, Eddie and I walked to the back, helping as Tazz and the other referees aided Michael Cole. When all of us got to the back, the women in the next match were waiting for us, eyes agape and jaw dropped. Ivory spoke for both of them.

"Thanks, guys," she said sarcastically. "We gotta follow that effort now? The crowd will be dead for us! Why do they keep scheduling us in such a bad place on the card -- the nacho break match? It's just not fair."

"Hey, Ivory... calm down. We're on Pay-Per-View. Besides, it'll be quick."

"Yeah... guess you're right, Alexis. Sorry, I'm just a little cranky right now. You know, my emotions all out of control."

"Sure, okay. I think. I mean, I wouldn't know or anything..."

"Believe me, it's not a cakewalk. Fortunately, I should be off the road soon."

We continued to the back. Paul and Stephanie were thrilled at the results. "All right, Eddie! That's the way!" Stephanie yelled as she slapped him on the back. Eddie smiled and helped me sit down. I had only been out there for about 20 minutes, but I felt like it had been two hours. *I guess at fifty, everything hurts more.*

"You okay, Hogan? Okay, good. I gotta get ready for the Rumble, man, but I just wanna say... thank you for giving me the cred out there, hombre. I told you everything would be all right."

"Yeah... you did."

"The following contest, scheduled for one fall, is for the Women's Championship! Introducing first, from Hollywood, FL, the Women's Champion, Ivory!"

Ivory's music plays as she walks out with the Women's title, jawing at fans along the way. She rolls into the ring and continues yelling, then raises her hands to the unappreciative crowd. The music stops, and the crowd begins to buzz for what would happen next.

"And the challenger, from Richmond, VA, here is Alexis Laree!"

Laree comes out to her hard rock in-house music to a HUGE ovation from the crowd. She slides into the ring and begins doing Lita's "rock on" arm swings on the second turnbuckle. She then climbs another turnbuckle and does the same thing. As she does, though, Ivory attacks from behind.

Ivory pummels away at Alexis, then throws her into the turnbuckle. She tries for a back suplex, but Laree flips out of it and hits a reverse X-Factor on Ivory. She then adds a lightning legdrop and picks Ivory up. Ivory is sent into the ropes, and Alexis hits a bodypress on the way out. She climbs to the top rope and moonsaults Ivory, then rolls off the cover. She sends Ivory into the turnbuckle, then grabs her head. She bounces up to the top rope and twists off in what the announcers call the LareeDT -- a tornado DDT. She covers, and **the match is over just 53 seconds after it began.**

"The winner of this contest, and NEW Women's Champion, Alexis Laree!"

Laree jumps up and down as she is handed the Women's Title belt. The crowd cheers ecstatically and chants "Welcome Back". Some of them even start an "ROH" chant -- just as Matt had predicted they would. Laree weeps tears of joy in the ring. She mouths the words "thank you" over and over to the fans. She is home.

I walked gingerly to the trainer's room to get an examination. Michael Cole was back there, getting a wrap placed on his foot. "Hey, Michael, you ok, dude?"

"Yeah, Hulk... I'm just not used to having to take wrestling moves, so my foot feels kinda funny after Kurt got done with it."

"He didn't hurt ya, did he?"

"Nah... this oughta be fine by morning. I just wanna stabilize it."

"All right, man."

"How about you? You look like you've been through hell."

"Well, you know, Cole, at 50 years old, all the little bumps and twists feel like they're being made by a jackhammer, dude."

"Well... if you can get through it, I'm gonna suck it up and work the Rumble."

"Wait a second, dude... you're not in it, are you?"

"Oh, no no... the refs have to be around ringside to judge people's feet hitting the floor."

"Oh, right man. Those things ran themselves for so long I forgot we needed officials, brother."

"Well... it looks good on TV," Cole concluded. He winked and hobbled out of the room as I got on the training table.

"The following contest, scheduled for one fall, is for the World Heavyweight Championship! Heading to the ring, weighing 326 pounds, the World Heavyweight Champion, Kane!"

Slow Chemical plays over the PA as red light bathes the arena. Kane slowly walks to the ring, the World Title held limply in his right hand. He enters the ring and stands in the center, raising his hands. He drops them suddenly, "setting off" pyro on all four corners. He stares at Earl Hebner as he hands him the belt.

"And his opponent, from Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, weighing 220 pounds, Chris Benoit!"

Benoit's music plays as the crowd cheers. Chris Benoit emerges from the back, shaking his muscles loose. He rolls into the ring and stares directly into Kane's eyes. Kane stares right back at Benoit, as the foot of height difference is played up by the announcers. Earl Hebner separates the two and calls for the bell.

Benoit jukes and jives around Kane, who charges and misses Benoit. Kane turns and faces Benoit, who is egging him on. Kane charges in again, this time with a big boot, but Benoit calmly ducks it and spins Kane around. He chops away at Kane, then whips him

into the ropes, where Kane hits a clothesline that spins Benoit in midair. Kane stands over him and taunts him, then picks him up and throws him out of the ring. He follows, pressing Benoit against the pole on the outside. He lets go and laughs at the referee, but when he turns around, Benoit sends him crashing into the steps.

Benoit tosses him back in and grabs an armbar. Kane stands up, with Benoit virtually hanging off his arm, and breaks the hold with ease. Kane then picks Benoit up, but Benoit rolls through and tries the Crossface. Kane scrambles for the ropes. Benoit maintains the pressure with a headlock, then tries to run Kane's head into the turnbuckle. Kane shoves him off, and Benoit slams into the buckle chest-first. Kane then grabs Benoit from behind and hits what was probably supposed to be a suplex, but wound up being a brainbuster. Kane ascends the top rope and waits for Benoit to get. He dives off... straight into another Crossface. This time, Kane powers out.

Benoit gets frustrated and grabs Kane from behind. He hits the first German suplex, then another. Kane breaks on the third one and grabs Benoit by the throat. The chokeslam connects, but only for two. Kane yanks Benoit up by the hair, but Benoit shoves Kane's hands away and chops him in the chest a few times. Kane is sent into the ropes, and Benoit uses Kane's momentum to send him right out over the top. Benoit follows with a tope suicida as the crowd goes ballistic. Back inside, Kane is prone on the mat as Benoit goes for a diving headbutt. He leaps, but Kane is ready and grabs Benoit's throat in midair. They both stand up, but Benoit rolls away from it and chops some more.

Kane is staggered against the turnbuckle, so Benoit lifts him onto it and follows. He connects with a superplex and covers for two. Benoit drops an elbow and covers again, but still gets only two. Benoit tries for a hammerlock slam on Kane, but Kane blocks easily and gorilla presses Benoit. He stands on Benoit's chest, and the ref counts to two before Benoit throws Kane aside. Benoit gets to his feet slowly as Kane beats him to the outside. He climbs to the top rope and nails the diving clothesline on him to the floor. Kane smiles at the crowd and at Benoit, then throws him back into the ring.

Arrogantly, Kane stands over Benoit, then kicks him a few times, as if testing if Benoit's alive. Benoit grabs Kane's feet as Kane smiles down, but the smile leaves when Benoit flips Kane onto his back. From there, Benoit applies the Sharpshooter to a surprised Kane, who fights the hold for a full minute. Finally, Kane reaches the ropes. Benoit drags Kane back to the center of the ring and makes the cut-throat sign, then goes up top. This time, Kane is up too soon. Benoit tries a body attack, but Kane grabs the goozle. However, Benoit hits the Crossface out of THAT, but Kane stands up while in it and grabs the torture rack out of it. He then hits a Death Valley Driver out of the torture rack. In Japan, I believe this is the Burning Hammer. In America, it's "GOOD GAWD ALMIGHTY, HE HAS TO BE BROKEN IN HALF!" Or something. Anyway, **it'll end the match at 16:09.**

"The winner, and STILL World Heavyweight Champion, KANE!"

I looked at the trainer. "Is he gonna be all right, dude?"

"Oh, I'm sure, Hulk," the trainer replied. "Y'see, he's been in Japan, and taking stuff like that is normal over there. I'm not saying it's smart, but Kane did his best to make him land on his face and not his head. See? Chris is moving again."

I left the training room with a clean bill of health as they were bringing Chris in. "Hey, Benoit, brother... you're insane."

"Yeah... thanks... that's one move I ain't doin' again." He slowly walked to the training table, where he was checked out for signs of a concussion. Meanwhile, Glen Jacobs knocked on the door.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No... not too much... just a bell ringing."

"Okay... I think I'll save that move for special occasions. It's like my Tombstone or your powerbomb."

"Yeah... smart thinking."

"Thanks for teaching it to me, Chris."

"No problem."

I walked out to the curtain area. Half the roster was ready, lined up from 1 to 30. Vince was giving last second instructions to the crew. I walked back and took a prime seating position in the locker room. The fastest hour of sports entertainment was about to begin.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is now time for the ROYAL RUMBLE! Allow me to explain the rules. Two competitors will start the match shortly. Two minutes after the opening bell, and every two minutes thereafter, another competitor will enter the match until all thirty men have entered. A man is eliminated if and ONLY if he goes over the top rope and both his feet hit the floor. The last participant remaining in the contest shall be declared the winner and will receive a guaranteed World or WWE Heavyweight Championship match at WrestleMania!"

The crowd cheers as they await the first two participants.

"Introducing first, in slot #1, from West Newbury, MA, weighing 240 pounds, *John Cena!*"

"Word Life!" hits the PA and the crowd gives a rousing cheer for the bad boy rapper as he enters. He steps into the ring, as always, with mic in hand.

"Yo, yo, cut it, man, cut it.

Tonight's the Royal Rumble, it's my turn in the sun.
So what if I come out having drawn #1?
I got 29 punks who think that they can outlast me,
But for them to win the Rumble, they'll have to get past me.
I got my problems with some boys, but they can't make 'em stick.
When I get into the ring, my whole routine just clicks.
I've got a shot at the title, a chance to live the dream,
And just like all the Philly wrestling fans, I'll take it to the extreme.

What's an hour of hard work, when the title's your reward?
It's not like a few broken bones ain't somethin' I can afford.
Nobody got it like I do, and that's just a fact.
I'm authentic, I'm the real deal, unlike that Rob Black.
I'm gonna win it, and as Kurt would say, it's true, it's true,
And if you don't think I can, lemme give you an F-U.
I'm gonna go the distance, cuz my game is sick,
And if you get in my way, I'll make you suck my--"

The crowd finishes.

"And in slot #2, from Cambridge, MA, weighing 270 pounds, *Christopher Nowinski!*"

Harvard's fight song plays as Nowinski walks casually to the ring. The announcers explain that all managers are banned from ringside in this event, and there are two referees on each side of the ring to make sure every elimination is caught. Nowinski steps through the ropes, loosens up, and waits.

DING DING!

Cena and Nowinski lock up. Nowinski pounds on Cena in the corner, but Cena reverses and chops away. Corner-to-corner they go, as Cena blasts Nowinski with a clothesline. Nowinski trips Cena up to slow him down, but an attempt at a Double Arm DDT fails. Cena then gets a shot with his knee in and staggers Nowinski. Both men charge at each other, but Cena ducks and kicks Nowinski. Nowinski goes up and gets F-Ued. Cena then **sends Nowinski packing at 1:34**, giving him almost 30 seconds of playing to the crowd *alone in the ring*.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Rhyno at #3! Rhyno charges the ring and gets into a brawl with Cena. The two men slug it out with reckless abandon as the crowd chants ECW for Rhyno. Cena sends Rhyno through the ropes and continues the pounding on the outside. Rhyno reverses a whip, sending Cena into the steps. Cena gets tossed back into the ring as Rhyno goes hunting for a weapon. He returns with an old-fashioned steel chair, only to be met with a chain-assisted punch from Cena. Cena mounts Rhyno and tries for more punches, but Rhyno kicks him low to stop that. Rhyno hits a spinebuster on the chair, then attempts to throw Cena, but no dice.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Billy Gunn at #4! Billy charges the ring and pounds on Rhyno, making him drop Cena back in the ring. Gunn then punches away at Rhyno, but Cena gets a waistlock, allowing Rhyno to punch away at Gunn. Cena then whips Gunn into the ropes, but Rhyno intercepts Cena before he can follow and tries for a suplex. Gunn then bodypresses Rhyno, folding Cena on top of him and sending all three crashing to the mat. Gunn picks

Rhyno up and gives him a military press, then tosses Rhyno onto Cena. Gunn goes to pick Cena up, but Cena whips him into a Gore from Rhyno. Rhyno and Cena then slug it out as Gunn recovers.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Rey Misterio at #5! Rey charges the ring rather than vault in and starts by climbing the top rope and diving onto all three men. Rey then punches away at Gunn while Cena bodyslams Rhyno. Cena goes to whip Rhyno into the turnbuckle, but Rhyno reverses, then follows up with a clothesline to cause Cena to flop to a seated position, where Rey gets a broncobuster. Gunn gets a Fameasser on Rhyno and tries to throw him out, but Rhyno fights it off. Rey charges Cena, who tosses him in the air. Rey uses the top rope to catch himself, then returns with a springboard rana. Cena clotheslines Rey as Rhyno rakes Gunn's eyes.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Goldust at #6! Goldust grabs Rhyno and slams him down. Rey and Cena double clothesline Gunn, then Rey backflips with Cena's help to land on Gunn. Rhyno is set up in the corner, and Goldust charges and delivers Shattered Dreams. As Rhyno slumps down, Cena grabs Goldust and gets the Throwback on him. Rey hits Gunn with a spinning armdrag, while Rhyno gores Goldust. Cena powerbombs Rey, and Rhyno **dispenses of Goldust at 9:23**. Gunn grabs Rhyno from behind and hits the One and Only. Cena decides to try for an F-U on Rey, but Rey slips out and monkey flips Cena. Rhyno again blocks Gunn's toss.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Brock Lesnar at #7! Rhyno charges Lesnar, but Brock sidesteps and Rhyno slams into the steel post. Gunn gets his clothesline no-sold, then is turned inside out by a return shot from Brock. Cena DDTs Rey, then goes toe-to-toe with Brock for a while. Rhyno gets a powerslam on Gunn. Rey charges Brock, who ducks down and **flips Rey out of the ring at 11:01**. Brock then grabs Cena for the F-5, but Rhyno clips him from behind. Cena falls on top, but gets hit with the Fameasser by Gunn as he gets back to his feet. Gunn suplexes Cena, while Rhyno and Brock slug it out. Cena has Gunn poised for elimination, but nothing doing.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Rob Van Dam at #8! RVD charges the ring and starts kicking away at Brock, who pounds right back as those two tussle. Rhyno and Gunn hit a Doomsday Device on Cena. Rhyno tries a gore on Cena, but Cena sidesteps and Brock gets it instead. RVD then hits a stepover enzuigiri on Gunn, while Cena and Rhyno double-suplex Brock, then turn on each other. RVD pounds away on Brock, but his superkick attempt is caught. Brock gets RVD in an overhead suplex, and Gunn hits a legdrop as RVD lands. Cena and Rhyno have rolled outside and are pounding away there, but return to the ring upon hearing the

