



TO THE GRAVE

DANIELLE HAD a big smile, blond hair and an infectious laugh. There was just a way about her, men and women wanted to be around her. Sam swept the young woman off her feet, wooed her, wined and dined her, gifts, clothes — the full princess treatment. It didn't last.



Detective Sergeant Peter Abi-Rashed interviewed Sam Pirrera at Central Station the day after his arrest. Pirrera told Abi-Rashed that he was separated from his wife and three children and that he had spent the previous week freebasing crack cocaine.

The cycle of the crack user is one of extreme highs and debilitating crashes. The addict tries obsessively to recapture the euphoria from the first time, but never achieves it. From then on, he lives day to day at a dysfunctional level, underachieving in every facet of his life.

Sam feared losing things that mattered to him — his home, cars, women. Try as he might, drugs and drinking did not provide a safe haven from his insecurities, and the anger that grew from them.

How do you deal with such rage? Abuse yourself with crack, chase it down with liquor on the side, numb yourself, aim for hitting rock bottom and slaying the demons at the same time? Is it enough? Or do you take it out on others, blame them, beat on them, drag them down with you? Because more than anything you fear languishing in that f-----g black hole alone.

Sam's behaviour was spinning out of control. He was brazenly bringing prostitutes to their own house. And he became increasingly verbally abusive. Started telling her things about his past, tales of violence towards other women, conveying a message that was as subtle as a sledgehammer: Don't cross me.

Despite the apparent unravelling of the relationship, Sam and Danielle had a child. In the summer of 1998, Danielle gave birth to a girl. Sam had by then been rehired at Dofasco, perhaps there was room for optimism about the future. He proudly showed off his new baby to neighbours.

But Sam's inclination towards self-destruction never left, his crack addiction had not waned. In the last week of June, Danielle took a trip to visit family in Newfoundland, and Sam was at home in the midst of a five-day crack binge.

While she was away, he got into an argument with a woman whom he accused of stealing Danielle's jewellery. He assaulted her, and was referred to a detox centre. In July, he had an interview with a detox official.

"I feel like a piece of shit," Sam said. "I want to be a good dad ... Keep pushing the kids away, it's the coke ... I've worked hard, have a house, two cars. I don't want to lose them. My wife is beautiful. I love her to pieces."

In a report, the official described him as a "tearful, earnest young man, motivated for treatment. He is quiet and co-operative."

Danielle had been threatening to divorce him. In October, he flew into another rage. Danielle ran to a neighbour's house with the newborn at 2 a.m. That same month, Sam, drunk, got into an argument with Danielle. He spat in her face. He was arrested, charged with assault and thrown into jail for the weekend.

His family hired a lawyer. Sam's mother, Lina Pirrera, asked Dofasco's medical services if they would write a letter to the court saying that Sam was needed back at work. A Dofasco official told her that was something they do not do.

The next month he was convicted on two occasions for assault. On the first he received 30 days' intermittent and two years' probation. Sam's mother called Dofasco and told them Sam was in jail. And then, after the second assault, Danielle left

him, took the baby and went to live with her mother. Soon after that, Sam landed in jail again. He signed up for anger management therapy.

On Feb. 24, 1999, he showed up for work at Dofasco looking especially haggard, from drinking, freebasing crack — heating it and inhaling the fumes.

Sam went on stress leave. He feared losing his job. He went to see a health counsellor before the end of the month. He said his marriage had collapsed, and was having "mother-in-law problems." He claimed he was eight days clean and sober.

Early in March 1999, he wrote in a self-evaluation form that he had been "feeling lonely, betrayed [sic], hurt, sorry for myself, weak, sick of feeling this way."

At the end of March, he said that his wife was seeing another man, but that he had not relapsed into drug use.

On the progress side, he said he was going to Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings, had joined the Dofasco gym, was doing OK at work. He added that his sister had a baby girl.

"My house is almost clean." In his locker at Dofasco, Sam kept several small newspaper clippings. They were from the Toronto Sun. The newspaper ran a feature called Poet's Corner. Sam had several of them.

*"For Better or Worse"
If being weak is a part
Of getting stronger
Then I'll stay weak
If crying is part of well being
I'll stop crying
If pain is the way to become alive again
Then I'll stop hurting
If fear is the way to feel joy again
I'll stay fearless
But you know what?
You may be right, I shall fight for it.*

*"The Other"
Hopes and dreams, nightmares and fears
Can one exist without the other
To love and to honour, to bicker and fight
Can one exist without the other
To grow old together to grow older alone
Can one exist without the other.*

One day, Danielle Pirrera walked into a restaurant and bar at Lawrence Road and Cochrane.

Pete's was a neighbourhood corner bar, a place to gather, especially if you were new to the area and looking for someone to talk to. Danielle was doing some laundry, Pete's was a handy pit stop.

A woman named Becky Hunter was behind the bar. She had recently landed the job, and had a friendly face and open manner. She started chatting with the attractive blond woman.

Turned out they had a fair bit in common. Both had marriages that were on the rocks, they had the same birthday. Danielle became a semiregular at Pete's, and friends with Becky.

Then Danielle disappeared for a few weeks. Un-



usual. She just wasn't there all of a sudden. What happened?

Becky was among those women who had been through the rabbit hole of violence in Hamilton and lived to tell about it.

She was born in Burlington but grew up in Harrisburg, a hamlet near Paris, west of Hamilton. Went to high school out there. Lived with her dad and stepmother, hated it, moved to Hamilton. Fought with her mom, got kicked out of the house a few times, moved out.

The small-town girl got sucked into the dangerous underbelly of Steeltown. Dated a member of the Red Devils biker gang. Met him at a bike shop, smooth-talking guy, she thought. Started dating a tattooist named Big Dave at the same time. Big Dave had once survived a shooting where he took seven bullets, or so the story went.

She hung out at the Devils' Arden Avenue clubhouse on the Beach Strip. Lot of weird stuff going on there. She had a bodyguard accompany her to a party there once.

She was on the fast track to a life that could only end very badly. And over the years she saw too much of the bad variety. In 1996, a friend of hers, Fran Piccolo, was stabbed to death along with her two children in a Stoney Creek townhouse. Fran had been through the life, too. It was as though Becky was both a spectator and participant in a story that could well be her own. That's what this town can do to you, she thought.

She managed to find her way out of the rabbit hole. Got married, had kids. You can turn your life around, she discovered, and people can change.

"Or at least you can make the right moves to make sure your fate isn't a horrible one."

Is that what had happened to Danielle?

On Saturday, April 3, 1999, Easter weekend, Danielle had received a phone call. Sam desperately needed her to come to the house. Danielle headed over to 12 Burns Place.

Tomorrow: 'I killed someone'

Becky was one of the women who had been through the rabbit hole of violence and lived to tell the tale. Others were not so lucky. Had Danielle fallen into the hole or found her way out?

GRAVEONLINE: Forensic pathologist dissects death. Watch the interview at thespec.com