

# **THE LIGHT FROM DEAD STARS**

**WRITTEN BY  
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**CHAPTER ONE:  
GOD'S LATEST FRIDGE MAGNET**

...Oh, Jerry! You bastard...my bloody rubber chicken!

I watch the Latex fowl that sat on my Jupiter Four synthesizer fly from the stage and descend into the sweating and dope smelling mosh pit of bikers to be grabbed by a fan as though it was his life's mission. I'll remember that face! Balding, swept back hair, about twenty five years old and purpose in his dark eyes that contained too much universe. It's only a small thing I know, but the road crew decorated that chicken with a pair of flying goggles, a leather jacket and a pair of stockings and suspenders. It even got fan mail. When you're on the road an item like that is precious. Now my famous rubber chicken has gone forever, and Steppenwolf will be pissed off at me. I was close enough to yell at the guy to throw the chicken back but he scrambled out of the massive fight that erupted when the other fans tried to grab it away. It's a rubber chicken for Christ's sake! Not Eric Clapton's guitar pick or Neil Peart's drum sticks, or a real chicken like Alice Cooper threw off stage because he thought if it had wings it could fly, so I think my planned tantrum is justified as I run off to stage left with the rest of the band before the last note of the show has died, only to have my chicken rage wrung at the neck by Hector and Danny the road manager, who tells us that Thomas Winter is dead.

Danny Judd is a bigger banana skin than my ex-wife.

He walks across this planet with bad news imprinted on him like a hideous tour shirt. If the road to Hell is paved with good intentions, Danny laid the slabs. Meeting us back stage with Danny is Hector, the boss of Terminal Records, hovering like a starving vulture in his black suit, his bald and shiny head reflecting the lights as the road crew start to pack the overheated gear and power cables. Hector is the punch followed by the knee to the groin and the elbow that breaks the nose. His face is permanently rented by a dangerous expression of muscle carved ferocity and his cracked teeth and ulcerous gums remind me of a graveyard I once woke up in after a binge of mythical proportions. His voice is worn deep by sleaze and bad deals in his favour. It's rumoured he once dated a fetish model called Truss. It's a failing of the human race that we trust people like Hector in the same way people trusted Hitler, but our greedy hearts rose to the occasion.

Hector's only contribution to modern life is waste. He produces shit, urine, carbon dioxide and CD's by bands that Ozone wouldn't be seen dead with. The list of things he has done to get this band on tour reads like an arrest sheet fuelled by coke and tempered by exhaustion. He has his own problems though. And one of them is Danny, the toilet paper against the arse of Terminal Records.

The four of us stand before this terrible two as the crowd scream our names and Danny tells us again that Thomas is dead. We stare back with the expressions of lottery winners who are told it's all a mistake and the cash went to Bill Gates.

Hector smiles his crocodile smile.

"Fucking goldfish," he says to Danny.

I glance at the rest of the band to see if they heard what I heard.

I suddenly remember a journalist who asked Thomas what it was like being the lead singer and lyricist for Ozone; Thomas told her it was like being fourteen years old and waking up on Gary Glitter's yacht. That was the end of *that* press conference. And now Thomas is God's latest fridge magnet. God collects famous people the way fans collect band merchandise. God has John Lennon, River Phoenix, George Harrison, Bing Crosby, Marc Bolan, Eddie Cochran, Jimi Hendrix, Buddy Holly, Elvis, Syd Barret, Robert Calvert, Vince Taylor, Jim Morrison, Grace Kelly, Heath Ledger and other dead rock stars and actors stuck to a fridge the size of a galaxy. God glances at them as he opens the door to get pizza and beer before settling down to watch us all on his flickering TV plugged into the corner of his shitty one room apartment. He's got Thomas Winter on his fridge so he can brag that he got him before the guy was really famous and look cool to his God-friends. Thomas will never be famous now. He'll only be a legend, and the plans to exploit that into profit will already be working to save Ozone; the band, not the one in the upper atmosphere. I make connections with the fact that both Ozones should not have holes in them.

A strange numbness comes over me. I feel strange and disconnected from the world as I look for Steppenwolf among the back stage chaos. There's something wrong with this picture. The band's drugs cabinet is missing. This is not usual. He waits back stage then follows us to the after show. He has a back stage and tour bus pass. And he should be here as I have something he wants.

"Where's Steppenwolf?" asks Don.

Danny blinks once like an insect inspecting the night's prey. "Did you hear me tell you that Thomas is dead?"