countdown.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Michael Shane at #9! Shane finds RVD and tries to superkick him, but that leads to RVD getting him with the stepover enzuigiri. Brock is beating Gunn into a pulp, while Cena climbs the ropes with Rhyno. After teasing elimination, he gets the Remix. As Rhyno lands, Michael Shane hits a standing elbowdrop on him. Gunn grabs Cena and tries for a piledriver, but Cena grabs the legs and goes for a Boston Crab. Brock clotheslines Cena to break it. Shane and RVD get a double-team dropkick on Rhyno as Gunn receives an F-5 from Brock. Cena crashes the chair into Brock's skull, then gets Van Daminated as Shane stomps Gunn.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Paul London at #10! London charges Michael Shane and the two begin flying left and right. Meanwhile, RVD grabs Gunn and whips him into the ropes, then **clotheslines Billy out at 16:33**. Brock spears down Rhyno in a twist of fortune, while RVD and London double suplex Shane. Cena tries a suplex on Brock, but Brock blocks it. RVD tries to backdrop Shane, but Shane gets a DDT, then is hit with a flying forearm by London as he nips up. Cena tries to eliminate RVD, but that goes nowhere. Shane and London work off a wristlock through an entire cruiserweight sequence, while Brock gets a triple powerbomb on Rhyno.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Charlie Haas at #11! Haas slams Shane into London, then kneedrops them both. Rhyno is nearly tossed by Brock, but slides back in. London and Haas duke it out as Brock and RVD trade punches in the corner. Rhyno gets a shoulder thrust on Shane in another turnbuckle, then superplexes him. London stops an elimination attempt by RVD by hitting a sliding punch. Shane crawls on Rhyno's back, but Brock suplexes him off. Rhyno goes to Gore RVD, but Cena yanks him by the hair to stop him, then **tosses Rhyno out of the match at 19:44**. Shane and London attempt to take out Brock, while Haas tangles with RVD.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Eddie Guerrero at #12! Eddie enters a house of fire, slugging down anything that moves. Shane goes down, London goes down, RVD goes down, and Brock goes down. Haas charges but is caught, and Eddie **throws Charlie out at 20:34**. Shane and RVD tangle in the corner, while Brock presses London over his head. Eddie spears Brock, then pops back up and grabs London by the hair. **London is disposed of at 21:07**. RVD begins punching Eddie from behind, while Shane sticks and moves on Brock. Shane and RVD try to double-team Brock, but he suplexes both by himself. Eddie dropkicks Brock into a Shane suplex.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Booker T at #13! Booker charges the ring and attacks Shane in the corner. Eddie and RVD trade blows, while Brock enjoys a breather. Brock then charges RVD and begins tossing him around, allowing Eddie to sit on the top turnbuckle and ponder. Booker doubles Shane over and hits the axe kick, then notices no one sees him. He delivers a Spinarooni, but that goes straight into an Eddie clothesline. Brock is unable to toss RVD, so he pounds on Booker instead. RVD flapjacks Shane, then kicks away at Eddie. RVD and Shane try to toss Brock, but to no avail. Booker and Eddie trade chops in the corner.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Road Dogg at #14! Road Dogg starts punching away at RVD, staggering him long enough to get funky. Booker spinebusters Shane as Eddie and Brock go at it. Everyone gathers in an attempt to toss Brock, but he shoves them all off. Road Dogg gets a DDT on Shane, then tries a pumphandle on Eddie, only to have Eddie reverse to a bodypress. Brock tosses Shane around for a while, then gets bored and beats on Booker. RVD nails Road Dogg with a chairshot, but Shane grabs the chair and tosses it outside. Eddie sneaks up on Booker and gets the rolling vertical suplexes. Brock F-5s Road Dogg for the hell of it.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Shelton Benjamin at #15! He goes after Cena (remember him?) while Road Dogg and Shane slug it out in the corner. Road Dogg rolls to the outside, but when Shane follows, Road Dogg blows "smoke" (gray mist) into his face. Back in the ring, RVD attacks Road Dogg while Shane staggers straight into an F-U. Booker and Eddie trade punches, and Eddie goes for the Gory Special, only to have Booker slip out of it and get a hangman's neckbreaker. Cena spears down Brock while Road Dogg hits a shaky-legs kneedrop on Shane. Eddie sneaks to the top rope and scores a flying elbowsmash on Brock, who falls on top of Booker.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Undertaker at #16! He rides in on his Harley as the action stops in the ring. Everyone attacks Taker, but he starts shrugging people off. **Road Dogg is gone at 28:24. John Cena follows at 28:33.** Taker took them both out, then gets a Dragon Sleeper on Shane. Shelton hits him from behind, but Taker merely turns around and **throws Shelton out as well at 29:17.** Brock charges Taker, and the two giants slug it out. Eddie and Booker hit each other with a double clothesline. Shane comes out of hiding and dropkicks RVD in the back of the head. Brock tries to dump Taker, but Taker hangs on.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Nova at #17! Nova dropkicks RVD as an ECW chant starts. Booker fights with Taker on the turnbuckle, but as Booker goes for ten punches, Taker **disposes of Booker at**

30:27. Shane hits Brock with a rana, while Nova gets hit with the stepover enzuigiri by RVD. He staggers straight into a goozle by the Undertaker, who chokeslams him. Booker T is just getting up on the outside, so Undertaker **powerbombs Nova over the top at 31:15.** Thankfully, Booker catches him. Undertaker charges Eddie and beats him down to the ground, then sets up the Last Ride. However, Eddie **ranas Taker right out of the ring at 31:48!**

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Bubba Ray Dudley at #18! Bubba enters the ring and begins elbowing RVD, hitting the old Flip Flop and Fly on him. Shane and Eddie take turns having their shots no-sold by Brock. RVD and Eddie get a drop toe-hold on Shane, then hit stereo Rolling Thunder / slingshot senton drops on him. Brock pounds on Bubba in the corner, but his elimination attempt is thwarted. Shane rolls outside to take a breather, while RVD and Eddie tumble around on the mat in what would normally result in a pinfall reversal sequence. The referees tell Shane to return to the ring, where he's met by a big elbow from Bubba and an overhead suplex from Brock.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Batista at #19! Batista charges and helps Shane take down Brock for a while. Eddie and RVD attempt to eliminate each other, and both take turns going over the top and back in. Bubba gets F-5ed by Brock, so RVD and Eddie climb side by side corners and hit Frog Splashes on him. Evolution pounds away at Bubba on the ground, as Batista hits RVD with a spinebuster. Eddie gets the El Paso Lasso on Shane, but Bubba breaks in order to Bubba Bomb Eddie. Batista and Brock square off as Eddie rolls outside and removes the lead pipe from the Undertaker's bike. He brings it in and hits people at random with it as RVD kicks Batista down.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Randy Orton at #20! All three members of Evolution instantly gang up on Brock. RVD and Bubba battle in the corner, while Eddie takes a rest in the corner. Shane superkicks Brock, who staggers right into a sit-out powerbomb from Batista. Batista picks Brock up, and Orton adds the RKO. All three Evolution members drag him over, and Orton does the honors, **sending Brock packing at 37:14.** Bubba picks off Shane, while Eddie tangles with Orton and RVD fights Batista. Evolution gets hit with a triple clothesline by the faces, but Orton bounces back up and gets the Play of the Day on Bubba. RVD spinkicks Shane down.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Hurricane at #21! Hurricane springboards into the action, bowling over Bubba, Batista, and Orton all at once. RVD and Eddie battle in the corner, where Eddie gets a Tornado DDT. Shane and Hurricane have a cruiserweight sequence, while Bubba tries to keep Batista and Orton at bay at once. It fails miserably, as irony strikes and the tag

champs give Bubba a version of 3-D. Eddie German suplexes Hurricane from behind, as Shane and Orton have a miscommunication and nearly come to blows. Batista calms things down, and Evolution takes its frustrations out on RVD and Bubba. Hurricane lands a Shining Wizard to Eddie's face.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Ron Killings at #22! Killings slides into the ring and pairs off with Eddie, as Shane fights Hurricane, Batista fights Bubba, and Orton fights RVD. All four men are in separate corners, and Bubba/RVD/Hurricane whip Evolution into each other all at once. Eddie sends Killings flying into the group to knock them all down. Hurricane poses, so **RVD dumps Hurricane from behind at 41:11**. Hurricane stares at him, but RVD shrugs as Killings attacks from behind. Killings lands a clothesline on RVD, then breakdances straight into a lariat from Batista. Eddie gets a Diamond Dust on Orton in the corner, and RVD crossbodies Shane.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Shawn Michaels at #23! Superkicks abound, as all seven men receive them. First RVD, then Eddie, then Batista, then Shane, then Orton, then Bubba, then **Killings, who flies out upon getting his at 42:33**. HBK poses in the ring for a while, then seeks out his nephew, but Evolution attacks in a group. Bubba and RVD slowly recover and punch each other. Eddie nips back up, then suplexes HBK, Shane, and Orton in a row before Batista clotheslines him down. RVD gives Bubba a monkey flip, then punches away. Orton rests on the outside for a few seconds, then returns to DDT HBK. Shane and Eddie fly all over the place.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's D-Von Dudley at #24! Bubba takes advantage by slamming Orton, and D-Von enters via giving him the Wazzup Headbutt. HBK does a rana on Eddie, who returns the favor. RVD flapjacks Batista, while the Dudley Boyz hit 3-D on RVD. Van Dam is dead weight, so both Dudleyz combine and **eject RVD at 44:58**. Eddie and D-Von battle in the corner, while HBK and Bubba go at it. HBK and Eddie whip the Dudleyz together, but D-Von slams on the breaks and grabs HBK for a 3-D. Meanwhile, Evolution sit and watch. Eddie ranas Bubba into the El Paso Lasso, but D-Von breaks it up. Evolution hear the countdown and face the ramp.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Triple H at #25! He storms to the ring as Evolution prepare to meet him head-on. HHH is a man possessed though, as he **sends Michael Shane packing at 46:17**. Both tag champs get facebusters, then **Batista is tossed out at 46:44**. Orton tries his luck, but Eddie cuts off the RKO. HHH hits the Pedigree and **tosses Orton out at 47:09**. With the slaughter of Evolution complete, HHH turns his attention to HBK, as the two beat each other down in the corner. Eddie tries to fend off both Dudleyz at once. This goes poorly

for him, as they give him the Wazzup Drop. D-Von performs Last Rites, and Bubba tells him to get the tables, but the referees stop that from happening as D-Von is shoved back in.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Konnan at #26! Konnan and Eddie team up against the Dudleyz, and hit stereo clotheslines to knock them down. HHH sends a kneelift to Konnan to stop La Raza's momentum, but Eddie pounds away at HHH. HBK is up and pounding on D-Von, while Bubba finds Konnan and Bubba Bombs him. Konnan blocks a second try with a mule kick, then hits a rolling clothesline and slaps on the Tequila Sunrise. HBK and HHH kick away in the corner, while D-Von attacks Eddie with an inverted DDT. Konnan release the Tequila Sunrise and tries to toss Bubba, but he's 300 pounds of dead weight. D-Von makes the save and brawls with Konnan.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Molly Holly at #27! She slowly slides into the ring and tries to look for an opening, clearly uncertain where to begin. Eddie and HBK double-team HHH, while the Dudleyz try to toss Konnan. Molly climbs to the top rope and hits Eddie with a rana, then clips HHH from behind. Eddie and HHH chase Molly, but HHH runs straight into 3-D from Konnan and Bubba. Konnan hits Eddie with a Stunner for good measure, but can't get him out. HBK spots Molly and wrestles her to the ground, then works the arm. Bubba Ray gets Flip Flop and Fly on HHH, while D-Von and Konnan brawl in the corner. Molly wiggles out of HBK's armbar.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's Rodney Mack at #28! Mack hits the ring and stares down Molly, which leaves him open to a suplex from Konnan. HBK slams down HHH, then drops an elbow. Everyone pairs off: Eddie with Bubba, D-Von with Konnan, HBK with Molly, and Mack with HHH. Eddie and Konnan whip the Dudleyz into each other, but D-Von leapfrogs Bubba and clotheslines Eddie. HHH tries to thrust kick Molly, but she ducks and HBK gets it. Molly then climbs and gets the Molly-Go-Round on Mack. The Dudleyz charge HBK and Eddie, but both men backdrop them. **Bubba's out at 53:42. D-Von follows him at 53:44.** Molly hides from HHH.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's *Nathan Jones* at #29! Making his WWE return, Jones charges the ring and pounds on anything that moves. HBK tries to attack from behind, but Jones just piefaces him down. Konnan makes the next attempt, but Jones grabs Konnan by the pants and throws him around. Jones then **ends Konnan's night at 54:48.** Molly cowers in fear in the corner, so Mack takes advantage by hitting her with the Blackout. Jones rips Mack off of Molly and **javelins him to the floor and out at 55:22.** HHH clips Jones, but that barely slows him down. A superkick, though, finally ends his momentum. Molly tries to hit Eddie with a

dropkick.

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1 - BZZT!

