

Steven 33

by Steve Finan

Steven 33 wouldn't thank me for revealing his secrets — not that he'd be too upset, he just wouldn't think you'd be interested. He always said he was an ordinary man.

Steven 33 built a palatial house made entirely of glass. The roof, walls, supporting pillars, light switches, bathroom fittings and furniture and hundreds of rooms were all made of glass. Even the trees and bushes and the paths in the garden were glass. The kitchens, ballroom, theatre and stairs were all glass. After he was dead they turned it into a museum and curious millions came to marvel at the crazy rich man's crystal palace and wonder at how he had lived alone and mysteriously in all this cold shiny glass. They sold little replicas of the house in a gift shop near the exit concourse.

Steven 33 believed illness was weakness. Other people could be ill, that was understandable and he had sympathy for these poor people. But illness wasn't for him. But the passing of years is a disease that we don't call an illness. It isn't nice to say the weaknesses that come with age is a form of illness. But it is. And it makes us all pitiable. Steven 33 had a personal nursing team who pretended there was nothing wrong with him. They didn't mind when he spoke to people who weren't there and his dignity was failed by his body. Or, at least, they pretended not to mind and that's almost the same. Nurses learn to do this. Even doctors, who never say what they mean in plain language, said the way he went was a bad way. His body attempted to turn itself inside out. It disgorged the effluvia that nature never intended to see daylight. Steven 33 retched and writhed and leaked and discharged. It wasn't his fault. It was no-one's fault. But a nurse knew, and smelled like, she had done her job after a shift attending him. Wellwishers never stayed long. Steven 33 died hard.

Steven 33 had no place that he called home. He didn't have to visit shops. He didn't have clothes he'd worn before. Or a family.

What he did have, though, he found as a boy on the stony shore of a weather-weary fishing village. Things from the past stay with you throughout your life. Whether they are in your pocket or just in your memory. Steven 33's thing was a small piece of sea-worn glass. He called it his pebble, although later analysis showed it was definitely glass. He often carried the piece of glass in his hand. Steven 33 touched everything he did with his pebble. He touched his first 33 cents. He touched the cola and the unexplainable mouse and the fossil fuels and many of the company-countries he owned. He touched women and colleagues, food and holidays, animals, waterfalls and his glass palace. The pebble wasn't for luck, it was to ingest the experiences of life so Steven 33 wasn't alone. Everything he had done, the pebble had done too. It was infused with all he was, all he knew. He took it out and looked at the marks on it from time to time and was comforted by the fact that he shared everything with his pebble. He knew the pebble had existed before him. And that it would exist after him. It was milky white, it looked almost powdery. Although there were a few scars and scrapes on its surface. After a while, people came to know of Steven 33's pebble. Stories were told of it. He left it behind when he died and many people wanted to own it. But it was just a piece of glass.

Steven 33 started small, made it big then opted out. All the great pillars of the world's economic construction do that. Steven 33 saw an opening, then sold the idea just before yesterday dawned. His first fortune grew from fear. People used to love shopping on what they called "the Internet" in those days. But, jabbed by sharp stories of fraud and identity theft, ladies in England were frightened whizzkids in Manila would mug them when they ventured their 16-digit numbers to pick up a few items on 5th Avenue. So, brave fellow that he was then, Steven 33 kept them safe. He said, "Buy with me, 33". And guaranteed the ladies were safe whenever they spent. He'd refund their money. All they had to do was tell him what they were buying. He charged them 33 cents to begin with, no matter if they were purchasing a motor car or a teacup. Then he dropped the price to 5 cents, then 1 cent. Sometimes things went

wrong and he had to pay. Most of the time people just gave him 33, 5 then 1 cent. Less than a British penny. Sometimes he was cheated. He pursued some of the cheats through the courts. Other times, it wasn't worth pursuing. But the cents kept rolling in. The world thought Steven 33 had an excellent idea. Even those who were insured by their credit cards or some other means thought a cent's worth of backup was a good risk. Pretty soon anyone who bought anything, even a sandwich in a shop, paid the extra cent to ensure they weren't at risk of anything. The cents became a shower, became a tsunami. Billions of cents washed up in Steven 33's hands every day. There was so much of it that Steven 33 knew it couldn't last and sold the whole operation to a collection of pension funds that thought they'd got a bargain.

