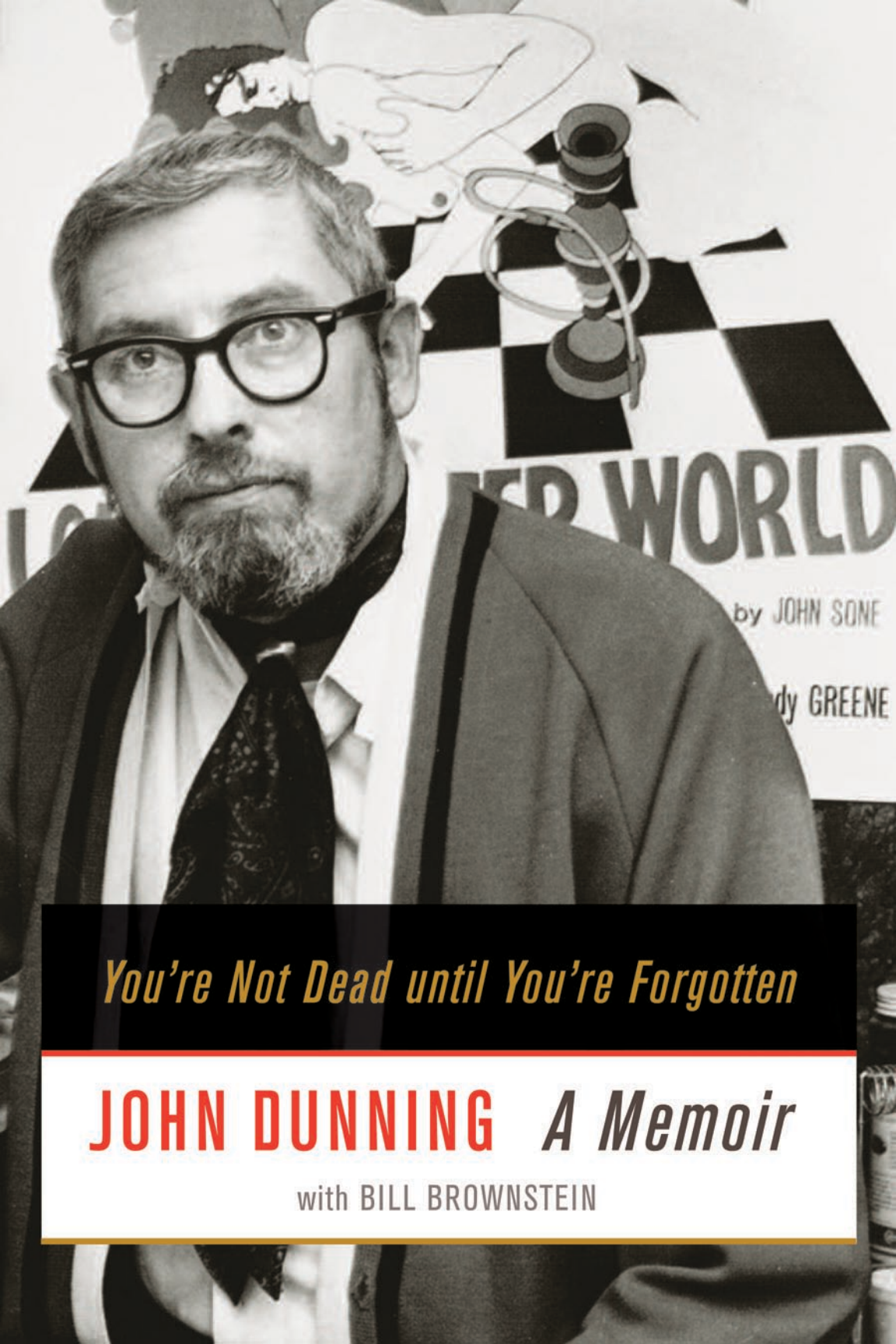

You're Not Dead until You're Forgotten

JOHN DUNNING *A Memoir*

with BILL BROWNSTEIN

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McGill-Queen's University Press

