



THE INVINCIBLE MANBOY

THE TAO OF DISASTER

By Stephanie Forte

A man's perseverance defines his character, but a boy's belief that he's indestructible can kill him. Such is the case with Canadian Steve Townshend, aka ManBoy. "There's something messed up about me," thought Townshend after surviving a lightning strike at age 15. "I just can't die." Over the seven years of Townshend's climbing career, vagabond-climbing habitués have come to recognize ManBoy as synonymous with epic. Having tallied 17 catastrophes by his 18th birthday (including a near-drowning, a bear attack, and the aforementioned lightning strike), Townshend's closest brush with death was an 80-foot grounder at Arizona's Virgin River Gorge (VRG). Undeterred by multiple broken bones, countless stitches, and four knee surgeries, Townshend, now 22, worries that the injury clock is still ticking.

In 1996, rumors spread about a *sick strong* climber on the Ontario, Canada, climbing scene. "I heard you were The Man," said a skeptic watching Townshend, then 15 and a neophyte climber, huck for holds at the gym. "But you're no man, you're just a boy." So he compromised: "I'm gonna call you ManBoy." The nickname stuck, fitting Townshend's boyish good looks and 6-foot-4-inch frame, which brims with youthful energy. "It's like letting a puppy loose in your house," says longtime friend and climbing partner Sonnie Trotter. "You just know he's gonna make a mess."

ManBoy's first accident — at age 18 months — occurred when he snapped his leg in two places while jumping on the bed. "They put a cast on and he wasn't supposed to walk," recalls Townshend's mother, Jan, "but within three days he was running everywhere." In town, people came to realize that a kid racing around with a cast meant that the Townshend family was nearby. "If I didn't see my doctor every month," says Townshend of his formative years, "he assumed I was dead." Now, when the full-time climber who, until recently, had lived out of his car for four years, shows up at home, it usually means he's recovering from an injury.

ManBoy's insatiable appetite for exploration often triggers spontaneous decisions, like the one that caused his first Brush With Death (BWD), at age three. Intrigued by a strange blue "patio" at his neighbor's house, Townshend found himself trapped, and sinking, inside a swimming pool's solar-blanket cover. Though Townshend says he "should have died for sure," his neighbor dove in, unwrapped him, and saved his life. This incident in no way dampened his curiosity, however.

"What would it be like to be behind the wheel?" wondered ManBoy later that year, waiting, fastened in a child-safety seat, in his mother's car in a neighbor's driveway. Quickly escaping the seat, he took his first joyride. It was a short-lived experience: Since he was too small to reach the gas pedal, he was able only to throw the car into "drive," smashing through the garage door and into a parked car inside.

ManBoy's next BWD came at age 14 on an overnight summer-camp outing, while sleeping in a canoe. When heavy breathing woke him, he thought maybe a raccoon was rummaging through camp. Upon opening his eyes, however, he found a full-sized bear in search of food lumbering toward him. Townshend tried to keep still, but couldn't stop shaking. "The bear didn't seem angry — just hungry," he remembers. The bear slowly nudged Townshend, then pushed him around like a rag doll. After a few minutes the beast lost interest and moved on. Though he

wasn't injured, Townshend gained a serious fear of bears.

A year later, working as a camp counselor north of Toronto, ManBoy added to his BWD portfolio as he was shepherding a pack of campers toward refuge after a nighttime thunderstorm had flattened their tents. Like a *man*, he acted as the group's guardian. Yet the *boy's* decision to hold a flashlight above his head in a lightning storm had its consequences. As the sky erupted, an electric shock coursed through his body. "I felt it in my waist, going down my legs and out my feet. I knew what had happened," he says, "but I didn't believe it."