Don nods.

"But you want to know where drugs are?" adds Hector.

"Fuck, yeah!" says Don, who stands a few feet from me sipping a drink handed to him by a roadie. Don is the beat. He is also permanently drunk. He was smashed before we went on tonight and no doubt he'll hit the beers until sunrise. On stage he hides behind racks of V-drums and relives his child therapy anti aggression courses. This doesn't always work and his violence has often spread into the first three rows of a crowd in a detonation

of fists and feet. His big boned frame is dressed in his standard uniform of army shirts and big Khaki pants with side pockets. I don't mess with him when he's drunk, or practising, or both. His tour rider includes a Black and Decker work mate and a set of power drills for unofficial restructuring of his hotel rooms. He grew up in the same area of North Bay as Keith Schofield, the keyboard player. Keith wears plain shirts and pants and prefers reading to a party. He does this to stay out of trouble and suppress the smouldering volcano within his brain. Back home, he'd be in crime if not music. Keith the keyboard player is angular and has long fingers like a typist and at the moment he is staring at Hector as if he is the Anti-Christ. Glaring at Hector with an expression of horror and post show trauma is Jerry Moore, lead guitarist, chicken chucker and resident paranoid who worries about money more than Hector worries about deals. Jerry was born in Prague but states his home town as Cambridge and has university arrogance flowing in his veins even though he dropped out. He's the band leader. He gave me the job on this tour so I suppose I owe him that.

I'm Larry Bain, second vocalist, bass guitar and keyboards. My bass playing has been described as a strangler's approach to advanced distortion, throttling tortured notes from the neck. That same feeling of strangulation is now gripping my throat and I empathise with the strings on my bass. I'm the enigma here; for tonight only, or so I thought, I took over the vocals from Thomas Winter due to his illness and if this band continues along Danny's road to Hell I might have got his job. The record executives won't like the look of this monster. I don't blame them. The tour has been a nightmare. My liver is about to commit suicide without leaving a note. I run on junk food and coke, I have a permanent visa for the State of exhaustion. All bands party and this one is no exception apart from bookworm Keith. A veil of delusion covers my days and nights and my inhibitions erode to thin stalactites from coke blizzards that would scare Keith Richards. After a year of tour parties to alleviate monotonous road travel to grey industrial cities and forgotten conurbations orbiting London and Manchester, I question the absurdity of my existence. The wheels are still tuning but the hamster is dead. My body is a wreck with too many miles on the clock. My arms and legs go numb at night as though detached and roughly sewn back on every morning. My mind is approaching a Zombie state comparable to the late night varieties flickering from TV horror films over the three in the morning hotel ceilings.

We are still staring at Hector when he drops a second bomb on us.

"The tour continues without Thomas," he says.

I mentally cut to World War Two documentary footage of bombers tearing up Berlin streets. Black and white devastation fills my mind and tanks burn inside shattered shop fronts.

Danny shrugs.

"Who decided this?" I complain, almost whining with shock. "No, wait, let me guess...Jerry?"

Jerry nods. "How many people have been through this band?"

"About forty," I agree, "but the others came out alive."

"We've no fucking singer!" says Danny.

"We thought you'd like the job," finishes Hector.

"Me?" I ask.

"You can sing," shrugs Jerry. "You did ok tonight."

"He's not in the ground, and you've replaced him!"

Hector steps closer to me, like a cop to a suspect, "I want this band on the road before Thomas has pushed up his first daisy, I want a full house sold out gig before the first worm gets a sniff of him. What was your plan? Strap him to the microphone stand? See if no one notices?"

"We could release a dead album instead of a live one," quips Keith.

My fist powers up behind a red mist and launches at Hector, connecting with his face before he has time to dodge and he hits the floor like a bag of bricks. He lies there stunned, looking up at my snarl that begs him to get up so I can hit him again. He touches his cut lip and stares at the blood. Before anyone else can react I step over him and head for the dressing room. That's me fired. No more scraping hardened Meringue off unconscious groupies, no more suitcases full of money to pay for top billing in shit houses that have never heard of us and no more pointless three hour meetings when I could be asleep. No more temper fits from dealing with waiters and customs men, drug dealing, playing the lost luggage game, hunting for ice machines in hotels; but on the downside, I'll probably never see Jenny again. Jenny is Ozone's PA. I pass her in the corridor as she runs to see the back stage commotion.