It's *Billy Kidman at #30!* We reach the match beyond with Eddie, HBK, HHH, Molly, Jones, and Kidman. Kidman gets between Molly and Jones, so Jones throws him aside. Molly tries to forearm Jones, but Jones just smiles. HBK and Eddie bounce off of HHH repeatedly, while Molly crawls out of the ring. Jones follows her and throws her back in, then follows. Kidman grabs Jones from behind for a DDT, but Jones simply tosses Kidman over his head. HBK saves Molly from certain doom by whipping her into the turnbuckle. He then tries to rana Jones, but Jones simply swings HBK aside onto his back. Jones sees Molly pulling herself up in the ropes and charges, but Molly ducks and pulls the top rope down, allowing her to **send Jones tumbling over the top and inexplicably out at 58:14**. The fun is short-lived, though, as HHH **tosses Molly at 58:19**. Molly runs to the back, being chased by Jones, as *Eddie, HBK, HHH, and Kidman are your Final Four*. HHH and Kidman pair off, as do HBK and Eddie. HHH uses a gutwrench suplex on Kidman, while HBK and Eddie trade chops. Kidman shoves HHH aside and leaps up for a rana, but HHH catches him and tries a powerbomb, which goes as well as you'd expect for him. Kidman charges HBK, but HBK is ready and drop toeholds Kidman into Eddie, sending them both tumbling. HHH tries a Pedigree on HBK, but HBK backdrops him out of it onto the apron. HHH returns back in and smashes HBK's head into the turnbuckle. Eddie hits a brainbuster on Kidman, but the slingshot senton misses. Kidman gets a rana and a headscissors on Eddie. HHH tries to toss Eddie, who goes over and back in. HBK and Kidman pair off, as Kidman gets a clothesline on HBK. HBK responds with a flapjack, but his bodyslam is slid out of by Kidman into the Unprettier. Kidman drags HBK over to the corner and climbs the turnbuckle, but Eddie sees this and charges. Eddie manages to **shove Kidman off and out at 62:04**, *getting Kidman fourth place*. Eddie stares at Kidman, who is slow to get up, so HHH tries to toss him. Eddie blocks it with a mule kick and a low blow. HBK and HHH square off as HBK gets a flying forearm on HHH. Eddie gets a camel clutch on HHH, so HBK dropkicks first HHH, then Eddie. Eddie charges HBK, knocking him over with a shoulderblock and adding a kneedrop. HHH gives Eddie a kneelift, then poses over HBK -- a mistake, since HBK then trips HHH and applies an STF. Eddie stomps away at HHH's head, then forces HBK to break. Eddie and HBK try to toss HHH, but he gets backfists on both men. Both men get facecrushers, but as HHH tries to charge Eddie, Eddie gets a calf kick, showing he was faking. Eddie pounds HHH into the ropes, then whips him across and scores a running DDT. HBK tunes up the band as Eddie celebrates, but Eddie hears it and ducks out of the way. Unfortunately, HBK anticipates this and pulls up, but Eddie spins him around and goes for a DDT, landing it. HHH grabs Eddie from behind and delivers a full nelson slam, but HBK nails HHH with a superkick. HBK then charges Eddie in the corner, but Eddie catches him and **HBK takes the Holy Shit bump to the floor and out at 65:45**, *forcing him to settle for third*. Eddie slumps in the corner as HHH approaches and kicks him down. HHH tries for a slam, but Eddie armdrags out of it. Eddie tries a rana, but HHH shoves him off. Eddie lands hard on his head as HHH walks over and picks him up. Eddie low blows HHH, then whips him into the corner and does the 10 punch count along, followed by a monkey flip. Eddie signals for the Frog Splash, but

HHH cuts him off with a kneeslash. HHH tries for the Pedigree, but Eddie backdrops over the top, but only onto the apron. HHH then **grabs Eddie and yanks him out of the ring at 67:38!!**

"Here is the winner of the 2004 Royal Rumble, *Triple H!*"

Eddie lies prone on the outside with nothing to show for his *second place finish*. Even though he *lasted the longest at over 47 minutes* and he *eliminated more people than anyone else with six*, he has only his pride. It is HHH who has defied the odds and won the Royal Rumble. HHH's date with Kane is set for WrestleMania as we roll the credits and end the show.

Sunday, January 25, 2004, 10:13 PM
Philadelphia, PA

As the Rumble was going on, Paul Heyman and I went in with the McMahons to plan out the road to WrestleMania. We were joined by Brian Gerwitz, Tazz, and a few other low-level writers. Vince took his spot at the head of the table and began the meeting -- perhaps the strangest business meeting ever, considering that I was still in my wrestling uniform and Tazz was in a three-piece suit.

"Gentlemen," began Vince, showing confidence and authority, "as the Rumble proceeds outside, we need to work toward the future. As you know, WrestleMania is our big event. It's even bigger this year because it's WrestleMania XX. It's in our home port of call -- Madison Square Garden. This is our chance to make history. Now, we have to think of a way to make that history. Gentlemen, what are your plans so far?"

"Well," said Brian, "our World Title match is going to be set after tonight. The suggestion you gave of HHH and Kane is a very good one, and once the Rumble is finished we'll go full court press on that."

"Very good. Dave," Vince said, turning to the SmackDown! writing crew, "how are you doing?"

"Well, sir, we're going to try to take advantage of No Way Out to help shape the course of the WrestleMania XX card from our side. We plan on having a couple of big matches, and hopefully creating the best show-stealing moments. With all due respect to RAW, which has definitely done very well for itself over time, we think that our brand has outshone theirs in the combined efforts."

"Come on, it's not fair," Brian protested. "You got a woman to show her snatch to the audience!"

"Brian, Dave... we're not in this for competition. This is for the common good. A house divided won't be able to stand, you know. Now," Vince said somberly, "what idea have you for No Way Out?"

"Well, we need a way to establish a #1 contender. We were hoping the Rumble would take care of that, but when Hun... when y... when it was decided that RAW should win this year's Rumble, we were left scrambling for ideas. You told us rather recently, sir."

Paul leaned over to me. "Actually, this is the first they've heard of it. The decision was made about 10 minutes before the match began." *You mean, HHH overturned the Royal Rumble decision on the night of the match so he could win it, Paul? Really? Are you sure? I mean, this is shocking news, it really is. I'm stunned. No. Seriously.*

"Well, the decision was made rather recently," Vince nodded in agreement. "All right, then, I'll meet with you again soon. In the meantime, if you want to watch the Rumble for ideas, you can."

As everyone watched, I began doodling. A few sticks here and there, connecting in a bizarre fashion at right angles. I didn't even realize what I was drawing until it was over. There it was, staring me in the face -- the answer!

"Paul, Dave, Steph -- c'mere, dudes," I said in a hurried voice. "I think I can get us out of this mess, amigos. See?"

I showed them my drawing, next to which I had added a chair and crown. Paul's eyes lit up. "That could work. It really could. Look, let's fill it up first, then we'll figure out where we're going. Now, Dave -- we have a couple programs in the books already, right?"

"Well, we have one set to go at it at No Way Out, yes, but..."

"Okay, we'll work around that... let's see... of course, he has to win..."

We spent the next ten minutes drawing names and moving arrows until everything was in place. Heyman got out his laptop and immediately began manipulating a spreadsheet to resemble the final product. By the time Eddie Guerrero hit the floor, we had No Way Out almost entirely set. At its center would be the King of the Ring's grand return.

10:48 PM

"Gentlemen, that was wonderful," Vince said as he addressed the combined locker room. "I dare say as far as booking ideas and entertainment value, this may be the best we've done the Royal Rumble. If WrestleMania progresses from this as other WrestleManias have progressed from their Rumbles, we will be looking at one of the single greatest wrestling shows of all time.

Now, RAW guys, we have our main program in place, with HHH facing Kane. I know that may seem like we're putting a lot of emphasis on an old program -- after all, even I remember that it was in MSG that Kane was unmasked -- but we feel it the best way to come full circle. I want everyone throwing their support behind the writing team. We believe that there is room for many people on the WrestleMania card. After all, this year we have asked for and gotten an extra hour, bringing the total card length to five hours. RAW will probably benefit from that extra time.

SmackDown!, however, is more up in the air. I'm not saying the extra time won't be given to you in some capacity, but it will likely come in terms of more time rather than more matches. I will admit that I was skeptical when the crew came up to me and said they wanted to book longer TV matches. But the ratings have confirmed that the men in the matches are able to sustain interest. I mean, Hogan and Eddie for 23 minutes? A tag match at 32 minutes? It's... it's almost unheard-of in today's market. Longer matches are

your strength. I'll let you play it up.

Also, just so both of you know, WrestleMania is going to have a nostalgic feel at some point. As you know, names like Rock, Austin, Hogan, Flair... they are coming back for a Showcase Match. I haven't yet told the audience what it is, but I'll tell you that we're bringing in all sorts of older talent for a special battle royal. We're looking at a bunch of names, and with any luck, we can push the number to 20. Now, some of you here may want to be in that match, but... we shall see.

I can tell you who isn't in the match. Taker, we'll have a spot for you at WrestleMania as before, but it isn't in this match. HHH, of course, has other plans. Shawn Michaels and Sting -- well, they're building to their own issue. We've talked to all sorts of stars from the past, though, and we're very excited about this. The event will be quick, but it'll be fun.

Well, everyone, hit the showers, and I'll see you in Hershey tomorrow. I dare say I think this will be an enjoyable Road to WrestleMania XX."

12:18 AM
WWE.com

SmackDown! commissioner Stephanie McMahon was busy watching the Royal Rumble, as all of you were, on Pay-Per-View. After RAW walked away with the top honors, she got together with her associates and has decided on a winning idea: King of the Ring!

The one-time June tradition will take place during No Way Out this year, with the semifinals and the finals to be on the event itself, February 15, from the Cow Palace in San Francisco, CA. Sixteen names have been placed in this exclusive tournament, and the winner will face the WWE Champion -- whoever he may be -- at WrestleMania XX!

The tournament draw was made minutes after the Rumble ended. Here is how the first round shapes up!

- * Billy Gunn vs. Rob Van Dam
- * Billy Kidman vs. Brock Lesnar
- * Rhyno vs. The Undertaker
- * Nathan Jones vs. Ultimo Dragon
- * John Cena vs. Shelton Benjamin
- * Eddie Guerrero vs. Jose Maximo
- * Jamie Noble vs. Tajiri
- * Charlie Haas vs. Rey Misterio

The first round will begin on January 27 from the MCI Center in Washington, DC! As if this important SmackDown! event weren't must-see before, this ups the stakes considerably! Be there!

12:44 AM

"Hulk, Hulk!"

I turned around. Dave Lagana and Paul Heyman were heading to me, somewhat out of breath. "We forgot something when you drew up your brackets!"

"What's the matter?"

"Well... who's facing Kurt?"

"Kurt?"

"Yeah," Paul said, his face red from exertion and embarrassment. "The WWE Champion needs an opponent. I mean, I suppose we can plug you back in, but..."

I shook my head. "I'm an old man, dudes. I don't have it in me to do that. I wanna give it all at the Showcase, brothers. WrestleMania is my moment -- I don't want to take away from it."

Dave shook his head. "Dammit. And we need ideas, fast."

"Well, hold on, Ja-- er, Dave," I said, nearly blowing everyone's cover by calling Jamie, the newest Angel on Paul's side, by her real name. "Let's look over the main event and see if anything comes to mind."

As we walked back to the conference room, we heard a scream from the women's locker room. All of us turned and faced it, panicking. We heard a lot of women's chatter inside, along with one woman repeating, "It's gone, it's gone," over and over. Suddenly, all the panic seemed to turn to tears as we listened. I looked at Paul and Dave, uncertain whether to open the door or not. Finally, Paul stepped forward and knocked.

"Ladies," he shouted, "is everything okay in there?"

A voice called back, "Just a minute," and after a few seconds, Torrie opened the door. "Oh, guys... wait a second... please... this is..." Torrie ran back inside, seemingly on the verge of tears.

"Lemme get Billy," Dave said, dashing off to the SmackDown! area. Paul didn't stop him, and I didn't think it wise to overrule Paul on this one. After a minute or so, Dave returned with Kidman, both of them seemingly scared out of their wits.

"What's wrong?" Kidman said. He knocked on the door. "Torrie? Are you okay? Is anything wrong?"

Torrie returned to the door. "I got him as fast as I could," Dave explained.

"Oh, thanks... it's... it's not me. It's... come on in."

We all entered. Torrie hugged Kidman immediately and started to cry on his shoulder. We rounded the corner, trying to find the others. They were huddled together, with Ivory at the center, wearing only a towel and sobbing uncontrollably. Alexis stood by her shoulder, muttering, "I'm sorry," over and over again. A trail of blood was visible from the shower Ivory was seated under to the drain.

While it didn't take me long to figure out what happened, I had no idea what others knew. I rubbed my face with my hand, as if trying to hide crying. Truth was, I WAS close to crying. Dave didn't understand, and simply stood dumbfounded. Paul approached Ivory slowly. "Should I call a doctor?"

Ivory shook her head. "Nora's doing that." She put her head between her knees and kept crying. Stacy walked out of the bathroom slowly, muttering about going to see Andrew. I looked back at Torrie through tear-clouded eyes as she and Kidman were

simply seated together, holding hands, with him comforting her. I thought of Lindsay, and of how someday I wanted us to be just like those two.

Nora returned, leading a WWE female trainee into the room. The doctor bent over and asked everyone to clear out. We slowly walked out the door, with Kidman and Torrie following us. I turned and faced Paul, shaking my head. He seemed to understand, and together with Kidman, Dave, and Torrie, we prayed.

After ten minutes, the doctor emerged, sullen. She looked at us in a circle and shook her head. "You can stop praying now," she said. "It's over. There's nothing I could do."

Torrie broke down in tears on Kidman's shoulder. I faced Dave, who was confused, but knew enough to be upset. "Andy," Jamie whispered, "what happened?"

Paul turned and faced her. "She was pregnant... was. She lost it."

02:24 AM

On the ride home, Owen and I sat in the back, not sure what to say. Owen had heard the news along with everyone else who was still around. By tomorrow, everyone would know. Not everyone would understand, but they would know.

I leaned over to talk to Owen. "I... I can't believe it, brother. It's incredible. I... how could this happen?"

Owen simply shrugged. "It happens. You don't think there's a whole section of Heaven dedicated to the unborn? I've seen it. Perfect souls, who never had to experience the ills and the evils we do. They're even exempt from our duty -- wouldn't be able to handle it. It's amazing how much God takes care of the children, even after death."

"Yeah, tell me about it," Jamie said from the front seat. "I've been dead for so long I can't even remember the last time I was alive. But I do know that as recently as a few years ago, I had the opportunity to refuse to work certain weeks. It helped a lot -- growing up takes getting used to, you know."

"Well, did you take advantage of that?" *In other words, do we have another Kathleen on our hands?*

"Not really," she said. "You see, my whole family got wiped out at once -- some huge car wreck or something. I didn't bother to ask for details. All that mattered was, we were dead. So Mom and I worked a lot of cases together. Same with Dad and me."

"You must've seen a lot," I said.

"Oh yeah -- if only I could remember it all. There are days when I put my glasses on and look in the mirror and I don't even recognize myself. I didn't know I would mature after death. I figured I'd be a kid forever."

I turned to Owen. "You mature after death?"

