

'The last trip'

Three teens die in a shocking suicide

BY BARRY CAME

By all accounts, they were normal youngsters, three teenagers at the threshold of manhood. Like 18-year-olds anywhere, they had problems. But Michael Côté, Stéphane Langlois and Steve Dallaire also brimmed with promise. The three youths from the hard mining towns on the Quebec-Labrador border were bright students, good friends, loved—and loving—sons. They had many reasons to live; instead, they chose to die. They drove clear across a continent to do it, entombing themselves inside a storage locker near Vancouver, slowly inhaling the exhaust fumes from their own car. And as they lay dying so far from home, they listened to the strident melodies and bleak lyrics of the troubled young man who seems to have inspired their last desperate act: grunge rock star Kurt Cobain, himself a suicide.

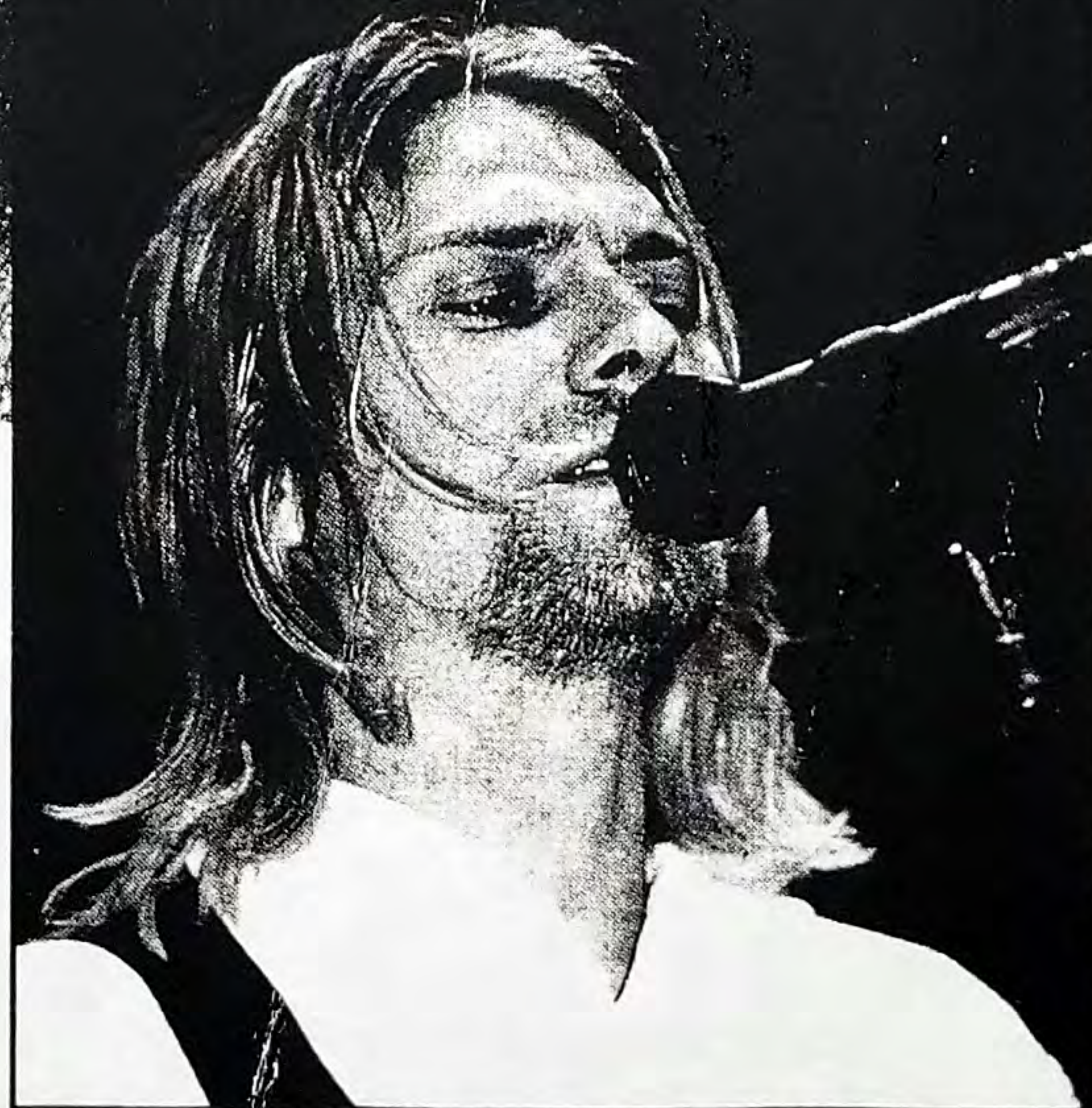
"When Kurt Cobain died, I died," Steve Dallaire wrote shortly before he and his two companions ended their lives amid the nondescript clutter of auto shops and discount stores in the industrial outskirts of Langley, B.C. Many other young people have expressed the same sentiment since Cobain, leader of the wildly popular group Nirvana, fired a shotgun blast into his brain on April 5, extinguishing an angry voice that spoke directly to a generation of disillusioned youth. In fact, there have been at least three known copycat suicides in the United States as a direct result of Cobain's death and, only last week in Montreal, a 17-year-old youth jumped to his death from the Jacques Cartier Bridge while listening to Nirvana on his Walkman. But few have gone to the lengths that Dallaire and his friends chose to transform what should have been a harmless metaphor into an all-too-grim reality. "The way I would have liked to have died is by a