Montreal & Kingston • London • Ithaca

ISBN 978-0-7735-4402-4 (cloth)
ISBN 978-0-7735-9608-5 (ePDF)
ISBN 978-0-7735-9609-2 (ePUB)

Legal deposit third quarter 2014
Bibliothèque nationale du Québec

Printed in Canada on acid-free paper that is 100% ancient forest free (100% post-consumer recycled), processed chlorine free

McGill-Queen's University Press acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts for our publishing program. We also acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund for our publishing activities.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Dunning, John, 1927–2011, author
You're not dead until you're forgotten : a memoir / John Dunning ; with Bill Brownstein.

Includes index.
Issued in print and electronic formats.
ISBN 978-0-7735-4402-4 (bound).–ISBN 978-0-7735-9608-5 (ePDF).–
ISBN 978-0-7735-9609-2 (ePUB)

1. Dunning, John, 1927–2011. 2. Motion picture producers and directors – Canada – Biography. 3. Screenwriters – Canada – Biography. 4. Cinépix inc. I. Brownstein, Bill, author II. Title.

PN1998.3.D865A3 2014 791.4302'32092 C2014-901302-7
C2014-901303-5

This book was designed and typeset by studio oneonone in Sabon 10.3/14

In memory of John Dunning …
who will never be forgotten.

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INTRODUCTION

Bill Brownstein

He helped propel then-unknown Canadian filmmakers like David Cronenberg, Ivan Reitman, Francis Mankiewicz, and Don Carmody to stardom. And the career of Bill Murray soared after the wacky comic was featured in his production of *Meatballs*, one of the most profitable Canadian movies ever released. Yet Verdun native John Dunning, while unarguably one of this country's most successful film pioneers, was a reluctant player who always shied away from the limelight.

Some people yearn for the glamour of showbiz. Not Dunning. He was born into it and initially wanted nothing at all to do with it. His dad, Mickey, began in the early 1900s by touring Quebec screening newsreel footage from the trunk of his car. He later owned and operated a string of Montreal movie theatres, where John spent most of his waking hours – but not by choice.

When he was thirteen, John was running the candy counter at the family-owned Century Theatre in Ville Émard. A few years later, following the death of his father, John was managing the theatre. Not so coincidentally, he developed ulcers and panic attacks at the same time, likely precipitated by the fact that unruly and soused patrons would tear the place apart on weekends. But as Dunning – a self-proclaimed "sociophobe" – would later reflect, his fate was sealed. Try as he might, he couldn't escape the business. He loved film; it was the people associated with it who often proved problematic.

One person, however, made all the difference. Dunning hooked up with André Link in 1962 to form Cinepix. They produced their first film, *Valérie*, for eighty thousand dollars; it held the Quebec box office record in Canada until 1995. (To Dunning, the movie was especially significant because it was named for his daughter Valerie, who died in 1986, at the age of twenty-two, in a car accident.) Dunning and Link – whether producing, distributing, or writing scripts – would soon become the most prominent Canadian movie moguls most had never heard of. And that suited the tandem just fine. Their distribution arm was responsible for bringing Canadian cinephiles such delights as *The Piano*, *Strictly Ballroom*, *Like Water for Chocolate*, and *The Crying Game*, among hundreds more. Donning their producer caps, these same men, who had been involved with the highly cultivated and poignant *Princes in Exile*, went in another direction, making low-budget, mainstream movies that ranged from the *Snake Eater* and *Meatballs* series to the whip-toting *Ilsa: She Wolf of the SS*. They were later labeled the Roger Cormans of Canada, in reference to the noted American B-movie master.

In the same way that Corman nurtured talent, Dunning and Link were responsible for giving the likes of Cronenberg, Reitman, Mankiewicz, and Carmody their starts at Cinepix. But the statistic that Dunning and Link were proudest of was that ninety-percent-plus figure of movies made in Quebec. "The system does not pay you for artistic success," Dunning relayed in an interview. "We're limited to making low-budget movies that entertain, find audiences and recover their costs. Unfortunately, we've never had the budgets to do the high-quality art films. I wish we were 6,000 miles away from the US like the Australians are. Then this business would be healthier."