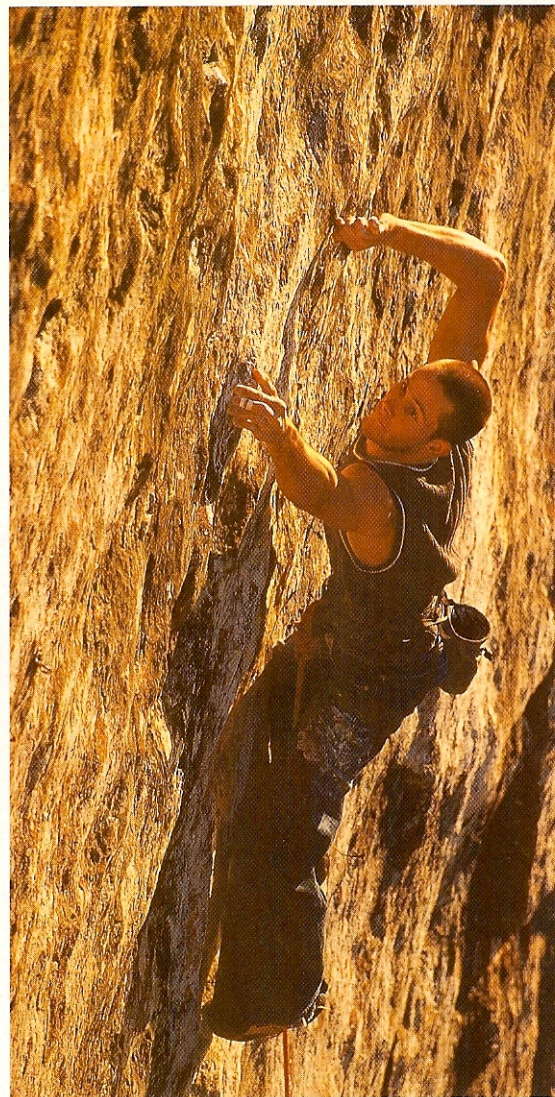
As the flashlight rolled to a stop beside him, the fearful cries of his campers echoed through the woods. But within seconds Townshend was on his feet, leading his group to shelter. In shock, he reached the camp's main cabin and collapsed. Later, at the hospital, his heart beat so erratically that doctors thought it might stop.

"He's one tough kid," says Trotter. "Like a rock." Townshend is also eternally optimistic, possibly a result of listening to motivational tapes while riding in the car as a child with his father, Des, a salesman. After a botched knee surgery at age 17 sent him home in excruciating pain to wait a week before undergoing two additional surgeries, Townshend made the best of the ensuing eight-month layoff by pouring his energy into physical therapy and rigorous training. He returned to the rock on-sighting 5.12c — previously his hardest redpoint.

"He only thinks about what's happening right now," says Trotter. "He truly lives life moment to moment."

The moment that nearly ended ManBoy's saga came in January 2000, when the belayer's end of the rope whipped through the draws on the VRG's *F-Dude* (5.14a), sending Townshend into an 80-foot freefall. Neither Townshend nor Trotter, his belayer, had tied a knot at the end of the rope. As Townshend lowered past the route's midway point, the rope flew through the belay device giving him time only to realize, *I'm about to deck*.

Trotter quickly took position on the steep, limestone-slab landing zone in an attempt to break the fall. Townshend tried to land feet first, but the impact of his airborne body knocked Trotter flat. The duo lay locked, still, and covered in blood. Townshend's eyes filled from a gushing head wound, with the left side of his face

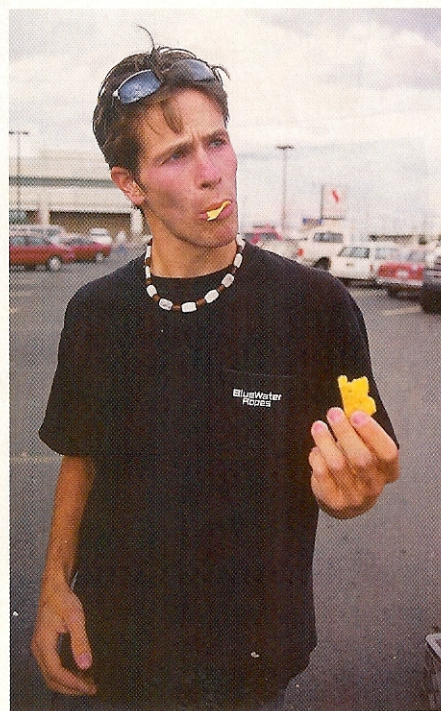


Accident-free on the *Lion King* (5.13c), Lion's Head, Ontario.

bruised almost beyond recognition. The uncertainty of death drowned the highway noise below, an eternity passing before a sign of life left his lips ... as a moan for help. "I thought I might die before the ambulance arrived," he recalls.

Later, amid the chaos of a Las Vegas trauma center, Trotter and I speculated about Townshend's probable internal injuries. Yet his bruises and cuts healed nicely, and Townshend suffered only a chipped bone in his foot. (Trotter injured the knuckles of his left hand.) For Jan, the VRG incident is compelling evidence that some higher power looks out for her son. "A long time ago I put it in the hands of the Father," she says.

Recovering from the groundfall, Townshend never felt defeated. Arriving home wheelchair-bound, he asked for a paper and pencil, then sketched every hold on *F-Dude*. He did



hundreds of pull-ups and ab crunches, and spent hours on the finger board and weight training. It didn't faze Jan when her son drove straight to the VRG the following May, on the day he could finally squeeze into climbing shoes. "He won't slow down when he's that badly injured" she says. "You know he's determined."