bullet in the head and with the same firearm that Kurt Cobain used," Dallaire wrote. "But it's too late now. Goodbye."

Those chilling words were inscribed in a journal, contained in an ordinary triple-ringed binder, the kind found in schools across the country, which police found when they discovered the youths' bodies last week. It is a

remarkable document, offering a rare glimpse into the minds of three suicidal youngsters, part of one of the most unsettling trends in modern society. In 60 pages of drawings and writing, the three French-speaking teenagers from the northern woods recapitulate in detail a month-long odyssey that took them from their junior college classrooms in Quebec City in mid-September to their deaths early in October behind the steel door of a concrete storage locker on the outskirts of Langley, 45 km east of Vancouver.

An employee of the sprawling storage facility discovered the bodies on Sunday, Oct. 16. "I was working on the roof and caught the smell," recalled the burly, gravel-voiced attendant, who refused to give his name. Drawn by the odor, he raised the door on Unit 27 and glimpsed a figure slumped



Cobain in concert; police examine the car in which two of the three youths died (top): a chilling discovery



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behind the wheel of a blue 1987 Plymouth Horizon sedan: "I saw the kid in the front seat. I didn't stick around to see any more. I got the hell out of there."

Investigators from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police detachment in Langley discovered the three corpses along with the body of a white rat, evidently a pet. All were badly decomposed; police estimated that the deaths occurred on Oct. 7. Dallaire, later identified as a resident of Labrador City, Nfld., was found in the driver's seat. Michael Côté, a native of the neighboring mining

town of Fermont just across the Quebec border, lay by his side. On the floor in front of the car, Stephane Langlois, also of Fermont, curled in a fetal position. By his side was a pair of jeans, upon which a will had been hurriedly scribbled. The writing trailed off into illegibility, indicating that it had most probably been composed while the author and his companions succumbed to carbon monoxide poisoning. In the car's tape deck, stuck in the play position, was a tape by Cobain's band Nirvana. "The car's battery was dead," said RCMP Staff Sgt. Richard Lawrence. "The ignition was on."