During their run together, Dunning (who focused more on writing) and Link (whose forte was distribution) produced fifty-nine feature films. They were honoured at the 1993 Genie Awards for their outstanding contributions to the business of filmmaking in Canada. In 2007 they were inducted into the Canadian Film and Television Hall

of Fame, and they received Lifetime Achievement Awards at the 2011 Fantasia Film Festival. But most intriguingly, the Toronto Film Critics Association (TFCA) named Dunning the recipient of its 2011 Clyde Gilmour award – an honour tinged with all manner of irony for its recipient. "I think one would be hard pressed to find a glowing review from Clyde Gilmour for any of Cinepix's productions," cracked Dunning, a few months before his passing at the age of eighty-four, in reference to the Toronto critic and author after whom the award is named. "But I think Clyde and I would agree that our films proved that Canadian films could gain international acceptance and recognition."

Though his health was fast deteriorating at the time, Dunning was both stunned by and appreciative of the praise he was receiving from critics and cronies alike when the award was first announced.

"John Dunning is a major unsung hero of Canadian cinema," pronounced TFCA president Brian Johnson, the *Maclean's* film critic. "Through the filmmakers he nurtured over the years, he's left an indelible signature. This is a recognition that is already long overdue."

"John Dunning is the unacknowledged godfather of an entire generation of Canadian filmmakers," offered David Cronenberg, whose early films *Shivers* and *Rabid* were produced by Cinepix. "I still consider him my movie mentor, and Cinepix my film school. It's thrilling and cathartic for me to see this wonderfully wry, gentle and supportive man finally get the public celebration he deserves."

"I would say that John was not only a great mentor to me, but also my 'real' film school," stated Don Carmody, whose producer credits include everything from Cinepix's *Meatballs* to the acclaimed, searing Québécois drama *Polytechnique* to the Oscar-winning musical *Chicago*. "He had incredible patience with us young film makers and treated us with respect beyond our abilities and made us understand the world of commercial film making."

Until his death, Dunning remained engaged creatively. He kept a series of inspirational quotations on a blackboard in his office to keep inspiring and motivating him. Among other projects, he was putting

the final touches to a horror film written by Lorenzo Orzari. George Mihalka, orchestrator of the original cult classic *My Bloody Valentine* for Cinepix, was in discussions to direct.

"He was so very passionate and successful in a career he never chose but grew to love," said his son Greg, an ex-Telefilm Canada staffer. "While incapacitated in his final year of life, he somehow found the energy to write another screenplay. His signature was giving aspiring young filmmakers and crew a chance to work and gain experience in the film industry."

YOU'RE NOT DEAD UNTIL YOU'RE FORGOTTEN

Nigerian proverb

1

Courage means accepting our fundamental solitude and stirring oneself to action in spite of the certainty of death.

French journalist Jean-Louis Servan-Schreiber

The year is 1927. The German economy collapses. Philo T. Farnsworth demonstrates the first all-electronic television. Charles Lindbergh makes the first nonstop solo transatlantic flight. And Al Jolson dazzles audiences with his nightclub act in *The Jazz Singer*, the first feature-length talkie, in which he crooned the classic "Mammy." I wasn't singing "Mammy," but I was hollering for my mommy shortly after being born in Verdun, a suburb of Montreal, on April 27. Legally, however, my birth barely registered a whimper. There was no record of my birth that day, since in his haste, the doctor who delivered me forgot to register me. There was no trace of me at the hospital or city hall. I wasn't even baptized. So much for auspicious beginnings.

It wasn't until I was sixteen that it occurred to me that I didn't officially exist. I had to sign up for the National Registration during the Second World War, but was told that I needed a birth certificate. I went home and asked my mother for my birth certificate. She looked at me like I was nuts. "What birth certificate?" she asked. This wasn't good. How was I to amount to anything if I didn't officially exist?