Despite scorching temperatures, he did the route with one hang. "I wasn't scared to climb past the bolts or fall," says Townshend, now in the habit of tying two knots at the belay end of his rope. Returning in February 2001, he clipped the anchors on redpoint.

Four months later ManBoy again tested his threshold for pain — on the *Titan*, a stout 5.14a at Ontario's Lion's Head. Gunning for the anchors, he heard a familiar snap from his left knee. He knew the noise — and the pain — meant a return trip to the OR for his fourth knee surgery. Instead of giving up in the face of the intense pain, he continued up the final, 5.11 section of the route. Deciding that one foot was better than none (and definitely better than falling), he tried hopping to the anchors. Though he fell, this only fueled his fire during rehab.

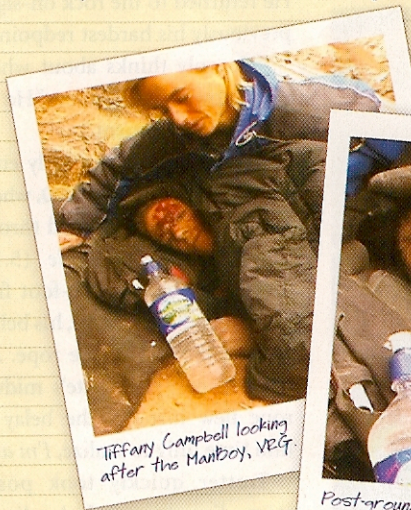
Increasingly more introspective, ManBoy explains, "I've learned that when the worst-case scenario happens, I can handle it." Driving south to Guatemala to study Spanish in 2002, he figured the biggest disaster would be having his 1989 Chevy Corsica break down in the middle of nowhere ... which it did. Though Townshend spoke only a few words of Spanish, he finagled a ride to a small town and coaxed a mechanic into helping him. Over those three days, his ManBoyish charisma went much further than the few pesos in his pocket.

"You can only be a climbing bum for so long," he says, attributing his first epic-free year to having *mellowed out*. "That's part of why I want to get responsible and work really hard." Now living in Squamish, British Columbia (and fluent in Spanish), he's working construction while considering a lucrative property investment in Honduras and hatching plans for a year in Spain. "Signing a long-term lease is forcing me to be responsible," he says. Then he mentions his time frame for increased accountability, i.e. the duration of his lease: six months.

Like a boy, Townshend has no self-imposed limitations, with every idea a viable reality. Reflecting on the many times he's escaped death, ManBoy now has a greater

The ManBoy's many epics — a chronology of pain

- 12/27/80: Steve Townshend born, six weeks premature.
- 18 months: Breaks his leg in two places after taking a fall while jumping on the bed.
- Age 3: Nearly drowns attempting to walk on solar blanket covering neighbor's pool.
- Age 3: Drives mother's car through neighbor's garage door, smashing into a parked car.
- Age 6: During gymnastics class, when instructed to climb 15 feet up a rope, goes 30 feet to the ceiling. Tries to grab the rafters, finds them coated with dust, and slips off. Grabs the rope to check his fall, resulting in burns on his chest, legs, and arms.
- Age 8: Fractures ankle while jumping a flight of stairs — 18 steps at a time.
- Age 13: Breaks arm in two places when his toboggan hits a tree.
- Age 14: Has a major reaction to poison ivy.
- Age 15: Attacked by bear on camping trip.
- Age 16: Struck by lightning while working as a camp counselor.
- Age 17: Undergoes three separate surgeries to repair a torn meniscus and snapped ligament in his knee. Eight months of intense physical therapy follow.
- Age 18: Doing trail work with a 30-year-old pickaxe at a crag in Mexico, drives a piece of wood completely through his hand.
- Age 18: On a rest day in Rifle, Colorado, decides to investigate a corroded culvert that drops into a spring. Ends up with two broken teeth and nine stitches in his chin.
- Age 18: Fractures wrist dynoing at the gym.
- Age 19: Cycling on a busy street, loses balance while avoiding another cyclist and flips over his handlebars into oncoming rush-hour traffic. Badly bruised, he is unable to move for three days: "I probably should have gotten run over."
- Age 20: Survives an 80-foot groundfall at the Virgin River Gorge and is airlifted to the local trauma center.
- Age 21: While climbing to the anchors of *Titan* (5.14a) he snaps a ligament in his knee — requiring knee surgery for the fourth time.
- Age 22: Car breaks down in the middle of nowhere in Mexico, resulting in a three-day mission to find help and get back on the road.



Tiffany Campbell looking after the ManBoy, VRG.



Post-groundfall at the VRG.

appreciation for his life. "I'm getting older; I need to settle down a bit," he says. "If I have nine lives like a cat, I've already gone through 20."

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