If there were any doubts about the nature of what transpired inside Unit 27 at Langley Mini Storage, they were quickly erased when police read the teenagers' journal. In their diary, the trio made no attempt to disguise their purpose. The front page is titled, in English, "The last

trip." The first drawing, portraying either a bedroom or a hotel room in Quebec City, is called "The big decision." The last is an illustration of the three young men in their car in the locker. In between, there are frequent written and pictorial references indicating that suicide is the the ultimate goal of a transcontinental trek that took them from Quebec City to a rock concert in Montreal, then on to Toronto, Niagara Falls, Detroit, Milwaukee and then into Montana before they crossed back into Alberta for the last lap to Vancouver. There, they first stayed at a shelter for street kids called the Safe House, whose coordinator last week described them as "wonderful" youngsters who were "like a breath of fresh air" during their 2½-day stay. Nevertheless, they did not waver from the purpose of their trip. "We all find this troubling and bizarre because they decided to commit this act sometime around the 9th or 10th of September and they committed the act on or about Oct. 7," said Lawrence. "In all that time, they did not change their minds."

Even more worrisome is the lack of any adequate explanation for the tragedy. Noting that the boys' journal "depicts a lot of love, very close families," Lawrence said there was little in their backgrounds to indicate suffering on a level serious enough to provoke suicide. In his view, distress over Cobain's fate may have helped to drive the youths towards suicide, but "curiosity about the after-death" may also have played a role.

Certainly, the youngsters' parents were at a loss for explanations last week as they struggled to come to terms with the tragedy. "I simply cannot understand what's happened," confessed a



RICERST/VANCOUVER PROVINCE

An alarming trend

Suicide among the young has quadrupled

The statistics are as alarming as the act itself. In the past three decades, the rate of suicide among 15- to 19-year-old Canadians has quadrupled, from 3.2 per 100,000 youths in 1962 to 12.9 per 100,000 in 1992—when 249 young people killed themselves. Most of the increase occurred between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, a period of sweeping social change. And although some of the rise may be due to improved reporting, there is consensus—based in part on similar increases in other Western countries—that the number of suicides has risen substantially. What provoked that, however, remains the subject of ongoing debate. "It's practically impossible," says Brian

again. "Society has a way of adjusting over time," adds Sakinofsky. Because children of divorce are no longer uncommon, for example, they do not feel different from their peers and can share their experiences with friends. "Hopefully," he says, "society will be breeding a hardier generation of young people."

Now, as always, certain factors put some teens at higher risk for suicide. Dr. Simon Davidson, chief of psychiatry at Ottawa's Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, points to the role of psychiatric disorders, as well as to such factors as a serious chronic illness, family dysfunction, poverty and child abuse. Aboriginal youths, who have a suicide rate five or six times higher than that of other Canadian youths, face their own unique predicaments arising out of economic hopelessness and wrenching social change. And Davidson says that everything from movies to news stories about suicide provoke copycat attempts. The effect can be mitigated, he says, if youths are told that help is available and that they should turn to a local hospital emergency room, family doctor, walk-in clinic, guidance counsellor or crisis hotline.

Experts emphasize that none of the high-risk factors automatically lead to suicide and that, while many people have contemplated killing themselves, only a very small minority actually do. Mishara points to studies that show anywhere from 65 to 90 per cent of young people have thought of suicide at one time, and that between three and 15 per cent have tried it, but did not follow through—many stopping in mid-act or calling for help immediately afterward. "One of the reasons why suicide prevention programs appear effective," Mishara says, "is that people generally respond to help."

The problem, according to Gerry Harrington, director of the Calgary-based Suicide Information and Education Centre, is that there is no national effort to ensure that suicide prevention programs are in place across the country. His group lobbies for more programs, especially in schools, as well as for gun control. "When a person decides to commit suicide, the first hour is critical," he says. "If they have to spend three hours trying to get a gun, chances are they will not die." That may just be one small piece in a disturbing puzzle. But in the war on mounting teen suicides, there seem to be no easy answers.

HOW CANADA COMPARES

Canada's rate of teen suicide is the third highest among major countries. Numbers of suicides per 100,000 among those aged 15 to 19 in 1991:

New Zealand	15.7
Finland	15
Canada	13.5
United States	11.1
Australia	10.5
France	5.3
Britain	4.3

SOURCE: UNICEF, PROGRESS OF NATIONS REPORT, 1994

Mishara, a psychology professor at the University of Quebec at Montreal, "to determine which of the many social changes that have occurred in the past 30 years are factors and which are not."