Jenny is cute. She's got cute bits all over her, but they look like the cute bits from other cute girls. She has a cute ass and long legs that look borrowed from some other girl with a cute ass and long legs. Her slender arms are the slender arms of some other girl. Small shoulders and another girl's breasts rise from another girl's chest. She's my jigsaw girl; assembled from the pieces of two mixed puzzles by someone who lost the box lids with the picture of how she really looks.

"Are you ok?" She asks me as she turns around and follows me to the dressing room. As the smoke in my head clears from the news about Thomas, I remember the absence of Steppenwolf, a necessary demon and angel of tour life. I don't know his real name, I don't want to. Don't make me an accessory after the fact. Steppenwolf sells drugs. Good ones. Cocaine, Heroin, (China White and Brownstone) Dexedrine, Nembutal, Lithium, Laudanum, Black Cat LSD, black bombers, Mandrax, Opium, GBH, special K, Skunk, Marijuana, Grass, Ecstasy, Hashish, Aspirin and Lemsip. His latest acquisition was a type of LSD called Area Fifty One. I've spent the tour

desperately trying to avoid getting spiked. Experimentalists tell tales of total disassociation while trying to function. Users wear a 'war zone trauma' expression and a fear in their eyes. I am not a fan of LSD or hallucinogenic drugs in general. I've met Syd Barrett and Peter Green.

The band slowly walks into the dressing room, giving me nervous stares. Jenny looks on with silent curiosity.

"Where's Steppenwolf?" I ask Jerry.

They turn to face me with expressions that look like I am the last to know about some hideous disaster. Hector appears in the doorway, a towel to his split lip.

I look at Jenny but she stares at the floor.

"The limo is waiting. We'll talk at the party?" says Hector.

The punch is not mentioned as we follow him out.

...The only way you would know this band is if you succumbed to one of those mindless compilation CD's that hit the TV and re-categorises your youth onto two plastic discs. They have titles like, Soft Rock or Soft Metal, or maybe Rock Legends Part Six, or a bunch of unlicensed album tracks exhumed from dead record companies and given a common theme to drive your car to. These discs usually contain songs by Deep Purple, Rainbow, Black Sabbath, the Scorpions, Cream, Jimi Hendrix or Queen. All the old singles that got them noticed back in the early Seventies. If you ever buy one of these CD's you might have noticed a one hit wonder called Electra Glide. The song is by a band called Ozone Layer and it was number one for three weeks.. Ozone Layer started with guitarist Jerry Moore and Flute player Rick Miller. They lived in a squat and got money for equipment by busking. Somewhere there's a piece of grainy black and white 16mm film of Jerry and Rick busking in Piccadilly Circus on some eternal summer's day..

The optimism on their faces is tearful in its innocence.

The first song by Jerry and Rick was called Sunrise Speed. It became a single that put a roof over their heads and established them as band leaders and song writers. From that day, the line up changed as musicians came and went. Mostly they went with a frightening rapidity. A quick way out of the band was to get wasted or go back into teaching. The quickest way out was to disagree with Jerry Moore, as Rick Miller found out.

Midnight's unreality persists as the limo drops us at the after show at the Hard Rock Café Hyde Park and we run between crash barriers that hold back a small army of fans. It's only a small army because the glory days are gone. Jerry stops to sign a few autographs and I see Don wobbling like a jelly

as he struggles with a felt tip pen to sign the naked breasts of a fan with wild blonde hair and a thousand acid flashbacks retold in the tattoos on her arms. The night is warm and the neon glows around us as the Café security hustles us through the doors. Inside the Café the dead rock star artefacts confront us like the tombstones of our heroes. There are no pictures or guitars that belonged to Thomas, but when they appear the Hard Rock Café is off my restaurant list.

We are seated at the back of the room around a large circular table and going clockwise from my left sits Jenny, nice move there and I hope the feeling isn't my imagination. Next to Jenny sits the antidote to fun, the famous Hector, then the band members, Jerry next to Hector like an evil shadow or a premonition of oncoming violence. Keith is sitting at my right and next to him is Don, wasted as usual. The conversation turns threatening almost immediately when Hector wakes from some dark stupor and says to Jenny, "Where are the press?"

"I booked them for midnight," she says. "If you think I'd miss the chance to set up an interview at the Hard Rock Café with the remains of Ozone, you are really taking the piss."

Hector drinks his Miller Lite and tries to look happy in the Hard Rock vibes.

