

»Don't be a hero.«

My grandfather told me this in the cab of his pick-up truck. I was 13. And I was in trouble.

I had been dismissed from junior high for starting a fight. A certain half-wit had been making obscene and nonsensical sexual comments toward two girl friends of mine. I asked him to stop. He threatened me. I put him in a headlock. He bit a chunk out of my side. We went to see the principal.

"You don't know this, but it's better to live like a dog than to die like a lion." My grandfather never gave me advice. He taught me how to sow a garden, how to use wood-working tools, how to play poker and dominoes. He gave me instruction; this advice was the first. I didn't know how to take it.

"I'd rather live like a lion." This was all I had to say. He hovered next to me, contemplating whether I'd said something smart-alecky... or just smart. There was a storming silence between us.

"Well, did you whoop that other fellow?" he asked, giving me back his approval.

Fast forward. December 31st, 2004, 2:45 a.m. I'm holding onto the window of my friend's SUV. It's moving at roughly 40 km/H. Inside the vehicle: my friend's digital camera, his iPod, a stack of my CDs... and an absolute stranger.

I don't care about that. I have two things on my mind: 1, every journal I'd put thoughts down in over the last 6 years is in the backseat, and 2, thieves are assholes.

Two knuckles on my right hand are bleeding from busting this car-jacker in the zygomatic bone. My

left buttock is currently being shredded by the brick wall he's grazing me across. When there's no more wall, he guns the engine and pulls a hard right. I spill off the car and roll over four lanes of (luckily) traffic-free asphalt.

I stand up in the street, watching those red running lights disappear like a penny dropped in deep, clear water. My socks are soggy with blood. My shoes are somewhere back in the alley.

Five hours later, I'm getting stitched up in the ER. I've detailed my attempt at preventing this robbery to the police, admitting nurses, and now my surgeon. The old black guy next to me getting his cysts drained has taken to calling me "Superman".

When I decided to move to Slovenia, I sold everything I owned. I threw caution to a NASA-simulation wind tunnel and put my faith in a calendar full of question marks. "That's so brave," all my friends said. Upon arriving here, and telling people about garbage heaping my entire life in Manhattan, I got pretty much the same response. But bravery is a gnat; it's in the eye of the beholder.

I don't think I'm brave. I think I'm an extremely poor decision maker. I'm a hothead, an idealist, and a hater of boredom. You bundle these qualities up and you don't get Jeanne d'Arc. You get an idiot.

OK, sometimes I'm an idiot. I'm comfortable with that. Tomaž Humar is an extreme idiot. But he's my kind of idiot. I'm glad that he failed in his attempt to climb Nanga Parbat. That means he'll try again. Or someone else will. Idiocy, too, loves company.

The most interesting angle I discovered while listening to people talk about Tomaž Humar was that a great number of Slovenians resented his bravado, as if he had broken some unspoken code of conduct. For them, Slovenia is a small, quiet country, incapable of producing these lunatics deadset on self-promotion, self-expression, and possibly self-annihilation.

These sentiments smacked of some Miss Manners-type shaking her finger and quipping "Such things just aren't done!"

But the media circus needs this balance. If "Dream Girl" can be on TV for something as tiresomely mundane as picking out her next boyfriend, why can't the Humars and Strels of this country soak up sponsorships, public attention and, maybe, just maybe, glory by doing something no human being should EVER attempt?

It all reminds me of Cocteau's quote: "Stupidity is always astounding no matter how often one encounters it." But neither stupidity nor bravery have much to do with being a hero.

Every so often, I'm a hero. I give extremely thoughtful presents. I hold the door for the elderly. I defend women against verbal assault, and chase down criminals.

And I scale mountains by cog-rail. ■