His next venture was someone else's idea. The world needed computing power, but the quaint old Moore's Law was making the processors hotter and hotter, while the cooling devices were working so hard to contain it that they were getting hotter than the things they were trying to cool. They didn't know about transference or parallel power in early Century 21, of course. Steven 33 found a man, well a boy really, who realised computers didn't need cooler cooling, they needed less heat in the first place.

So Steven 33 and the boy made lots of little processors do the work of one or two big processors. Steven 33 took half the profit as the world bought four billion of the boy's idea at two thousand dollars each. Back then, his cut of four thousand billion dollars was seen as a lot of money.

After that, Steven 33 just had fun. He bought Coca-Cola, which was a food and drinks company, on the cheap and sold it on the expensive. Then did the same with Disney. It's hard to describe properly to today's audience what Disney was. It involved a mouse.

Then he bought some Eurasian countries which, it so happened, controlled the fossil fuel supplies that seemed so important, if you can believe it, in those days. He owned 72% of America by the age of 29. Most of his thirties were spent merging a couple of companies that used to be called India and China. Legend says he owned the

world by the age of 35. But he was closer to 38 before you could truly say that. People invented myths about him and his wealth. Sometimes the myths fell short of what he actually was and what he did. What would any man do with all the money and power in the world?

Steven 33 loved three women in his life. His mother, his aunt Rina, who wasn't his real aunt but who could bend her body backwards and dangle her feet over her head. And Patri. He kissed his mother's cheek, Rina would kiss him for joy and as the last syllable of her laughter. Patri would only ever kiss him when no-one could see. Patri was married to one of Steven 33's employees, but said she wasn't happy. She was always looking, looking for something else. She needed to be stimulated. She said. Patri was going to leave her husband and come to be with Steven 33. They would become a real couple and their lives would be complete. Just as soon as Patri's boys, Ollan and Siron, were old enough to understand that Patri wasn't happy with her husband and that loving Steven 33 didn't mean she loved them any less. Guilt made Steven 33 promote Patri's husband again and again to a post where he earned enough money to make life endlessly stimulating and fulfilling and comfortable for Patri, Ollan and Siron.

At school, Steven 33 had a teacher who praised an essay he wrote describing an autumn day. She said he had perfectly grasped the sights, sounds and feel of the brown leaves rustling on the ground in the wind that made you wish you had a scarf and hat like the children at the academy with the crest above the iron gates. Steven 33 never forgot that teacher. She taught him he could break free from the bonds of what others termed "his lot in life". Years later, when he sent an investigator to find her so he could properly thank her, it was discovered she had died quite young. Her husband had married again and didn't really want to talk about her. His new wife was jealous of the unimpeachable perfectness of the old wife so he had moved house from where they lived together and it didn't matter who was trying to interfere in his life, the world's richest man or not, just go away and leave him alone.

One morning Steven 33 found his mother eating dandelion leaves. Mother and son silently regarded each other. There is shame in eating leaves that you have risen early to pluck from the ground while the surrounding houses' windows are still shuttered and asleep. There is shame even when both mother and son know it is necessary to eat something, anything, in order to survive another day. Both knew that life should not have come to this. Both knew that there was a piece of bread under an upturned plate in the kitchen. It was a little stale and there was no butter to go with it, but it was bread. It was for Steven 33. Steven 33's mother was doing a noble thing. But shame hung over the bare table and suffocated them both. They felt they had failed and both wept inside, while remaining outwardly brusque. The neighbours knew Steven 33 and his mother didn't eat well. Miss Katerina Mazouwski, from downstairs, thought Steven 33 and his mother were sadly thin. She gave Steven 33 apples and plums when she could spare them. He ate them where no-one could see.

Steven 33's mother shouldn't have drunk so much wine, but it was a friend's 18th birthday celebration and her husband-to-be was working on a farm a hundred miles away. Steven 33's mother walked home with people she didn't know. They took her reputation and her future and gave her a shame that began to show a few months later and made her flee to a big town where no-one knew her. Aunt Rina took her in and they lived together and cared for the baby any way they could until he was old enough to earn money himself. Steven 33's mother died for reasons he never knew because no doctor would come to look at her unless he was paid beforehand. Steven 33 found the pebble the day his mother was buried, the grave unmarked, in the land above the high water line close to aunt Rina's village. He threw stones into the waves breaking and sucking a rumbling undertow on that stony beach. But he didn't throw the glassy pebble he found. Steven 33 kept it for ever.

