

Paul King. BR.

A Mississauga love story

April 24-8 PM

DeCoursey, Rowan

Mary Morwood will never forget the time, date, year and place — 7:30 a.m., December 4, 1982, in the kitchen of her Mississauga home.

She was depressed. "As depressed as a person can be without trying to end it all," she says now. She'd actually whispered the word "suicide" to herself a few times, but the thought frightened her. So did the rest of her life. She was alone and needed someone to talk to, hold or just care for. Her 20-year marriage was ending in a messy separation and divorce. But people didn't understand. So she picked up the phone in her kitchen, dialled and waited for her best friend to pick up the receiver.

She never did. Mary had dialled the wrong number. "Hello," came the voice at the other end. "Mississauga Transit."

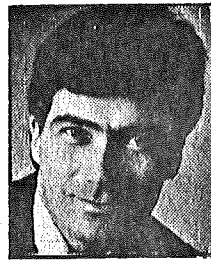
Mississauga Transit? Mary felt foolish, apologized, wanted to hang up, but something stopped her. "It was his voice," she says. "It was just a feeling, a comfort . . . I don't know."

His name was Rowan DeCoursey, a Mississauga Transit driver who "just happened to be by the phone at the main terminal that morning." And he too just happened to be depressed, in the midst of a painful separation/divorce and "as low as I've ever felt in my life."

So there it was: two lives, out of control but tenuously linked by a wire-thin piece of phone line. Could they make a right connection off a wrong number?

Mary: "To this day I don't know why I kept talking to a complete stranger. I just don't do things like that."

Rowan: "I still get chills when I remember the next part of our conversation."



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Rick Drennan

It went something like this: Rowan said what a nice day it was, Mary disagreed, then explained what she was going through, Rowan said "welcome to the club" and Mary started to cry. Rowan comforted her and asked if he could meet her after work for a coffee and some talk. Mary agreed — reluctantly.

Eight hours later, a tall man in his late 40s, with a well-earned crop of grey hair and wearing a chocolate-brown Mississauga Transit uniform, walked into Mary's store at the Square One shopping centre. Mary fretted away most of the day for being so stupid as to agree to a clandestine meeting with a man she didn't know.

What did he look like? How will I ever get rid of him?

But those fears melted away when she saw, then talked to him.

Mary: "I just knew from the moment we first met that . . . well . . ."

Rowan: "We haven't been apart since. . ."

It's five minutes to eight, or five minutes to showtime at the Dixie Tavern in the Dixie Mall off Dixie Road in Mississauga.

Mary is nervous. Rowan's not. She fidgets with her pretty black and white dress while he sucks back a drink.

As Willie Nelson would say, the Rowan & Mary — Country Class show is on the road again. Another tavern. Another small crowd. Another room full of empty tables. Another four hours of singin' and playin'.

Mary's new to performing. Rowan's not. For 20 years he hit the road as a single act, playing the bar scene, cutting three less-than-successful albums and one Top 40 single. But when his marriage broke down, so did his career. He put his guitar away, got himself a steady job and then . . . ? He met Mary.

"On our first date he brought his guitar with him," she remembers. "Then he asked me if I could sing."

"Could she sing?" Rowan laughs, looks at Mary and shakes his head. "Damn right she could sing. Hell, the first time I heard her I knew we would sing together."

Like Loretta Lynn, Mary was married at 14. Like Tammy Wynette, she suffered through a divorce. And like Dottie West, she has a voice that blends perfectly with her partner's.

But until she'd met Rowan, she'd never sung professionally, only dreamed about it.

"It was as if God wanted us to be together," she says. "I believe He's the one that made me dial that telephone number."

Working in perfect harmony, Rowan and Mary put together an act. It wasn't much at first; they played Mississauga's small clubs. Some nights were good, others bad. Rowan remembers the feeling of playing to half-empty rooms of loud people who

muted the music as they ordered more and more beer. Then it got better. "A break," they like to call it. Their act was booked into Country Gold, one of the top clubs in Toronto. And they are a crowd favorite.

But it's only a start. Mary's impatient for real success. "She wants a hit yesterday," Rowan says, knowing it takes time, a bit of luck, playing in front of the right people or recording "the" song.

Rowan and Mary have the same dream: to cut a record, play *The Tommy Hunter Show*, record in Nashville and step on stage at the Grand Ol' Opry. "I'd happily die the next day if we could do that," Rowan says.

So they keep singing, he keeps driving his Route 3 and Route 51 bus during the week, and they wait . . . for the next show to begin.

"It's eight o'clock," says Rowan, checking his watch. "Time to go," adds Mary, getting up to walk to the stage. The room is almost empty: three teenagers in the corner drinking too fast, a couple in the other corner and two guys at a table out front. And that's it. But tonight will be a good night. The room will fill up. The people will get into the music and Rowan & Mary will feel "high as a kite afterwards."

"And even if we don't make it," says Rowan, "we've still got each other." He then loosens his collar and pulls out a gold chain with a charm on the end of it. It's a small gold telephone. "And it all started with that telephone call."

"I didn't get a wrong number," says Mary, smiling.

Rowan & Mary will be back at the Dixie Tavern on May 1, 2 and 3.