"Some of us do," Owen said. "In theory, Kathleen would've eventually been 21 and stopped there. I mean, chronologically she would've known when her birthdays would've been, but she wouldn't seem any older. It's confusing. Do you understand?"

"Kind of. Well, enough, anyway."

"Yeah, it took me a while to wrap my head around it. I had to see it in action before I knew what it was all about. That's tough -- living your adolescent life without the

physical problems but with the emotional instability. Man... I would've gone insane."

"Like she did."

"Who?" I didn't even realize Jamie was listening.

"Oh... someone we used to work with. She... she got caught and..."

Jamie's face went from interest to disappointment. "Oh... I see. I never knew anyone got caught. I just avoided talking to anyone and everyone I wasn't working with."

"Advice she would have been wise to follow," Owen added parenthetically.

"C'mon... we got a big day ahead. We should rest so we can get our new assignments."

Monday, January 26, 2004, 08:00 AM
Philadelphia, PA

I slowly rolled out of bed, half-expecting to be Hogan again. I had had so much fun that I knew whoever I was would be a letdown. I slowly stretched and got out of bed. I heard a grumbling from the other bed and looked to see a large, hairy back poking out from under the covers. *Well, that answers who I'm not.*

I slowly walked over to the bathroom and started the waters. As I did, I took a perfunctory glance into the mirror. Suddenly, I realized that I was more cavalier about Monday than I used to be -- almost as if I was used to it by now. The thought strayed my mind only long enough that I had to think about who I had become. For whatever reason, it wasn't obvious.

Then it occurred to me that I was looking for longer hair than existed. Now the face was familiar. I was someone who didn't belong on SmackDown!, but was put there by Vince McMahon. I was someone who was as lonely as I was, but someone who would be able to realize completeness more regularly than I had been.

In fact, if I recall correctly, this person's going to be spending time off very soon, so that he can be with that person who makes him complete. Lucky bastard.

I was tall, blond, handsome, and very nervous. I was Andrew Martin -- Test.

TWENTY-SIXTH WEEK

Monday, January 26, 2004, 10:38 AM
Philadelphia, PA

We gathered in the lobby as the RAW superstars walked past. I kept my eye out for various individuals to see how they were doing. JR and DDP were comparing notes for the night's broadcast. Vince arrogantly strode along with the RAW team, chest out, like he could conquer the real world and not just the wrestling world. Nora and Gail giggled with each other as they whispered jokes. Everything seemed just as I remembered.

Then I saw something weird. Stacy came by the lobby. My first instinct was to come up to her and greet her -- after all, we were in love. However, before I could move, Shawn Michaels placed his hand on my shoulder and smiled. "Sorry, big guy, not yet," he said. "Wait for the wedding. We gotta keep her focused."

I slumped back down in my chair. Something didn't add up. *Why would Shawn tell me? Does he know who I am? Obviously not, or else he would've been more subtle about it. As it is, everyone's making fun of me. This isn't right. Harumph.*

Stephanie approached the front of the room. HHH was with her. They held hands, and as he left to head outside, they kissed. Stephanie smiled as he left, while HHH seemed rather businesslike. I couldn't tell whether he was pre-occupied or simply didn't care. *Either way, that's not good.*

"Gentlemen," she said softly to the crew, who paid close attention. "You may have heard by now about... a tragedy in the WWE family last night. Ivory, um... will be taking an extended leave of absence after this show tonight. She needs time to grieve with her family after the loss of her unborn child."

There were many murmurs in the crowd. A-Train whispered to me, "I can't believe she's actually going through with the match tonight. I'm not sure I could be that kind of professional."

I thought about it, then replied, "Be glad we're guys. We'll never have to find out." In the back of my mind, though, I knew I might find out. There had been a chance Amy would have miscarried during her Heat match. *It certainly felt jarring, landing the moonsault, like I had hit concrete and not another body with some rubber underneath. That may have been what happened with Ivory.*

Stephanie continued. "Tonight, we're going to be getting an early arrival in DC. The brackets for the King of the Ring were announced last night on WWE.com, and I'm sure you've all seen them. I want each man who has a match to talk it over with his opponent. The last thing I want is for our organization to have a match deteriorate just when Dad was saying how impressive we were getting in the ring. The pressure's on, guys.

There is one exception, though. Nathan and Ultimo, you don't have to work your match out. The truth is that Nathan is -- well, in the story, anyway -- not a wrestler. We don't want too much choreographed, and the more awkward and brutal Nathan looks, the better. Ultimo, I hope you can work with this. I know we're asking you to do something difficult, but Paul and I have confidence that you can make it happen."

Ultimo nodded. I looked over to him, not wearing the mask, but still with a Toryumon shirt on. It seemed very unusual to see a man you think of as a masked legend in his everyday outfit. I wondered if he wore the mask all the time in Japan and Mexico to preserve his identity, or whether he left it off to preserve his anonymity.

"Now, we've been trying to come up with a #1 contender for Kurt Angle for No Way Out. So far, Hulk Hogan has declined a rematch, saying he wants to be in shape for WrestleMania -- and certainly, we understand that. Meanwhile, no one seems like an obvious choice because, well, the King of the Ring has a lot of people in it. If anyone has ideas, please come and see us in Washington. Now, Paul, any final thoughts?"

"Just one. Matt, Shannon, thank you very much for a very entertaining match at the Rumble. It was great of you to allow me to connect with my former ECW fans the way I did. If you wanna get even with me on-screen, be my guest, but what you've done already... well, I just wanna say thanks."

"All right, gentlemen. Let's get on the buses."

12:05 PM

Stuck in traffic outside Baltimore, MD

"But Paul, it's not fair!"

I protested loudly after hearing I wouldn't be able to see Stacy all week. *The wedding had been planned for months, and the rehearsal dinner had already happened, sure, but she was still about to be my -- okay, Andrew's -- wife, and the tradition's only for that day, right?*

"Andy, it's been agreed upon. Stacy has to do a lot of promotional work for RAW in the week before the wedding, and with Confidential looking over the proceedings, it's better the two of you don't do anything stupid. Her mom and dad insist that she just focus on the wedding without you -- she needs the time with her old family before she starts a new one."

"Stupid? What would I do that would be so stupid?"

"I can't say. I don't know how impulsive you are. But believe me when I say this is the best way to handle this."

I turned to Owen -- Ultimo -- and tried to get him to plead my case. He simply shook his head. "This isn't my fight. If the Keiblers want to keep you two away from each other for a while, that's their prerogative. What am I going to say?"

I sighed and shook my head. This bothered me in ways I couldn't comprehend. Before I could reply, though, Owen added with a smile, "Besides, you're used to being away from the one you love -- what's another week between friends?"

"Hey, no rubbing it in!" Paul seemed upset. "Just let him work on it on his own. It's not your business. You have a match to worry about, anyway, Owen. I wanna see if you can make that big lug look good in the ring. You got that?"

Owen shrugged. "I've made worse wrestlers look good. Haven't you seen me take on Makhan Singh?"

Paul rolled his eyes. "Oh, get off it. That was, what, 15 years ago? This is different. Standards are higher. Maybe they shouldn't be, but they are. The wrestling fan

has become more of the wrestling connoisseur. He's not just going to sit back and take what you give him. You've gotta deliver. And to be honest, I'm not sure Nathan can deliver."

"Why, Paul? Because he's a hoss?"

"No, Jamie... because he's a green hoss! Look, guys who are 7 feet tall and 300 pounds aren't necessarily bad athletes. I've seen my share of good guys who checked in at a huge bill on the scale. Do you remember Vader? He was an awesome wrestler. Bryan Clarke could do a good match in his day. For heaven's sake, just look in the back seat -- Test has talent. The thing that worries me is experience. We're trying to disguise it right now, but eventually, Nathan will be exposed for being a novice. Our goal is to make sure it doesn't happen soon."

I pondered what was being asked of Owen. I turned to him and wondered if he knew how difficult his own task was. Owen gulped, then slowly put his Ultimo mask on. It's as though he were trying to channel Asai's spirit. *Owen Hart as Ultimo Dragon -- what an appropriate combination.*

"Say Owen," I asked, "out of curiosity... who would win between you and Asai?"

Owen smiled. "It depends on where it was. Who would look better? Well, I think we'd both look like a million bucks. We can tear the house down... too bad I won't get the chance to do that. I was kinda looking forward to teaming with Tajiri."

"Hey, there's always the house shows."

"True."

03:44 PM
Washington, DC

We checked in downtown to our hotel, as A-Train and I went up to our room. Inside was the usual things you would expect in a hotel room -- but also something else. I walked over to the bed and saw it had "Andrew" written on a card on it. I opened the card and read it.

"Andrew--

I miss you and I love you. I can't wait for Saturday, when we will be forever together. My heart yearns for you. All this time we have been apart I have wished it did not have to be. Soon it will no longer have to be. Please, think of me, even though you honor my parents' wishes. The time is almost over. I love you.

--Stacy"

"Hey, Andrew," A-Train yelled. I turned around to face him. He was holding a giant basket of assorted candies. "This was on the top shelf of the closet. You know why it's here?"

I smiled a smile that was a mile wide. "I think I do. It's Stacy... she left it for me as a gift to tide me over until Saturday."

"Yeah, Saturday... man, you ready for that?"

"I'm as ready as I can be. I'm nervous, yeah, but... I'm just glad I only work

Velocity and then I can get out of the wrestling grind for a while. I'll be back for No Way Out, don't worry. In the meantime, don't think about what I'm doing."

A-Train smiled. "Right. Anyway, can I have some of the candy?"

"Sure... why not. I might as well share what I can."

08:44 PM

We all gathered in the auditorium to watch RAW live. I sat alone in a chair, imagining Stacy's shapely figure on my lap. Kidman and Torrie sat down next to me, holding hands all the way. I turned to Kidman. "You're a lucky man," I said. "You have your love with you all the time."

"It's not as much luck as you think," he explained in his usual casual voice -- a voice he used even when speaking on-screen, which would explain why they rarely let him talk. "Torrie and I, yeah, we were lucky to find each other. But once you find that right person, it becomes a matter of perseverance. You WANT to spend all your time together. You WANT to be around each other. You NEED to have all the time in the world, and even then, it's usually not enough. The truth is, when I'm not around her -- like she's doing a photo shoot or I'm in Europe on tour -- I feel like part of me is missing. I can't stand it."

"Oh, honey, that's so sweet of you," Torrie gushed as she placed her head on his shoulder. I leaned back and thought about putting on my glasses, even though I was certain Kidman's words about a part of him missing were more truthful than even he realized. The whole locker room always talked about what a perfect couple they were -- even while I was Laree, I heard Buff come up to me and say he hoped Alexis and Joey would turn out that way. Now I saw it firsthand.

"What's your secret?" I asked. "How do you keep in love with each other? I mean, doesn't the bloom come off the rose eventually?"

Torrie leaned forward. "Oh, you mean, do we fight? Sure, we fight. Everyone does. Hey, if we agreed all the time, I'd be bored. But... the difference is that at the end of the day, what we fight about is so trivial that we can set it aside. What's most important is that we love each other. You can't top that. Ever."

Kidman added, "Besides, why would I want to hold a grudge against a beautiful woman like this? It's just not common sense." Torrie giggled and kissed Kidman on the cheek. They then gave each other a quick kiss on the lips. I rolled my eyes. *Is this what Lindsay and I are like?*

"Okay, but... I mean, Kidman... dude, doesn't it bug you what Vince has Torrie do? The Playboy shoots, the whole encounter with Jamie, the..."

Kidman laughed. "Hey, Torrie's an independent woman. We're not of one mind. She has worked very hard on her body, and if she doesn't mind flaunting it, I don't mind letting her. Besides," he said with a wink, "those who see her only know the half of it."

I shuddered. "I... think we'd better watch RAW."

- The SmarK RAW Rant for Jan. 26 / 04.

- Live from Hershey, PA.

- Your hosts are **Jim Ross** and **Dallas Page**.

- RNN: **Randy Orton** proudly holds his tag title up high and declares he'll NEVER lose it. Until it's time to be World Champ, of course. Speaking of which, his guest is **Triple H**, fresh off the Royal Rumble win no one wanted to see. Typical HHH interview follows, and no one cares until **Evolution** all hit the ring. **Batista** gets in the first shot, and it's all downhill from there for the Game. **Eric Bischoff** takes the mic and declares that HHH's win was a fluke and won't change anything. For the next three weeks, HHH has to face a member of Evolution, and if -- and ONLY if -- he beats all three will he keep the title shot. Well, considering HHH is more over than any one member of Evolution, this should be a fun way to elevate Evolution... or a fun way for HHH to squash everyone. I know which way I'd bet if Scotsman forced me.

- Women's Title: **Alexis Laree** v. **Ivory**. **DDP** and **JR** speak in hushed tones about Ivory's legit miscarriage, which I bet makes the WWE feel THAT MUCH MORE STUPID for running that Godawful **Lita** pregnancy angle. Thankfully, they've taken Lita off the air before they've been forced to show her showing, or else the whole thing would've been blown. Anyway, Laree offers a handshake to Ivory to start, and they go into a tumbling sequence. Ivory comes out ahead and clubs away at Laree's back. Ivory gets an elbowdrop for two. Laree blocks a forearm shiver and gets an armdrag and rana for two. Laree goes to a headlock as Ivory appears to be crying. Ivory suplexes her out for two. Carpetmuncher gets two. Ivory goes up top, but Laree meets her with a superplex for two. LareeDT finishes soon after at 5:03. The crowd applauds Ivory's professionalism afterwards. Laree looks 100% better than the women's roster -- except for **Molly**, but she's also got the over thing going for her -- and I wonder who they'll put her with to keep her from being bored. *1/4

- We go to a board meeting in Stamford, Connecticut, for the always thrilling sports entertainment stylings of **Linda McMahon**. Actually, we're spared her and given **Vince** instead. Vince says that WrestleMania XX will be the greatest ever. I hope so. He also says it will include a look back at the past, then announces officially the Showcase of the Immortals Match that's been rumored on the dirt sheets: 20 former titleholders together in the ring in a Royal Rumble-style event to determine who is the greatest of all time. He says the list will be made final over the next five weeks (four names per week), and vignettes will familiarize us with why each person has been selected for the honor of being the best of all time. Well, I assume they'll leave out the "they were available" explanation.

- Hmmm. Well, this is definitely feast or famine, though I'd love to see them get everyone's ego into one locker room. Presumably, they have a short list of three or four people who will win (I know who I'd have win, but I'm not **Vince McMahon**, Evil Genius), but with NWATNA trying to move up to an international presence, it'll be

interesting to see who they get. Plus Vince doesn't have the inroads to Japan, which is a shame because I was kinda hoping he could land **Muta** or **Lyger** for an event like this. I'll just have to wait and see, I guess.