So, it was decided that I get baptized at sixteen at the Church of the Redeemer in Ville Émard, a Montreal suburb. And while we were at it, we decided to get my sister, who was eighteen at the time, baptized too, because there was no record of her birth either. Her records were destroyed in a fire at the hospital where she was born.

Not that I wasn't already plagued with self-doubt, but the minister presiding over my baptism asked me if I wanted to reconsider the names John Parnell because "now is the time if you want to change it, if you want to be called something else." But my tough-as-nails, no-nonsense paternal grandmother, who was also my godmother, informed the minister in no uncertain words that my name was to be John Parnell Dunning, and that was that. And, for better or worse, that is the way it has been.

It is probably a coincidence that as I gurgled my first sounds, Al Jolson was bringing sound to moviegoers with the first talkie. I'd like to say that this impacted my career path. But, truth is, I was born into the movie business, in a manner of speaking. My father was managing the Park Theatre, a magnificently ornate movie palace in Verdun. It showed all the big films from Hollywood and England.

My father's name was Samuel John, but everyone called him Mickey. I'm not sure how they ended up with Mickey. Some suspected it had something to do with the tough-guy expression, "taking the mickey out of you." But there was also a Mickey Maguire in the early comic strips. He always wore a bowler hat and was a really tough little bugger. They said my father was branded with his nickname because of his temper and rough manner.

Mickey got bitten by the movie bug when visiting New York City around the turn of the last century. He was cruising along Broadway one day and spotted these Nickelodeon Theatres. He started talking to one of the owners and eventually offered to buy a half interest in the fellow's theatre for three thousand dollars. So he wired his parents in Montreal, explained the proposition to them, and asked them to lend him the money. He told them it was the next big thing; that they would all get rich. They wired him back money – but only to come home. They weren't interested in showbiz.

But my father was nothing if not determined. Back in Montreal in 1906, he bought the Quebec exhibition rights to the San Francisco Earthquake newsreel. He travelled around the province, set up a tent

at every stop, charged admission and screened the movie. That was the beginning.

He soon decided that the way to go was to be the proprietor of his own theatre. So in 1915 he built the Park Theatre for about forty thousand dollars. He formed a company, The Standard Amusement Co., and sold shares at ten dollars each. His parents kept a controlling interest, and he paid a ten per cent dividend to shareholders up until the early 1950s, when TV really decimated the neighborhood theatre business.

And so Mickey Dunning became one of the original motion-picture pioneers. Except for a short period during the flu epidemic of 1919, the theatre stayed open more than forty years.

He wasn't exactly raking it in during those early years. When the Park opened, ticket prices were five cents. In 1917, price of admission was raised to ten cents, while special shows might cost fifteen cents a ticket. Theatres, with the exception of the major downtown theatres on St Catherine Street, always featured a double bill along with a cartoon, usually a two-reeler comedy or travelogue. They even had sing-a-longs in those days where members of the audience sang along with the organ and followed the bouncing ball on the lyrics that were projected on the screen. Theatres ran non-stop from noon to eleven p.m. Patrons could enter at any time – even in the middle of a feature. They would stay until they had seen the complete program.

The funny thing was that, at the time, many movie theatres were owned by Greeks, who were mainly interested in movie theatres as a way to get audiences to go after the show to the restaurants they owned. But my father introduced a different wrinkle. He had a candy concession inside his theatre. His audiences didn't have to leave the theatre to eat.

Again, Mickey Dunning was something of a visionary. Food concessions at theatres didn't really come into vogue until after the Second World War. Only then, people realized that the concession business was probably more lucrative than the actual movie business. My father

figured this out back in 1913, although for whatever reason he never got into soft drinks until the 1940s.

••••

But it was always a battle. Around the time when I was born, he was fighting to get product. Famous Players, controlling the major theatre chains in the province, wanted a share of his profits for their, let us call it, "goodwill." Their attitude was: *give us a percentage and we won't build a theatre in your town and take your product away from you*.

My father had initially gone along with that deal, but then he broke it in the 1930s. It was the Depression. He didn't want to keep paying them when he was having enough difficulties attracting audiences. So, when he opened the 5th Avenue theatre in 1936, one of the chains promptly built a theatre in Verdun to compete against his. That theatre was called the Savoy.

