

Excerpt from “Mad Dog”

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At that moment three years ago when John Casey had signed up for University Challenge, he could not have known that the BBC cameras would love him, that the incongruity of his Washington Senators baseball cap, his impossibly swift answers to questions from any academic field, and his penchant for the exclamation “Who da brain man!” would make him a stand-out on the Lancaster University team. He had no way of guessing that tossing his head back and howling after each correct answer, something he started on a total whim and then continued even after he had been scolded and told to stop, would earn him the status of nationally adored rascalion (John “Mad Dog” Casey).

After all, the real John Casey was just an egghead foreign exchange student, a homesick, small-town Virginia boy with the musical talent to be a concert pianist, the first Casey to go to college instead of right into the Toyota dealership off the southbound I-66 Smoky Ordinary exit. His family, which had lived in Smoky Ordinary for five generations, actually owned the elephant in the local TV ads, the one on which Grandpa Red perched when he shouted his message about ten tons of terrific Toyotas. “This will all be yours,” Grandpa used to whisper to John when all of the other cousins were outside playing football and the two of them were at the piano bench. Then he would gesture to a framed photograph of the elephant with a distant, misty admiration. “You’re the only one

who's as smart as Bessie." But, as it turned out, the future had other plans for John Casey.

At first, as the acclaim grew, and as John grew into his Mad Dog persona, everything had seemed fan-freaking-tastic—there was an exclusive interview in *The Sun*, an appearance on *This Morning*, four months later a ghost-written autobiography (*Mad Dog*), and two months after that a top 20 album featuring him on piano and primal wail (*Mad Dog*). There was a particular A-list London party during which he snuck into an upstairs parlour to play Rachmaninoff's piano concerto number three in D minor on a baby grand, and ended up impressing his favourite hip-hop artist, Suga Bear, who stood in the doorway and clapped when he finished. Since then, the two of them had become friends, real friends who talked about music, art, the hassles of fame; it was like something from his dreams.

And the money. God, the money. His accountant made him buy stuff, property and the like, just so he could keep some of that money busy.

Now, though, he understood that he was trapped on this island by his own condition as a minor celebrity. He'd had his fifteen minutes, a backlash was forming, the US populace hadn't the faintest idea who he was, and the UK was the only place where the term "comeback" was going to make any sense. Only, when he did come back, he was determined to be known this time for what he *was*. He *was not* just some idiot savant pop-singing redneck here for the amusement of know-nothings who bought *The Sun* and ogled the topless girl on Page Three. He *was not* what that critic in *The London Review of Books* said last week – "the clearest indication of a people beset by the tremulous urge to crawl back into the trees and communicate via guttural emissions from whatever aperture

is most convenient.” He *was* in MENSA; he held degrees in music and European history from UVA; his professors had assured him that his abilities as a pianist could afford him a professional standing.

In order to reinvent himself, he just needed a bit of preparation. At his first acting lesson, last week, his coach told him he had potential. With his wholesome everyman looks and his natural ability to feel the words as he spoke them, he could be a Brando or a Dean -- *if* he could re-direct himself. Instead of bursting out everywhere, like a ray of sunshine, he should be a charcoal briquette, still and maybe even grey on the outside, pulsing hot within. He wasn't sure he wanted to be enigmatic like that, though. He hadn't enrolled in the class because he wanted to become an actor, but rather in order to learn how to project the person he felt he actually was on the inside.

So, no matter how his publicist begged him, he would not howl. Not now, not ever again. The howling had become forced in recent months anyway, something he did because someone pointed at a camera and said do it. There was no emotion in it now. It made him feel like someone waking up on the floor the morning after a party, realizing that prancing around with the hostess's pantyhose on his head had been hilarious only while it was happening, and then mainly to himself.

He refused to miss his mother and his father and his brothers and cousins back in Smoky Ordinary, Virginia, or to dwell on the fact that everyone back home saw his enthusiastic nature as a good thing (“Full of the joys of spring, that boy”) and never as a lack of finesse, the way people did here. It was true that the people who knew him best were easily fooled by a forced positive attitude. Back home, if he grinned and had a strong handshake, everyone would assume he was a perfect example of virtue. No one

back home had a shit detector, that was for sure. But he preferred this positivity to the European philosophy on life, which as far as he could tell was, *Everything sucks. And yes, this includes you, loser.*

His growing anger toward his decidedly B-list girlfriend helped him to stay strong, to stay focussed on recovery, on climbing to the top, far away from her. She was right now, in fact, nagging him about his dog, Stevie -- droning on and on in an accent that some time ago he had stopped finding quaint or charming.

There were two things he would not do in response to her annoying complaints. First, he would not wrestle her to the floor and tickle her until she wet her pants or had sex with him. That had gotten old. And second, he would not pick up the nearest item that belonged to her, in this case a Ted Baker handbag, and throw it out the living room window. He wasn't there yet. The urge to do something dramatic was just an itch in his stomach, an itch he could hold inside him.

"It's not your fault," said John to Stevie, who had left a trail of paw prints on the dining room chairs; Stevie was small for a black Labrador, and had the habit of hopping onto furniture to make himself more imposing. "You're a beautiful animal and you can get on the table any time you feel like it," John said. He scraped some dirt off a dining room chair with a still-sealed letter from his publicist, Ian Hawthornthwaite. Letters from Ian gave John the urge to go home, but still he refused to miss Mexican food and Reese's Peanut Butter Cups and Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July. He refused to miss Bunny O'Connor's annual Barbeque Wing-Ding out on her farm. He absolutely refused to miss Amber, his younger sister by eleven months, his closest friend in the world, so much like him they nearly shared a photographic, 140 IQ brain.