- World Title: **Kane** v. **Hurricane**. I'd question what Hurricane has done to earn a title shot, but then I'd have to question what **HHH** has done, too. Hurricane flies in to start, but Kane casually catches him and slams him down. Gorilla press follows, but Hurricane slides down the back and tries to rally. Kane no-sells the rally and slugs Hurricane out of the ropes with one shot. Outside, Hurricane climbs the STEEL steps when thrown into them, then leaps into Kane's arms... earning him a one-way trip to the railing. Oops. Back in, it gets two. Kane slugs away and gets a clothesline, then goes up top for another clothesline for two. Kane yells at the ref, so Hurricane rolls him up for two. Kane then grabs the goozle, but Hurricane slides out of the ring. Kane follows and tosses him back in. Hurricane blocks a kick, but that goes straight into a KANEZUIGIRI! Hurricane is out for... two. Oh. Kane tosses him in, but misses a clothesline and Hurricane gets a desperation rana. He goes up top and hits a bodypress for two. Shining Wizard gets two. He goes for a chokeslam, but Kane grabs him, pulls him back, then BOUNCES his head off the turnbuckle into a chokeslam for the pin at 7:44. I'm beginning to dig Evil Monster Kane. ***

- Showcase of the Immortals Entry: **Stone Cold Steve Austin**. Crowd goes insane.

- **Tommy Dreamer** v. **Sylvain Grenier**. The replays of Heat show that **Rene Dupree** is insane for taking that bump as the announcers let us know that **Nick Mondo** has been suspended for a week. This pretty much gives away the finish. Dreamer punches away to start. Grenier goes low, then clotheslines Dreamer. Neckbreaker gets two. DDT gets two. Grenier hits the chinlock, but Dreamer powers out and clotheslines Grenier. Dreamer Driver gets two. Spinebuster, but Grenier hooks the neck and both men are down. Grenier up first, and he gets an atomic drop for two. Dreamer gets hooked on the post (BALLS OF STEEL~!), and Grenier drops the big elbow for two. Dreamer gets a backdrop out of nowhere and a swinging neckbreaker for two. DDT, but Dupree runs in for the DQ at 4:54. This was there. *3/4

- Showcase of the Immortals Entry: **Ric Flair**. Duh.

- **Chris Benoit, Booker T, and the Dudley Boyz** v. **Michael Shane, Randy Orton, Chris Nowinski, and Rodney Mack**. HUGE brawl to start, as all eight men go to town on each other. Mack opens up **Bubba** almost immediately, and a Nowinski dropkick into a Shane German suplex gets two. Outside, Benoit chops Orton into tiny pieces, then allows Booker a chance to slam him onto the mats. Back inside, **D-Von** scales the ropes as Nowinski tries a slam, but Bubba slides out and clotheslines Nowinski... then does Wazzup with D-Von. Time to get tables, but Mack clobbers D-Von. Booker haterizes on another brutha (Mack), then gives **Theodore Long** a piece of his mind, sucka. Belie dat. Meanwhile, Benoit delivers the Rolling Germans to Nowinski, but Shane gets a flying forearm and rana on Benoit to make him face-in-peril. Nowinski with a brainbuster for two. Orton gets Play of the Day for two. Mack tries the Blackout, but Booker kicks him

down. Evolution with a double superkick, Mack gets two. Nowinski blows a bodypress, hot tag Booker. KICKS FOR EVERYONE! Axe kick floors both members of Team Black, and a spinarooni follows... straight into the RKO for the pin at 10:44. Oops. Too much going on at once. *3/4

- **Sting** speaks! He outlines his illustrious career and puts over that he has been the man the WWE has wanted all along. It took **Shawn Michaels** to convince him to do it, though. I guess Jesus freaks stick together. He declares that he's still got it and doesn't need to be in the Showcase. Next week, he wants Michaels to lay out a time and a place. Sounds like fun.

- Main event: **HHH** v. **Batista**. Let's get it overwith. HHH and Batista slug it out to start, and Batista gets a slam to put HHH down. Batista clubs away (yawn) and gets a powerslam for two. Press slam gets two. MAIN EVENT SPINEBUSTER gets two. HHH gets a facebuster to stem the tide. And a kneedrop. Heaven forbid he ignores the knee. Hunter with a slam, but Batista tosses him in the corner and pounds him for two. Bossman slam gets two. Batista lifts HHH up, but HHH with a series of taped fists to the face to turn it into a Thesz press for two. Batista tosses HHH outside, then charges but hits post. Back in, HHH with a catapult and KICK WHAM PEDIGREE to finish at 6:59. Boring. *3/4 **Kane** charges in and mauls HHH, then declares he wants to face Hunter at WrestleMania. Career suicide, I tells ya.

The Bottom Line:

Well, it started out great, and the Showcase announcement really made things interesting, but after the title match it just sort of did nothing. HHH winning next week is a foregone conclusion, which is never smart. The Michaels/Sting meeting better be a saving grace.

Anyone else hoping HHH re-injures his quad and has to lose at WrestleMania?

12:44 AM

"Hey, Train."

"Yeah?"

"What do you think Stacy's thinking right now, back in Baltimore, planning the wedding?"

"I dunno, Andrew. She probably misses you and all. I mean, hell, I'd miss my fiancée, especially as the date drew nearer. Takes guts for her to go along with this separation."

"It's not easy for me, either. I just kinda wish Saturday would be here sooner rather than later. I'm kinda tired of waiting. You know, the Rumble was at least tolerable with her by my side."

"Well... it woulda been better if I'd been in there."

"Do I detect a little bitterness?"

"A little. I feel like I've been overlooked. I mean, look at me. I'm a monster. You telling me I couldn't do what Jones did? You telling me I can't be a superstar that way?"

"Well, c'mon, Train... you're not exactly seen as a legitimate wrestler."

"What do you mean?"

"Well... the fans think you're a freak."

"I know. I hear it all the time. You think it's my fault I grow hair all over my body? You think I like how it feels? You think it's comfortable? It's a pain in the ass! No one respects me, man."

"Hey, Train... I respect you. I think you got a good future if you wanna do this. There's always an owner out there looking for a monster heel with a good name to him. You fit that reputation. You were champion in Memphis, remember?"

"I know, I know... it just seems so long ago. I'm not sure I wanna stay in the WWE."

"Then why haven't you quit?"

"I need the money. I need to support myself. I'm not that smart, Andrew, but I know a good deal when I see one. Free transportation to see the world, fans who know your face but not your name... there's good to go with the bad. I just wonder sometimes if it's worth it."

"Well... I can't answer that, Train. Only you can."

"I know... hey, Andrew... how do you put up with people telling you how much you suck?"

"I just drown it out. Truth is, it ain't personal. They know enough to separate me from my character. Besides, after 5 years or so in the WWE, everyone knows who I am. A wrestler. I'm not a maniac or a mean boyfriend, just... just a guy. That's all we all are, Train."

"Yeah, just a guy. A guy with a hairy body who'll never get laid."

"Train, I thought that for so long. There's someone out there for you. Just give the world a try."

"I guess... it's too much to think about. It's late. I gotta get some sleep."

"All right, buddy. G'night."

Tuesday, January 27, 2004, 11:54 AM

Washington, DC

"Stacy?"

"Yeah?"

"Hi! It's Andrew."

"Oh, hi honey! How are you?"

"Just stretching out and getting ready for tonight. They got me doing Velocity duty, and after that I'll be able to come up to Baltimore."

"But Andrew... you know you're not allowed up here."

"I know, I know... it's not fair. Why do we have to be separated this long?"

"We just do. It's not my decision. I don't like it any more than you do. I'm constantly asking Mom and Dad why they're doing this, but they just say they want to

know they can trust me. Andrew, we've been trustworthy the whole time we've been together, haven't we?"

"Of course we have... why the sudden need to keep us apart? Is this a family thing?"

"Well, Dad was a military man... he says that all the travel and all the sea duty really tested his marriage with Mom. And... and he says he wants to make sure I can handle it."

"Can you?"

"So far? It's tough, but... I'm doing what I can."

"I know, babe, I know... but it's really hard. Ever since I came over here, I've... I've been kinda miserable. I mean, I proposed to you because I wanted to make sure you still loved me... that we could stay together this long."

"But Andrew... you know we can. We have. Every week is a new challenge, yes, but... every week I'm convinced I want to live with you. After we're married, I'm sure Vince will put us together again. He has to."

"Stacy, I hope he does. These two days a week or only during Pay-Per-Views... it drives me up the wall. I want to be able to say it's just temporary. I want to be able to see the light. You know how much I missed you last night? With all my heart and all my being."

"Except your stomach, I hope."

"Oh, of course! Thank you, thank you, thank you. I can't believe I forgot. How stupid of me!"

"It's all right, Andrew honey. The point is, you got it. I mean what I said -- I miss you so much, and I just can't wait for Saturday."

"I can't either. I want to begin our lives together. I've had so many times when I've wanted to jump into the body of one of those Kru guys and dance with you."

"Oh, Andrew, you're so funny! I've told Dawn Marie I wished I could get one of those fortune cookies from that Freaky Friday movie."

"That would be wild. I couldn't imagine marrying Dawn Marie!"

"Yeah, and what would her Simon say?"

"Exactly... but... I still miss you, baby."

"Oh, I miss you too. I want this week to fly by so fast. But it's just forever."

"I know."

"..."

"..."

"Honey?"

"Yeah?"

"Oh, good, you're still there."

"Yeah... it's funny. I feel connected even when we're just silent... knowing you're on the other end of the line."

"That's so sweet."

"Thanks... I... oh, hold on..... Stacy, I gotta go. Paul wants to take some Velocity guys to lunch."

"Awww, honey."

"Hey, it's free food. Besides, we'll have all week next week to talk."

"Yeah... I can't wait."

"Me either. I love you, Stacy."
"I love you so much, Andrew. Bye."
"Bye."

03:44 PM
Burke, VA

We drove by as I rattled off the directions from my memory. I hoped no one would be around as we drove by. Owen was busy putting Ultimo's mask on to make sure no one saw his identity. Jamie, who was Paul London, was trying to follow the map to make sure we could get parking. Paul was busy making dangerous lane changes and yelling at people -- as usual, when you fight traffic on a major highway. Eventually, we turned off onto Braddock Road.

As we began the long trip down to the Fairfax Memorial Park, Paul began to turn early -- and left, when the cemetery was on the right. "Paul, it's another few miles."

"I know, Andy, I know... I just need to get some gas." He turned into a station right off the road and turned off the engine. He saw that all the filling stations were empty -- except for one, which was cordoned off and had a wreath over the handles. Paul took a quick look at it and shook his head. He then ducked back in. "You wanna try another station?"

"No," I said. "I'm okay." I took a deep breath, then got out of the car. Jamie followed, but at a distance. She acted like she was stretching London's legs out, but in reality I could tell she was concerned about me. I walked around the cordoned-off station, certain what I would see on the other side. As I got there, I braced myself, even though it seemed like I'd be seeing someone else. There was my picture looking back at me in the middle of the wreath.

Jamie made it over and looked at the picture. I saw London's eyebrow raise, then his head turn to face me, switching back and forth from the photograph to me. After a while, he jogged back to the car. I stayed and looked at the picture, almost unable to comprehend that was me looking back. *Was my connection to my former self -- or my disconnect -- all that normal? What about others?*

As I walked back to the car, I heard a gasp and a thud. I ran to the car and saw that London had fainted. I began to try to revive him as Ultimo -- mask on -- ran over to help. Paul returned from the convenience store where he'd paid for his gas and saw the commotion. He ambled over as fast as he could and shouted, "Is he all right? Is he?"

We helped London to his seat. We all got in the car as London slowly revived. "Wh... wha... my God..."

"Jamie, Jamie," Paul said as the car started again. "What's wrong?"

"I... he... this is..."

I spoke on her behalf. "She just now realized that this is where I died, Paul. I think she never bothered to ask what I looked like, and... well, seeing someone staring their own death in the face..."

Paul became sober. "Jamie... did you ever have to see where you died?"

"No, I didn't. There's no marker or anything. We just all died."

"Well, I can tell you it's a bit of a shock the first time. I'm kinda glad, actually, you never had to see it. I'm not sure how someone like you could handle it."

"Oh, c'mon, Paul... it's been forever. Like I said, I'm not even sure when it was anymore. I mean, I remember the general time, but I'd have to look up the day. Maybe it's easier that way. But... how do you handle it? Owen, how do you handle Kansas City?"

Owen was silent, wearing the face Ultimo would use during his deepest pondering. "It's hard," he finally said. "But you know... I've never been back up there. I hope I never have to go back up there. Even with all the people I've been... being in the ring makes me feel more alive. I guess in that respect it's easy to avoid. But that first time... that first ever SmackDown, when... when we were in Kansas City, I couldn't handle it. After a few trips, I realized... I couldn't think of myself. It was selfish. I went out, and I wrestled that night, and... you know, I had the best match my guy had. It was therapy."

"Andy?" I didn't respond at first. Paul repeated himself, "Andy? Is this the first time you've been back?"

"No," I said. "I've been here before. And ya know -- Shawn being there... it helped so much with keeping me sane. And... and something else happened. I was Hurricane then... and that was... that was when we found out Jeff crashed. I had to immediately -- immediately -- focus on being Hurricane again. It was what I needed at the time. I had to focus on something bigger, and that counted."

By this time, we had made it to the cemetery. We got out, and I led everyone to where I was. As Jamie saw the grave, with its simple marker, she began to cry. Owen held strong. He seemed to be holding back emotion in order to comfort Jamie. "Jamie," he said, "let's go look at other people... if that'll help."

"I... I guess so."

As Owen and Jamie walked on, I looked at other people and families visiting their loved ones. I held back, wondering whether their pain could have been eased. *What if Mom and Dad knew I was now fighting on the side of good? Would they be proud of me? Would they rather wish me back and alive?*

I didn't know. I didn't think about it. I only walked back to the car, comfortable in the knowledge that I was still safe and alive.

07:24 PM

As I waited in the ring, the silhouette appeared on the TitanTron of Rey's mask. His hip-hop music played as he shot up from beneath the entranceway. The MCI Center crowd -- *my home crowd, dadgummit* -- cheered as Rey and Torrie made their way to the ring. Dawn Marie massaged my shoulders and shouted words of encouragement as I looked on. Both of them came in, and the bell rang.