The distributors stopped selling films to my father, because the Famous subsidiary was buying films for its eighteen- to twenty-strong theatre chain, thus squeezing my father's two theatres for product in the hopes he would sell out to them. The distributors weren't going to sabotage an eighteen- to twenty-theatre deal just to supply my father's theatres, movie pioneer or not. So my father went to court and petitioned against this restriction of trade. But he couldn't get anywhere with the action, because he had to prove that the public was suffering. And because the admission prices were about the same, no one was suffering – except him.

Fortunately, during his battle with Famous Players, my father was able to get some product to keep his theatre going. And that came about largely due to his association with Hollywood mogul Louis B. Mayer.

When my father had been living with his parents on Roslyn Avenue in the tony suburb of Westmount in Montreal, their neighbours were the Shearers. They had a daughter, Norma, who went to Hollywood

in the 1920s and became one of the original screen sirens. My father met Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer mogul Louis B. Mayer through Norma Shearer. Mayer was originally from New Brunswick and in the scrap metal business and he had to make it against great odds. So a bond was formed, either through the Canadian connection or Norma Shearer's influence. Though guys like Mayer had a reputation for being ruthless, he stood by my father and never sold his MGM movies to anyone else. The MGM connection not only became my dad's legacy but also supported his theatre through the years.

My father wouldn't let go of his dreams. In 1922 he built a third theatre, the Century, in Ville Émard. But nothing ever came easy for him. As fate would have it, there was a bylaw that one couldn't build a theatre within one hundred and fifty feet of a church. My father was in the clear. His theatre was about two hundred feet away. But the church was adamant that something as hedonistic as a movie theatre not be anywhere nearby. So the church bought a property adjacent to it and turned it into a vestry, which then put my father's theatre within the one hundred and fifty-foot area. My father was thus forced to change the entrance to the theatre, putting it on a side street and away from the church.

The theatre never really recovered from this change, as it required people to go down an alley to get in. Yet my dad was a man who never backed down and who thrived on a challenge, whether it came from Hollywood or the Vatican. It was always a problem for my father to put people in the theatre, because audiences had to take such a circuitous route to get in, but the theatre managed to persevere into the '50s. Small wonder, then, that my infancy was spent in a high chair watching the screen along with my sister while my father managed and my mother sold tickets. I didn't even remember the movies I was seeing until later, when at four I saw *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* – both of which scared the hell out of me and gave me nightmares.

Among the other historical footnotes in 1927, my birth year, one of Montreal's great tragedies took place, the Laurier Theatre fire, which resulted in the deaths of scores of children. But so many more

lives could have been saved. My father always told me the doors to the lobby from the balcony of the Laurier Theatre opened in instead of out. When the fire started and the kids all started streaming down the stairs, the staff couldn't get the doors open. As the kids were piling up at the doors, pushing instead of pulling, the ushers had to take the doors off altogether, but by the time they did that, many kids had died, mostly by suffocation.

As a result, no one under the age of sixteen could be admitted into movie theatres in the province. My father never cottoned to the idea that children should not be admitted to theatres. It was a provincial bylaw, enforced by provincial police. But he was "contributing" to the war-chests of the local aldermen and mayor, and the city wouldn't bother him when he let kids in, leaving the enforcement to the province. In fact, he became famous across Montreal for letting kids under sixteen into his theatres. Occasionally, the provincial police would come down and make a case, but he'd fight it in court. It was also hard to deny that he was extremely security-conscious. His theatres had always had many exits, with doors opening out. (Following the fire, it became the law that all exit doors at theatres had to open out.)

And wouldn't you know it? The church got into the business of showing movies on Saturday mornings. They packed church basements with kids, and even charged admission – but unlike the theatre owners they didn't have to pay taxes, nor were they supervised for safety.

So I spent my formative years in defiance of the law. My father would tell me that no matter what happened just to keep telling the police that I was sixteen if they dragged me out. So I was all of eleven and telling some mystified cop over and over again that I was sixteen. The cop would just laugh.