There are, though, a number of theories. Dr. Isaac Sakinofsky, head of the suicide studies program at Toronto's Clarke Institute of Psychiatry, points out that the baby boom after the Second World War meant that a whole generation faced increased competition for education and employment. At the same time, a rise in divorce rates complicated the lives of children. Those trends coincided with an increase in the availability of street drugs. Together, says Sakinofsky, "these can create an environment of adverse life events that allow states of mind such as depression to flourish, leading to suicide in vulnerable people." Sakinofsky notes that as the bulge in the population boom passed, the suicide rate levelled off. It increased slightly during the latest recession, but Sakinofsky expects it to level off



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distraught Christian Côté, father of Michael. A geological engineer in Fermont, Côté described his son in glowing terms. "He was a really bright kid, maybe the brightest in his class," he told *Maclean's*. "He loved the outdoors. He could never wait to get out into the bush on his Ski-Doo. They tell me that this guy Cobain is somehow responsible but I can tell you that Michael was not even that fond of Nirvana. He liked hard rock much more."

Richard Langlois, the father of Stéphane, had a similar view about his son. "He was the kind of kid who listened," said Langlois, a mechanic at an iron ore facility operated by the Quebec Cartier Mining Co. "When you told Stéphane to be home at a certain hour, he would. If he was going to be late, he'd always call."

The two youths were lifelong friends, having grown up together in Fermont, an isolated town of 4,500 in the sub-arctic wilderness 300 km north of Sept-Îles. The boys graduated from Fermont's high school last year, an event the two families celebrated together. A year ago, the two went off together to study science at a junior college in a Quebec City suburb. Although both Michael's and

Stéphane's fathers expressed anxiety about sending their sons so far away to study, neither had any hint that anything might be troubling the boys. Michael shared an apartment in Quebec City with his two older brothers, also students at the college. Stéphane lived on his own. "Everything appeared to be going well for both of them," claimed Christian Côté.

Steve Dallaire's situation was a little more difficult. He lived with his mother, Francine Emond, in Labrador City while his father worked in the Lac St-Jean region far to the south. Describing her son as "first-class," Emond last week said she never had any serious problems with him. At the same time, however, she did admit that he had started to miss classes at the junior college in Ste-Foy, another Quebec City

suburb, where he was enrolled in a social science program. More ominously, he was also known to have been upset by the suicide last May of his best friend, who killed himself in a fit of remorse over Cobain's death.

Of the three youths, it was Dallaire who appeared to be most under the influence of Cobain. "There are notations in the journal that all three were distressed by the death of

Kurt Cobain, although Steve Dallaire was more distressed than the other two," said Lawrence. Still, there was no evidence to support the view that Dallaire led his two companions into a bizarre suicide pact. The affair began, in fact, when all three cut classes in Quebec City to attend a rock concert in Montreal on Sept. 11. They travelled to the city to catch three groups—Napalm Death, Obituary and Machine Head—at the Spectrum, a popular rock venue. The bands are leading exponents of a brand of hard rock known as "death metal," the loudest, most extreme, most abrasive form of heavy metal music. "All of these groups glorify death," said Geneviève Borne, a veejay at Montreal's rock video TV station, Musique Plus. "There's nothing romantic or melodic about their music, and you can't often hear the lyrics because of the heavy guitar. But they're becoming tremendously popular because they're so explicit in their gory details. I think kids like them for the same reason they like horror movies. It's the shock value."

Borne dismissed the view that the death metal show might be somehow linked to the suicide pact that was consummated in British Columbia, and she is probably right. But it is also true that the live show at the Spectrum was the last ever seen by the three friends. It can have done little to dissuade them from pursuing their grim purpose.

With CHRIS WOOD in Langley

'All these groups glorify death. They're becoming tremendously popular.'



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comfortable **OR** because
it writes really
smoothly?

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The Dynagrip pen comes with an air-cushioned grip for unsurpassed writing comfort. The Lubriglide ink system lets the pen virtually glide across paper to give you bold, vivid lines. Does that make Dynagrip the perfect pen?

In a word, yes.

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