Rey and I circled each other, then I tried a lockup. Rey scooted underneath, then tried a rollup, but it only got one before I kicked out. I charged, ready to boot Rey, but Rey ducked that and dropkicked me twice. I headed to the outside quickly, anticipating that Rey would dive after me, and when he did, I caught him and held him. The crowd let out a huge "uhoh" sound as I poised to ram him into the post. When I did, Rey crumpled

to the ground. I picked him up and tossed him into the ring.

As he slowly got to his feet, I charged in again with the boot, imagining Josh Matthews and Paul Heyman talking about how I was obsessing on hitting it. Rey sidestepped it, but this time I was ready and slammed on the brakes. I grabbed Rey from behind and hit a neckbreaker. I picked him up again, this time sending him into the ropes and hitting a tilt-a-whirl slam on the way out. I covered, but only got two. I tried for a second tilt-a-whirl slam, but Rey reversed it into a headscissors. I got up quickly, but he was ready with a leap to my head, from which he DDTed me. He covered, but I was up at two.

Rey climbed to the top rope, ready to dive off with a missile dropkick. I grabbed his legs and set him on the ground, then readjusted my grip. I picked him up for a powerbomb, but again Rey and Kidman had been learning off of each other and Rey reversed to a facebuster. Rey went back to the top rope and hit a legdrop to the back of my head. He tried to roll me over, but I took advantage and cradled him for two. Dawn Marie jumped up on the apron and dropped her purse -- which, needless to say, was supposed to be loaded. As the referee argued with Dawn, Rey got up and delivered a 619 to her -- um, back. Dawn flipped over the top rope and landed in the ring, drawing Torrie in. The catfight began.

As the referee cleared the women out, I picked up the purse. I looked around for Rey, but couldn't find him. When I turned to the top rope, Rey dove off for the West Coast Pop. *Or is it Hop? Cop? Drop? Whatever.* Before he could reach me, I slammed the purse right between his legs. He fell to the ground in intense pain as I tossed the purse into the aisle. Rey staggered slowly to his feet, and I booted him right between the eyes. One, two, three, goodnight.

"Thanks, man," I said as I got up. I raised my hands and celebrated with Dawn Marie. We exited the ring as replays ran for the TV audience. Dawn casually picked up her purse as we headed to the back. While we walked, I said softly to her, "I wish you were someone else, you know... no offense."

"Oh, I know," she replied. She assumed I meant Stacy. I meant Lindsay.

- The SmarKDown! Rant for Jan. 29 / 04, taped Jan. 27.

- From Washington, DC, home of 500 idiots. No, I don't mean the WWE booking committee.

- Your hosts are **Michael Cole** and **Tazz**.

- Opening match: **Tajiri, Faarooq, and Bradshaw** v. **Hardcore Holly, Matt Hardy, and Shannon Moore**. Needless to say, there's a huge brawl to start, and the faces clean house. Tajiri baseball slides straight into Shannon's mouth, while Faarooq drags Holly in by the scruff of the neck. I would say hair, but, well, yeah. **Dawn Marie** distracts Bradshaw, and Matt gets the Side Effect to make Bradshaw cowboy-in-peril. Shannon gets a rana and a dropkick for two. Hardcore punts Bradshaw low, and as the ref admonishes him, Matt gets the yodelling legdrop. Holly gets two. Shannon and Matt do a

clothesline / German suplex combo for two. Shannon tries a Twist of Fate, but Bradshaw shoves him off into a lariat. He's too tired to cover, so hot tag Faarooq. When did Faarooq get his old name back? Whatever. Powerslam gets two. Spinebuster gets two. Tajiri kicks an interfering Holly, but Matt spears Faarooq for two. **Paul Heyman** jumps on the apron, but his beltshot goes astray and hits Bradshaw, and Holly gets the pin at 6:55. Not bad, all in all. **1/4 Faarooq and Heyman argue while Matt gets a Twist of Fate on Tajiri. Is this setting up a four-way at No Way Out? Well, I suppose they could do worse.

- Quick, someone tell me a way it could get worse. I'm starting to feel complacent.

- **Stephanie** unveils a giant scroll and reads the proclamation of the King of the Ring, saying that the winner will join the list of the elite including **Austin, HHH, Bret, Edge, Owen, and Brock**. Strangely, **Mabel** doesn't make the announced list. **Billy Gunn** comes out and protests that HIS name wasn't mentioned in the list, to which Stephanie rightly replies that he wasted his chance as King of the Ring. But hey, he has another one, right about now!

- King of the Ring First Round Match: **Billy Gunn** v. **Rob Van Dam**. RVD charges the ring and attacks right away, so Gunn bails and RVD dives onto him. **Nidia** joins the ringside crew and adds nothing of note. Back in, RVD with a stepover enzuigiri and a flying kick for two. Gunn finally stops the onslaught with a full nelson slam for two. One and Only gets two. Gunn goes for a military press, but RVD somersaults out of it, only to be clotheslined by Gunn. Gunn with a flying legdrop that misses by a foot, but still it gets two. Crowd boos that. Gunn goes for the Dumbasser, but RVD rolls away and gets Rolling Thunder for two. Gunn slingshots RVD out of the ring, then sends him into the steps. Back in, Dumbasser gets two. He tries again from the top rope, but RVD powerbombs him for two. Suplex sets up the Five Star Frog Splash for the pin to advance at 7:04. Foregone conclusion, sure, but RVD seems motivated to do well. I wonder if he sees a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. **1/2

- Showcase of the Immortals Entry: **Hulk Hogan**. Well, that probably means he won't rematch with Angle, as rumored, so who's next?

- King of the Ring First Round Match: **Billy Kidman** v. **Brock Lesnar**. Kidman refuses to defend the US title, so one guess who's jobbing here. Kidman ducks under a few lockups, but gets clotheslined charging in. Brock works the neck with a camel clutch, but Kidman wiggles out and gets a rana. Brock suckers Kidman outside, where Kidman gets press slammed onto the announce table. Which doesn't break. Brock then climbs the apron and legdrops Kidman. And the table still doesn't break. Who assembled this table, **Bob Vila** or **Bob Sapp**? Back in the ring, Kidman is covered with one hand for two. Brock goes for the triple powerbomb, and Kidman takes the first two before countering. Kidman slooooooowly climbs the ropes, and Brock slams him off halfway across the ring. Brock clubs Kidman down, then gets an overhead suplex. Kidman rolls outside to take a breather, but Brock just tosses him back in. This isn't a match, it's a slaughter. Brock punches Kidman down in the corner, then goes up and gets a diving elbow for two. Kidman gets a fluke crossbody to start the comeback. He hits a running dropkick and a

spinkick to the face, then as Brock bails, gets the backflip to the outside. Back in, Kidman goes for the Unprettier, but Brock shoves him off and gets the F-5 on the rebound for the pin at 12:34. I'm a sucker for big v. little matches, and these two made it work. **1/2

Rob Van Dam re-emerges and beats on Brock to establish they'll be meeting in the quarters.

- **Kurt Angle** is out and stands on a podium wearing the WWE Title. He talks about all the awards he's won, including 5 WWE Title reigns and 2 gold medals. He declares the crowd is jealous of him, and that he's better at everything than everyone. He gets on the platform as streamers fall from the ceiling. While he celebrates himself, the announcers call him a self-centered whatever. Then **Tazz** charges the ring!!!! Tazzmission on Angle, and Tazz absolutely runs him down, calling him an obnoxious, worthless, delusional, cue-balled, lowlife, cheating, backstabbing, disrespectful, arrogant, egotistical, self-absorbed, pathetic scumball who doesn't deserve to be walking, much less holding the highest honor in wrestling. Don't hold back, dude. Let us know how you really feel. He says ANYONE can do a better job as champion than Angle can, and offers to prove it at No Way Out. Angle gets up and laughs, saying Tazz is just a color analyst, so Tazz gets a T-Bone Suplex on Angle. Angle finally agrees. I guess Angle needed something to do before WrestleMania, so why not?

- King of the Ring First Round Match: **Undertaker** v. **Rhyno**. Hmm... I think we'll be heading to the crowd a minute in. Yup, there we go. Taker pounds down on Rhyno outside, and Rhyno flees over the barricade. Taker calls for a chair, but Rhyno slams him to the concrete. More punching as they tour the work area. Rhyno tries to climb the crowd's nest, but Taker gives him an Electric Chair drop to pull him back to earth. Rhyno gets a mule kick on Taker and tosses him back to ringside, where each man hits various steel objects. In the ring, Rhyno gives Taker a neckbreaker for two. Press slam gets two. Frog splash gets two. Taker with a soupbone to take control, and a big boot gets two. Chokeslam, but Rhyno kicks Taker low and gets a spinebuster for two. Taker counters a powerslam try with a dragon sleeper, but Rhyno hooks the ropes. A second chokeslam attempt is reversed to an armbar, re-reversed by Taker into a sort-of Crossface. Rhyno makes the ropes. Rhyno misses the Gore, then eats a second big boot. Last Ride is countered by a DDT, and Rhyno hits the GORE GORE GORE... on the ref. Oops. Rhyno goes for the lead pipe, but **John Cena** runs in and clocks Rhyno with the chain. Taker tosses Rhyno in, and the Last Ride follows for the pin at 8:11. Could be worse. **3/4

- Showcase of the Immortals Entry: **The Rock**. I miss him already.

- King of the Ring First Round Match: **Ultimo Dragon** v. **Nathan Jones**. Dragon charges Jones, but gets tossed into the corner. He tries a leg trip, but Jones just steps on Dragon's neck and kicks away. Dragon is slow to get up, so Jones grabs him and flings him out of the ring. He follows, but Dragon dropkicks Jones off of the steps. The Asai falls short, however, as Jones moves. In the ring, Jones clubs Ultimo in the back, then punches him down for two. Dragon with a dropkick to the knee, but Jones blocks the forearm and pulls on Dragon's arm. Dragon makes the ropes. Jones then doubles Dragon over and absolutely punts him in the head for the pin at 4:02. Um, yeah. *1/2 Jones tosses Dragon

over the top rope and kicks him in the face on the outside, to re-inforce that he's a jerk.

- **Stephanie** refuses to replace Angle in the main event, so it's...

- Main event, handicap match: **Eddie Guerrero, Paul London, and Nova v. World's Greatest Tag Team. Haas** and Eddie start, and Eddie dominates that. Headscissors and slingshot senton get two. He catches **Shelton's** boot and spins him around into a clothesline while Nova and London dispose of Haas. Eddie dropkicks Shelton, then gets a superkick of his own. London in with a crossbody, but Shelton catches him and slams him. Haas with a German suplex for two. Leapfrog choke gets two. Shelton with a DDT for two. Haas gets mounted punches and a dropkick for two. Double clothesline gets both men two. London ducks and makes the heels collide, hot tag Nova. Spin Doctor gets two on Haas. Double superkick disposes of him, and all five men go at it. Shelton tries a Rydian bomb, but Eddie sunset flips out of it for two. Nova gets a missile dropkick on Shelton for two. Haas hits an Angle Slam for two. London with London Bridge for two. Shelton hits a 450 on Nova for two. Eddie with the Gory Special and the Frog Splash to end it at 9:33. Good finish. **1/2

The Bottom Line:

Very businesslike SmackDown!, as No Way Out has that transition feel to it. Something tells me the WWE won't be concerned if there's a low buyrate, although I wonder if Cena/Rhyno is for Mania and how they'll keep that issue going.

At any rate, I'm winning at the 411 office pool for the tournament, so I'm happy.

Friday, January 30, 2004, 10:44 AM
Baltimore, MD

Owwwwwwwwwww. Ow ow ow ow ow. My head hurts. Oh does my head ever hurt... I do not wanna get up today. Thank God the wedding's tomorrow; I don't think I could drag him through it.

Damn, what a party last night was. Everyone was so damn drunk. I think the cops must've showed up a few times. Or were those escorts dressed as cops? After a while the whole thing kinda blurs together. And there's still that smell from the bathroom.

Where's the aspirin? Oh, here it is. Awwwww, crap, the shade's open. It's too bright out. I gotta close it... if only I had the strength. Just a few more minutes. At least everyone else headed to Ohio last night -- don't have to worry about being harassed.

Where are my glasses? I knew I hid them in the drawer here and locked the drawer... now all I gotta do is get the key. Is it in this pocket? No... let's see, keep looking... pizza boxes... beer... more beer... would explain the stink in the bathroom... my shirt... my books...

Hey, what the... is this... a bra?? Oh my God. This is Trish's! How did this get here? Why isn't it with her? Did she leave it here on purpose? Wait, what's that on the

ground next to it? It looks like some paper. It's... it's got writing on it?

"Andrew -- here's a little souvenir of last night's party. If you and Stacy ever want to have me join you again, I'm game for it. Just let me know -- xox, Trish." Was she here last night? Was Stacy at my bachelor party? Oh, no... that would be a disaster! I hope she... wait... no, she wasn't. This is just a reference.

Where was I? Oh yeah, the key. Let's see... here are my good jeans... check the pocket.... Ah, bingo. Now open the drawer, and voila! Ah, the glasses are still in good condition... but am I? Oh, geez, I never thought of it. And it's too late to get to Paul now. Oh, I'm so nervous... just put them on, Andy... you're either okay or in trouble.

Hey, I think I can make it. I mean, yeah, okay, I've seen brighter... certainly it's something that would be fixed after a few hours... I don't know... I should get me to a church and just... but what do I confess? What have I done wrong? I'd feel so much better if I knew.

Whose forgiveness am I seeking? I'd better get dressed. Is it God's? No, I don't need to seek it, just ask for it. Stacy's? Lindsay's? They don't even know. Mine? Do I need to forgive myself? But... how can I be responsible if I can't remember? C'mon, Andy, think -- what happened?

Let's see... everyone barged in... then they ordered pizza... then we had some beers... then we got loud... then the pizzas arrived... then Trish came in and... oh. That's right. That's why her bra's on the floor. Did I do anything with her? What did I do? I don't remember! I gotta call...

If I had all this fun, I almost wish I could remember it.

04:01 PM

"Hi, Stacy, it's Andrew!"

"HI! How are you?"

"Easy, easy... I woke up with a big headache this morning."

"Ohhhhh... the party was last night?"

"Trust me, it wouldn't have been my idea."

"It never is. So, how much did you drink last night?"

"That's just it -- so much that the last hour or so is just fuzzy. I remember the pizza arriving, and we drank a few beers... okay, combined it was probably a few hundred..."

"Oh, Andrew, you're so funny."