Verdun was a happening place in the '30s. On the shores of the St Lawrence River, it was then one of the most popular residential districts on the island of Montreal, no doubt due to the fact that housing prices were relatively modest. But there was also a sense of community

Players in the *Sleeping Beauty* skit of Mrs Jackson's kindergarten and primary school evening program at the First Presbyterian Church in Verdun, Quebec on 14 June, 1933. From left, John's life-long friend, Bobbie Harwood as Prince Charming, John's sister Dorothy as The Queen, John as The King, and Ruby-Jean Harper as Sleeping Beauty.

pride and spirit. It was called the Brooklyn of Montreal. Residents didn't feel the need to head off to downtown Montreal for a good time. They had all the amenities there. Well, except for alcohol. Verdun was dry back then. But they had the movies, of course. And carnivals would roll into the community and set up on empty lots, including one on the corner of our street. Verdun was vibrant.

Apart from running his theatres, my father was also very sports-minded. In the '20s, he sponsored a lacrosse team – which was one of the most popular sports of the period – and Verdun Park was playing in the Quebec Lacrosse league. In the '30s, his focus changed toward soccer and he even managed to bring the prestigious Dominion Soccer

Championship to Verdun in '34. And against all odds, the Verdun team went all the way to the finals that year in Edmonton. Talk about your *Rocky*-like scenarios! The teams were always called Verdun Park to publicize the theatres. My father was no fool when it came to the intricacies of marketing.

We were relatively privileged at home. My sister and I attended Mrs Jackson's private school a few streets away from us. My sister was six when she started and, even though I was only four, I screamed and begged to go to school, too. So I was actually doing my Grade 1 at the age of four. We were taught drama and elocution at the school. We would mount shows and present them in church auditoriums around the area. Eventually, Mrs Jackson moved away and we were sent to a public school, Woodland. Although I was ready to go to Grade 6, they felt I was too young at the time and put me back into the fifth grade.

Still, it was kind of a fantasy life I led. My friends and I would hide out in the balcony of the movie theatre, armed with candies, cupcakes and chocolate milk, supplied by my friends' fathers, respectively the candy-store owner, the bakery deliveryman, and the milkman. And together we would catch all the movie classics.

At the same time, though, it was hard being my father's kid. Everybody thought we were wealthy. But the money was being siphoned off by my dad's sports pursuits. Ah. We were comfortable. We certainly never starved. Still, that didn't stop some from jumping to conclusions. My father even received a note in a milk bottle that said if he didn't leave one hundred dollars in a certain location, I would be kidnapped. This was the '30s, a few years after the Lindbergh baby kidnapping, and my father was naturally quite alarmed. He called the cops to investigate. And for about a week, my sister and I would walk to school with a police escort. They never found the culprit.

I don't know if it was because of the Lindbergh kidnapping or some other event from the movies but I had a recurring nightmare throughout my childhood. I would dream that I was trapped in our basement facing a cement wall and couldn't get out. But I have to credit the

movies for helping to rid me of this nightmare. I had seen this gangster film where a psychologist, held hostage in his home by a gang, suggested to the leader, also plagued by a recurring nightmare, that his describing it would make it disappear. I followed the same tack. I talked my nightmare out to my mother and sister one morning at the breakfast table and it never recurred.

A couple of years later, when I was nine, my movie savvy came to the forefront again. A motorcycle cop picked me and a friend up, suspecting that we were responsible for some minor vandalism near our home. We were innocent, but down at the station the cops were in no hurry to release us. I was certain that my parents were panicking because we had disappeared. Then I remembered from the movies that even bad guys were allowed a phone call. I marched over to the desk sergeant and demanded my phone call. He just laughed and shook his head. I never got my phone call, but finally they drove us home. By now my parents were frantic – they didn't know we were safe at the cop shop. A crowd had gathered in front of our house and no sooner

Young John wonders what he did wrong while his cranky old man, Samuel, scowls disapprovingly on the front stoop of their Desmarchais Avenue duplex in Verdun, Quebec.