"And then someone else arrived."

"Hm?"

"Um... well..."

"Oh, they brought strippers, didn't they?"

"In a way."

"What? Wai, wait a sec..."

"..."

"Um, Andrew? Trish wants to talk to you."

"She's with you?"

"Yeah, she's a bridesmaid, remember?"

"Oh, right."

"Okay, hang on."

"Okay."

"Andrew?"

"Trish?"

"Yeah, hi. Um... about the party last night... well, I told Stacy about what happened."

"Okay."

"And... uh..."

"Well, could you tell me? Because I don't remember much of anything."

"Heehee. Oh, all right. Well, about an hour in, when everyone had had something to drink, I entered and complained that I couldn't sleep. I said I was next door and that the party was ticking me off -- because I wasn't in it."

"Oh boy."

"Relax, buddy, I just ate some pizza and drank a beer with the rest of you. Well, until the boys started leaving."

"Why'd they leave?"

"A-Train started throwing up in the bathroom. He went to the doctor and everyone decided to leave and pay for cleanup. Well, everyone but me."

"Oh no... what happened?"

"Nothing, Andrew. Look, I don't let things happen to people. Besides, it was Stacy's idea."

"WHAT?"

"Yeah... you can ask her, too, if you want."

"No, I hear her laughing in the background."

"Okay. Well, just to let you know, I didn't do anything she didn't want me to do."

"You sure about that? Because, uh, you forgot something."

"I know. I wanted you to see it. I talked this over with Stacy, too."

"You did?"

"Sure... you can ask her yourself. Hold on."

"But I... oh..."

"Hi again honey!"

"Hi... did you set this up?"

"Sure! Look, I just remember how much fun you had when Trish came by that first time."

"You mean when we got engaged? But Stacy... you seemed to be having all the fun." *I should know.*

"Oh, come on... you liked it. Two hot Divas crawling all over each other and over you... how could you not?"

"Yeah, I know... but, uh... Stacy, I'd rather not think about it."

"Why?"

"Because I feel like... well, it's you I love. Not her."

"Aww, thanks. I love you too. But you know, Trish introduced us and all, and I

wanted to thank her too. That's why I did it."

"Um... did she discuss the note?"

"The one she left you? Yeah. It's okay with me."

"Really?"

"Of course."

"Look... um... at least for the first few months or so... can we just keep it to us? I want to love you, because you're gonna be my wife. You're the person I want to dedicate my life to, not Trish. I feel like... well, your open attitude kinda worries me. It's like you want to please me. Well, Stacy, you don't have to please me. You really don't. I love you. You please me by existing. That's... that's how I am. Please believe me."

"Ohhhh, thank you. You're so sweet. I understand totally. Of course... if you want us to be exclusive, just the two of us... well, when we start a family, it's how it'll be, but when it's just the two of us... if you want it to be, that's fine. The truth is, I know I'm going to enjoy that time more."

"Why's that?"

"Because we can be more free. Because I trust you more than anyone else. Because there are some things we just wouldn't do with Trish around that I want to do with you."

"Hey, whoa, Stacy... I'm the man here."

"So? I can have hormones too, you know. Andrew, I love you. I want to be with you. Just one more day. Until then... well, I guess I'll have to wait."

"Me too. I hate waiting."

"Yeah... it's so painful. I can't imagine what other people go through with their families at home. I feel like I've been waiting for you for months, not a week."

"Me too. It's like, ever since I got traded, I've felt different. I proposed to you because I had to. Because I missed you, and I knew you missed me, and I didn't want it to be that way ever again."

"That's why I accepted. Oh, Andrew, I'm so nervous. I can't wait!"

"I can't either. I wish I didn't just have to talk about it. I want to... I mean, I want to get married."

"I know what you meant, honey. It's okay. I just... you know, it's funny. I gotta go, but I don't wanna hang up."

"Me either."

"But I gotta."

"Then do it!"

"Andrew!"

"Well, what am I supposed to do? Ask you to stay on? Get you in trouble?"

"I know, I know... okay, honey... I'll see you tomorrow at the altar."

"Yeah... the altar. Bye, Stacy."

"Bye."

The altar. Oh... my... I'm gonna be married to Stacy! I don't... I shouldn't be! I gotta see Paul and get out. Let Andrew have his moment... oh, no... Paul's in Ohio. I guess I'll have to do this. I prayed for a chance to be with Lindsay... instead, I'm marrying someone else. I hope this doesn't ruin things.

Saturday, January 31, 2004, 11:30 AM
Baltimore, MD

I waited at the altar. The bridesmaids were on my right, while all the groomsmen were to my left. I leaned over to Kidman -- the best man -- and whispered, "Do the nerves ever go away?"

"They haven't yet for me," he replied. "It's love." *For Andrew's sake, I hope you're right.*

"Here Comes the Bride" started on the organ. I told myself not to look back. I waited. I heard the gasps and sounds of appreciation. I knew who was back there. Finally, I let myself turn around. There she was, wearing the all white, the veil, and the train. Even though most of her features were obscured, the person approaching me seemed the most beautiful person on earth.

She stood next to me. I looked over to make sure there wasn't a bait and switch. No, it was definitely Stacy. I looked back to the front and waited. The priest took the book and began to speak.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to witness the union of Andrew Martin and Stacy Keibler. These two have declared their love for each other, and to each other, and now wish for God and the Church on earth to be witnesses to their declaration. Let us pray.

Father in Heaven, through the Sacred Scripture you have deemed that holy matrimony shall be a sacrament and a blessing from the Most High. Your Son, Jesus Christ, acknowledged this through the miracle at Cana, and today Andrew and Stacy wish to partake in the holy union of souls. Bless them and approve them as they journey through life together. We ask this in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

"Amen." We all sat down and listened to the readings.

"A reading from the Book of Genesis." (Gn 2:18-24)

"And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him. And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof. And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him. And the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the LORD God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. The Word of the Lord."

"A reading from the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians." (1 Cor 13:1-13)

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not love, I am become

as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing. Love is patient, and is kind; love does not envy; love does not lift itself up, is not proud, Does not behave itself unseemly, seeks not its own, is not easily provoked, thinks no evil; Love does not rejoice in what wrong, but rejoices in what is right; Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails: but where there be prophecies, they shall fail; where there be tongues, they shall cease; where there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. All that lasts now is faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is love. The Word of the Lord."

At this point, the alleluias went up from the congregation. Stacy and I stood again as the priest approached the lectern, taking the Book of the Gospels and holding it ahead of him. He placed it on the lectern, and said, "The Lord be with you."

We replied, "And also with you."

"A reading from the Holy Gospel According to John."

"Glory to you, O Lord." The priest began. (Jn 2:1-11)

"And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee; and the mother of Jesus was there. And both Jesus was called, and his disciples, to the marriage. And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus said to him, They have no wine. Jesus said to her, Woman, what have I to do with this? my hour is not yet come. His mother said to the servants, Whatsoever he says unto you, do it. And there were set there six waterpots of stone, after the manner of the purifying of the Jews, containing two or three firkins apiece. Jesus said unto the servants, Fill the waterpots with water. And they filled them up to the brim. And Jesus said, Draw out now, and bear unto the governor of the feast. And they bore it. When the ruler of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and knew not whence it was (but the servants which drew the water knew), the governor of the feast called the bridegroom, And said unto him, Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse: but thou hast kept the good wine until now. This beginning of miracles did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory; and his disciples believed on him. This is the Gospel of the Lord."

As we sat down, the priest continued.

"It was at Cana that Jesus Christ performed his first miracle. It was at Cana that he showed the importance of marriage to His Church. And although turning water into wine may not seem like a major activity -- unless you're hosting a fraternity party -- it was a foreshadowing of the transformation surrounding the bread and wine. But it was more than that; it was identical to the transformation undergone by the bride and the groom.

Our first reading highlights this transformation. When Adam sees Eve for the first time, after having gone through the litany of animals, he realizes that this creature -- this being -- is his own kind. There is nothing more beautiful than the first time you see that person you know you will be in love with for all eternity. That is what Adam experienced at that moment, and that is why he praised the Lord immediately.

But why was it important that she be made of man? Why must Eve be from Adam? Because when the man and the woman are united by God in matrimony, they become part of each other. No single soul who is united in this holy sacrament can then be removed from the sacrament. It is a permanent and eternal change. It is also a beautiful and wanted and desired change. It is the greatest thing to happen to man or woman.

With this change, of course, must come love. In the second reading today, we hear of what St. Paul says about love. It is clear that love is the greatest gift that God has given to man. It is part of what separates man from the animals. In the animal kingdom, there is no love -- there is merely a hormonal drive to procreate and continue the species. Only in humanity does the idea of love become central and even override the biological union. It is why two people who cannot produce children on their own can still be very happy with each other in a way that animals cannot experience.

All this together shows us that matrimony is a blessed event. It has been sanctified by God and by Jesus; it has been observed even in Genesis, as when a man leaves his family, he joins with woman, and they become one. They unite in God. We see St. Paul show that love, the central emotion we celebrate at weddings, is the central emotion of Heaven and of God. Now, let us allow Andrew and Stacy to partake of God's love for them, and of their love for each other. Let us transform these two souls, uniting them for all time."

We stepped forward. This was the moment Andrew had been waiting for. Now, I would experience it instead.

"Andrew and Stacy, you have chosen to express your love before God and wish to be joined in the holiest of matrimony. At this time, I will ask each of you to commit to the other in the sacred ritual of matrimony."

Kidman looked at me from over my shoulder. I could feel his hand on my back as I steadied my nerves. I turned to Stacy and waited for the priest to begin.

"Andrew, repeat after me." *Here goes nothing.*

"I, Andrew Martin..."

"I, Andrew Martin..."

"...take thee, Stacy Keibler..."

"...take thee, Stacy Keibler..."

"...to be my wedded wife."

"...to be my wedded wife."

"To have and to hold..."

"To have and to hold..."

"...to love, honor, and obey..."

"...to love, honor, and obey..."

"...for richer or for poorer..."

"...for richer or for poorer..."

"...in sickness and in health..."

"...in sickness and in health..."
"...till death us do part."
"...till death us do part."

"Stacy, repeat after me." She turned to me and smiled as she spoke.

"I, Stacy Keibler..."
"I, Stacy Keibler..."
"...take thee, Andrew Martin..."
"...take thee, Andrew Martin..."
"...to be my wedded husband."
"...to be my wedded husband."
"To have and to hold..."
"To have and to hold..."
"...to love, honor, and obey..."
"...to love, honor, and obey..."
"...for richer or for poorer..."
"...for richer or for poorer..."
"...in sickness and in health..."
"...in sickness and in health..."
"...till death us do part."
"...till death us do part."

The priest turned to face the congregation, but did not ask about objections. By this time, everyone who wanted to object had done so. I turned to Kidman, who produced the ring -- a sparkling, brilliant, diamond ring which Andrew and Stacy had picked out long ago. Stacy then had in her hand a bright gold band for me. The priest turned to me again.

"Repeat after me, Andrew." I took Stacy's hand in mine and slipped the ring on her finger. I could feel her body tremble.

"With this ring..."
"With this ring..."
"...I thee wed."
"...I thee wed."

"Repeat after me, Stacy." I offered my left hand to her. She placed the golden band on my ring finger as she stared into my eyes. I could barely hear anything.

"With this ring..."
"With this ring..."
"...I thee wed."
"...I thee wed."

We looked deeply into each other's eyes. As we did, the priest finished the ceremony. "By the power invested in me by the Lord God in Heaven, I hereby pronounce

thee husband and wife. What God has joined together, may no man rend asunder. You may kiss the bride."

We kissed. It wasn't the longest kiss I'd had, nor was it the most intimate, but it was the most passionate and sincere I had ever experienced. I was partially aware of the applause in the church, but more so of Stacy's presence. I was feeling everything Andrew would -- all the joy, all the bliss, all the love. And the greatest feeling was love.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Martin!"

01:15 AM
Honolulu, HI

As we arrived in the Bridal Suite, we saw a pair of notes awaiting on the heart-shaped bed. I carried Stacy in over the threshold and placed her on the center of the bed. I picked up the first note -- it was for her. I gave it to her as I read my note.

"Andy--

This past week has been an adventure for Shawn and myself. However, we finally succeeded in keeping the two of you apart until now. We did this so that neither of you would be aware of the other. This is our surprise gift to you. I am certain this will be the greatest weekend you have had.

In retrospect, I'm not sorry I did this. I had to keep you from ruining the mission. Now that you and she are here, away from us, you can know the truth. I placed your glasses in the pocket of your suitcase. Take them out. This is our gift -- and, probably, God's gift -- to you.

--Paul"

Surprise? What's the surprise? What is he talking about -- HE kept us apart? I don't... what? I slowly reached for my glasses in my suitcase. As I did so, Stacy said to me, "Honey, could you get those plastic glasses for me? They're in the front of my big suitcase."

I stopped. *Oh... my... God... no way.* I turned around. "Stacy? Will these do?" I handed her mine as I went over to her suitcase and got hers. As I pulled them out, Stacy squealed in delight -- the most ecstatic sound I had ever heard. I slowly put on my glasses.

For the first time since I was actually in Heaven, I felt like I was in Heaven. When I prayed and prayed to God, I thought he hadn't heard me. More to the point, I thought He'd heard and misunderstood. Now I knew differently. He knew what I meant, and He had listened, and I was deemed worthy of having my prayer answered.

"Andy," she said. "I can't believe this. We got married!" She ran over to me and hugged me tighter and better than I ever had been. I wrapped Andrew's immense arms around her as I looked at her. Tears were forming in my eyes. I could barely see her beautiful face, her perfect form, her long beautiful hair. I felt weak.

Before I responded, I carried her back to the heart-shaped bed. That night, we would experience our feelings as we never had before. This was what I knew had to be

from the day we met. Although we had no bodies to join together regularly, our souls searched each other out. Now we had been given the greatest gift -- we were allowed to experience marriage on earth to each other.

"Yes... we did. I love you, Lindsay."

Sunday, February 01, 2004, 10:35 AM
Honolulu, HI

I slowly awakened. The sun filtered in through the blinds. I could hear the waves coming onto the shore. I looked down at the end of the heart-shaped bed, then out to see two suitcases -- his and hers -- side-by-side. On the side table was a colorful clock, and two pairs of glasses by it. To top it off, there was Stacy -- Lindsay -- curled up under my arm.

I slowly got up, trying to avoid waking her. I paused at the edge of the bed when I heard her move. It was merely some pleasant dream, though. I walked around the bed as I grabbed a towel. I entered the bathroom and started the shower as I let my mind wander.

I can't even begin to describe the feeling right now. I... wow. I thought I was going through the motions. I thought I was just being Andrew. I got to be married to... to Lindsay. What a feeling.

Okay, so technically I wasn't married to her -- Andrew was married to Stacy. Yeah, yeah, I know. But it's still a wonderful feeling to go through the wedding. I should have known. I should have known when I felt the wedding kiss. I should have known when she talked about being over here. Heck, I should've known when Paul was bending over backwards to keep us apart.

Paul. Shawn. Those little buggers. They felt they couldn't tell me about us. Like we couldn't wait or something. No, wait... they wanted it to be a surprise. Oh, was it ever. I can't believe they'd surprise us like this, though. Wow.

What an experience. To look into her eyes -- her real eyes, not Stacy's eyes -- and to see her there, happier than I've ever seen her before, and knowing -- knowing -- that we just went through committing our love to each other in front of hundreds... that's the best feeling I've ever had. I don't want it to end. I don't want to be away from her.

But I have to be. I have to cherish time like this. Tomorrow -- Monday -- I'll be back on the mainland as someone else. The honeymoon will be over. And Lindsay will be just another worker bee, collecting souls for the hive.

And so will I. Damn.

But I don't want to think about that. I got better things to think about. Like how she squealed with glee when she saw me. Or how she looked up there at the altar in that pure white dress... smiling back at me, and saying that with this ring, I thee wed. What a time, what a perfectly blissful time.

God works in mysterious ways, doesn't He? We wanted to be together, so He arranged for this. We prayed that we could see each other, but He took it to the next level -- and I doubted Him. I thought we had screwed up -- but He knew what we wanted in our hearts, and our prayers were answered.

But they were selfish prayers, weren't they? We wanted to have a distraction on

the job. We wanted to think about each other more than we thought about saving Vince. And now, tomorrow, we'll be back to thinking about saving Vince, having basically abandoned Owen, and Stefani, and Jamie. Did we do the right thing?

No, we haven't abandoned anyone. I haven't abandoned any of them. This is all part of the experience. We were put here because God thought better. This is our consolation prize, I guess. After suffering and learning more about love and life and each other, He gave us this opportunity to see if our commitment was ready. Well, it was ready. I think it was. I wish I knew.

Did we do this just to be selfish? How does she feel? Does she love me still? Or now that we finally went through this, is she going to realize I'm not the person she thought I was? I know I wanted to get married there, but I thought I was just acting. When I found out who she was... my heart soared. It hasn't come down. I want us to be married. For real. Forever. Does she? Does she even...

My thoughts were interrupted when the bathroom door opened. I heard footsteps approaching the shower stall door. It opened. Stacy was standing just outside the shower, naked. She smiled. "I was wondering," she said, "if there would be any room for me in there, Andy."

I smiled. "Of course," I said. She giggled and stepped into the shower, closing the door behind her.

08:24 PM

We spent a wonderful day together out on the beach. While Stacy preferred to work on her tan and pretend to sleep, I decided to try my hand at surfing. Admittedly, a 6'6 man doesn't exactly have the balance necessary for controlling a wave, and this combined with my novice status led to many wipeouts. But still, I tried.

After a romantic dinner for two out by the ocean, we walked back in, hand in hand, laughing and smiling, to our suite. We kissed just behind the door and slowly seemed to melt into each other's arms. A divine day -- provided by divine intervention -- was set to come to a perfect end.

I picked her up off of her feet and carried her to the bed. I set her down gently on the covers and kissed her again as she drew me to her. I moved my hand down her side as I climbed onto the bed and hovered over her. I looked into her eyes, ready to plunge into strengthening the bond we had. "I wish we could be together forever," I said.

"We are, silly," she replied. "We just got married." At this point, reality hit me right between the eyes. Everything I had thought of alone in the shower before she arrived rushed back to me. *We won't be together forever. In fact, odds are that in a couple months, we'll never hear from each other again. How do I tell her without killing the mood?* "Andy? Dear? What's wrong?"

"Lindsay... as much as I want this to last... you know it won't."

"I don't understand."

"Tomorrow's Monday."

She stopped. "Oh... oh dear. That means we... oh, I don't want to leave!"

"But we have to go back, don't we?"

"I know..." she sighed. "Andy, I... I wish we were together for real."

"But you know we can't be."

"I know, I know... it doesn't stop me from..." she seemed totally upset. "I don't wanna think about this. We have one more night together, Andy. Why should we focus on the bad?"

"Well, we should at least not get carried away. Remember, as soon as Vince is decided, we say goodbye. We may never see each other again."

"No... it can't be. We're in love."

"You told me yourself. You said it was. Oh, Lindsay, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... how did this happen?"

"It just happened. But I wish I knew of a way. This isn't fair. It isn't. I don't wanna think about it. Andy, we have one more night together. Let's focus on that. I don't want to think about us being apart."

"But we have to."

"Not now we don't... Andy, I love you... I just know that God will make things work out. I don't know how or when, but He will. He brought us together at the altar. He can bring us together in the afterlife. Trust Him, Andy. Let go of your worries and let Him show you the way. Tomorrow, we'll think about Vince and about others and about being apart, but now... we have us. God gave us that. Don't waste it."

I looked into her eyes, hoping to come up with something. *She's right. We have tonight. Why am I so worried about the future? Why can't I look what I have right in the face and enjoy it? Is it a fault with me?* "I'm sorry, Lindsay... I'm such a killjoy."

"No, no... don't apologize... Andy, please. You're trying really hard. I understand we don't have long together. I thought of it too. But that's why I want this time. I don't want to kill the mood. How can I? Think of all the fun we had together. Doesn't that mean something?"

"Yeah... it does... I'm sorry." I leaned in and kissed her again, slowly rolling her on top and moving my hands around her sides.

"Thank you."

The dream began.

I wasn't in the usual Tunnel. I was in another one, facing one way. I couldn't figure out why -- maybe because I was coming back from Hawaii. I looked around. There was Lindsay, right next to me. We started to walk down the tunnel.

"Are you sure this is the right way?"

"I think so." *Besides, I don't see anywhere else to go.* We walked on. Along the way, I thought I saw a glimpse of the familiar. In various places, a patch of wall paint or a ceiling light told me I had walked this path before. All the while I held Lindsay's hand, occasionally looking back and smiling at her. Her smile back made me realize she had no more of a clue where we were headed than I did.

We came closer to the end. I couldn't see anything directly in front of me except the wall. From the curvature of the sides, I realized we were headed to a T-junction. That was all I knew. I moved slowly into the junction. I could barely see past the nose on my face. We walked into the wall on the other side, then stepped a few steps back and

waited. *Anything could be here. This could be a trap.*

Just as my anxiety reached its peak, a single light shone over our head. I looked around to find anyone else who may have turned it on. I couldn't see any more than before. Then, a second light went on down the hall we had arrived from. Then more lights. Soon, the whole place was ablaze.

It was the old Dream Tunnel. And standing at the SmackDown! end, smiling and with his hands on a set of lightswitches, was Owen. He moved toward us, smiling and laughing. "I saw the looks on your faces. Why'd you come here if you were so worried?"

"I thought we had to," I said.

"Well, I guess you did. Anyway, I just wanna say congratulations on the marriage. Yeah, I know, you didn't really get married... well, kinda."

"Kinda?" Lindsay asked, with a puzzled look on her face. "What do y... you me... oh no..." her breath shortened. Her eyes widened. She began to get a panicked expression. She clung tighter to me, staring into my eyes. I could see the veins in her eyes as her breath seemingly became more constricted. "H... Hel... help m... me..." but it was too late. She collapsed.

I leaned over her, checking her pulse before realizing spirits had no pulse. I turned to Owen, confused and scared. "Is she... what's going on?"

He merely smiled. "Don't worry about it. Happened to me before." He pointed to something on his wrist -- probably Martha's heart, but I couldn't tell through my suddenly blurred vision. "Just let it happen," he said. I had trouble breathing. I was losing my balance. I leaned over Lindsay to try to help her, but could barely help myself. I felt faint.

"Andy? Are you up now?"

I woke up, face down, on a green surface. I was still in the Tunnel; that I knew. I tried to figure out how long it had been. Owen was standing over me. He must have been talking to me, though in my state I couldn't discern male voice from female completely. I groaned a reply.

"It's all right. Take your time. It happens to all of us. I saw it happen to a couple of people during Vacation. You're going to be fine. Just take your time standing up... you've been through a rough procedure."

"P... pr... what?"

"I can't explain. You'll have to see it for yourself. When you get up, I'll point it out to you. I saw it all happen. You had to be knocked out for it, or else you would've fought it. But it's the right thing to happen."

"Wh... what... what a..."

"Shhh. Get your strength back. Get up. Here, maybe I should help." I saw an arm reach down to me. I grabbed it and allowed Owen to pull me to my feet. "Now, listen. What happened just now... well, I'm sure the two of you being together for the wedding wasn't a coincidence anymore. This was part of it. When God sees two people in love, don't you think that death isn't an obstacle? I mean, He'll find a way."

"What are you talking about?" I could barely clear my head. Owen was rambling on about coincidences and the wedding, and here I was, having just lost hours off my life -- well, some amount of time, anyway -- and trying to figure out where I am. "Owen..."

what just happened to us? Where's Lindsay? Is she okay?"

Owen smiled and slowed down. "Look at yourself for a second." I did. Everything seemed normal. I still had full tone -- no fading. I was still in the same clothing. *Same shoes. Same socks. Same white shirt. Same stains. Same patch on it. Wait a minute...*

I took a closer look at the patch. It was entirely black -- much like Lindsay's outfit. It seemed to be made of a different fabric than the rest of the shirt. Further, it felt different. I touched it, trying to see what it was made of. At that point, it slid out of me -- I saw it had depth. I also saw its shape.

It was in the shape of a heart.

"Owen? What happened?"

He beamed. "Doesn't it look familiar?" As he spoke, he held up his wrist -- to which Martha's heart was attached. "How about now? You're a different entity than you were when you were knocked out, Andy. You're not yourself anymore -- nor, really, can you ever be again. You've changed. But it's a change you want."

I stared at Martha's heart, then at the heart-shaped chunk in my hand. I noticed an armband attached to the bottom of it. I slid the heart on my right arm and looked at it. Everything came to me at once.

"Where is she?"

"I'm over here." Lindsay emerged from the shadow of the third tunnel. She had tears in her eyes. She gave me a huge hug. As she did, I noticed something didn't feel right with her, either. I pulled back and looked at her. Her heart was cut out too, and on her left arm was a white and red patch -- which would fill the hole over my heart completely.

"Does this... does this mean what I think it does? Owen, are we...?"

He nodded, the smile on his face seemingly growing to a mile wide. "When Andrew and Stacy were at the altar, the two of you pledged your love to each other. God knew it existed -- that's why He must have arranged for your assignments. What God joins together, no man can separate -- and that applies to souls, too. You two are married -- not just them. You are joined together for all eternity. Congratulations."

We both brought him in and hugged him together. We were all laughing and crying tears of joy. It was the greatest feeling of happiness I had ever felt. God had listened, after all. God knew I wanted to be married to Lindsay, and she to me. He had arranged it all along! Our souls were united forever.

"Does this mean... even after... that we...?"

"Yes, it does, Lindsay," Owen said with a knowing smile that never left his face. "When we're all done here, the two of you will be kept together. Every assignment you'll have, you'll have with each other. You may not be near each other, but you'll be in each other's hearts -- or more to the point, they'll be in you."

I looked Lindsay in the eyes. "We did it," I said. "I love you."

"I love you too," she said before breaking down in tears again.

"Owen," I asked, "is there any way we... I don't know... could be together?"

"You want me to leave? Sure. I'll be over in SmackDown!. See you tomorrow."

As Owen left, I looked at Lindsay again. "Lindsay, baby... we're together. I can't believe this. What's wrong? Are you okay?"

She shook her head. "Nothing's wrong... I'm so happy. Oh, Andy, I never thought... but now... now being apart is gonna be so much harder."

"But, Lindsay... we don't have to be apart forever. Every night, we can meet right here and talk. And just... be together. Being with you... it's worth waiting years after years for Heaven. You're my preview of Heaven right here. All I need is to know that you're alive and that you love me and that... that we'll see each other. Please. Can we do that? Can we stay together?"

Her tears began to dry a little. "I want to be together every day. I want to be there or here with you. It's going to be so hard, getting through the day without you around. I really missed you so much. And now... now that we're united... why do we have to be apart?"

"Lindsay, please... think of Owen. He's been away from his wife for five years. He's got it worse than us. He's gotta see her in her dreams. He... Lindsay, you can do this. Please. Don't throw it away because you want it one way or no way. I want to be with you every moment of every day, but we gotta work it out. Can you do this for me?"

Silence reigned for about a minute. She slowly lifted her head to look into my eyes. She nodded deliberately. "All right," she said. "I'll see you here. Every night. I need it."

"Of course... I'm sorry. We have to go now. The sun's almost up. I'll see you again tomorrow night. I love you, Lindsay."

"I love you too... goodnight."

We hugged for the longest two minutes I had experienced. I looked at her heart on my sleeve, then at mine on hers. We kissed quickly, then slowly separated. She headed to RAW, and I headed to SmackDown! -- but deep down, we both knew that our time apart was only temporary compared to the eternity together awaiting us.

Monday, February 02, 2004, 09:44 AM
Toledo, OH

I slowly arose from my bed. "Finally," I heard a voice say. "I thought you were never getting up, buddy." I opened my eyes to see Hardcore Holly standing at the foot of my bed, rather upset. "You said we were gonna get breakfast together, and now you're off sleeping in till all hours. Dammit, get a move on before the breakfast bar closes."

"All right, mate, I'll get moving." *Did I just say what I thought I said?* I got out of bed and stretched, nearly scraping my knuckles against the ceiling. I looked to Holly -- more to the point, down at Holly, who was now a good eight inches shorter than I was at least. I slowly moved to the bathroom to splash water on my face, and in doing so, I got a good look at myself.

I was huge. I had muscles where muscles had no business being. I was nearly bald, much like Holly, but with a shade of a beard that made me look like a criminal. *Wait, I am a criminal!* Everything hit me at once, but I still needed confirmation. I quickly searched a bag next to me -- making sure to stick the glasses I found inside it in my pocket -- and found a wallet. On the wallet was written a calligrapher's work.

"N. Jones."

My name is Nathan Jones. G'day.

TO BE CONTINUED