The press: Now there's a tour pain in the arse no one needs when they are against you. In the past they've referred to us as Ozone Layer even though Jerry Moore dumped the 'Layer' years ago. But they ride us on the many gags they get from our name. We're Ozone because we're always high, or our gigs are close to no atmosphere, when in reality the name came from an idea where we would be a surrounding force, like our live sound, or a protective force like the real Ozone, but not one of the press clicked onto the real reason for the name which comes from the fact that this band has a huge hole in it where the money pours into outer space. Now the hole is Thomas Winter shaped everyone has a lot to talk about. We've barely got the beer in when the press arrive like a gang armed with flash guns that arc like Tasers. Microphones and digicams point at us to suck out our souls and print them onto tomorrow's chip wrappers. I watch this strange species of humanity flocking around the opposite semicircle of the table as they push their microphones at us like stacks of chips before a spinning roulette wheel. The answers to their questions will be the result of the same gamble. I realise I'm on the spot for the first time. On some old TV show I once heard Peter Ustinov say that an interview was often the first time you found out what you really thought about something. This will be my first interview as singer due to fate's removal of Thomas and the press vultures are lining up to eat me alive. Hector fucking knew this would happen. It's ironic that this is taking place in a restaurant. For now though, it's Jerry's show. He settles down at the round table like King Arthur before his audience in an area of the café now cleared and roped off. Some people on a balcony can see onto us but they don't look like trouble so security leaves them alone.

The first question comes at Jerry like a bullet.

“What happened to Thomas Winter?”

The journalists pounce on this and Hector raises his arms for quiet. “Thomas Winter died from pneumonia.”

“How do you react to allegations that Thomas Winter committed suicide due to external pressures on his life?” shoots another journalist. “There’s still some mystery...”

I see a quick nod from Hector to a Goliath sized security guard and while the second barrage of questions launches at Jerry, no one sees the removal of the journalist who cast the first stone as he himself is cast out. No one cares about the scuffle at the doors as he is ejected. It’s one less Hyena and more fresh meat for the others. Interviews are all the same, press animals inching forward to snatch morsels of food from predator’s jaws with out getting eaten themselves. I guess that’s the end of the Thomas Winter questions. A pretty female journalist announces she’s from the New York Times and howls of mock disapproval fill the café. This breaks some ice and Jerry straightens an imaginary tie at his neck.

“How do you approach your writing?”

“I sneak up on it when it’s not looking,” says Jerry.

A nervous chuckle shivers across the café and instinct makes me look at Hector, who is talking to Jenny. I can tell he’s hitting on her but I can’t tell if she’s interested. I rip my gaze away and back to the job at hand, the mental stitches tearing. I want to ask if any one has seen a rubber chicken.

“Can you be more specific?” asks the New York Times.

Jerry licks his lips. “There are dark areas in my brain where nightmares hide. My brain doesn’t work properly. Faulty wiring and cheap circuits send electrical currents down the wrong wires and flashes light up the dark areas. I write what I see there and that becomes a song.”

Light applause filters up from the crowd and I relax. Jerry has the room in his pocket and I’m not needed here for about half an hour. Backing slowly out of my chair I go to find Jenny who has craftily slipped away from Hector. She’s at the bar getting a juice as I move next to her.

“Come here often?”

She smiles at me and I order a beer and look back in the direction of the interview. The other band members are still in the arena.

“Have you seen Steppenwolf?” I casually ask.

Jenny turns pale.

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” she says.

“Come on, what is it?” I push.

“Steppenwolf won’t be coming back,” she tells me as the barman hands her a drink.

“Hector?” I test.

“Hector,” she confirms.

“What did he do?”

The image of our resident drug supplier sailing into space in a bizarre imitation of my rubber chicken fills my mind along with visions of murder and hit men.

“Leave it Larry,” warns Jenny. “Just leave it. He’s in one piece but...”

“Jesus,” I whisper.

“Yeah, no more drugs. Hector’s on a mission to keep you guys clean.”

“It won’t work,” I retort.

Jenny indicates that we should get a booth and we pick one out of the press table’s line of sight and sit opposite each other.

“Ever wondered why the band is always broke?” she asks me.

I sip my beer and almost choke. “You can’t blame that on drugs. It’s not as if we’re all heroin addicts. A bit of a smoke’s no damage to finances.”

“Cocaine is, and the opium that Jerry orders for the plane rides from New York, and the bags of weed and the pills. This band rattles every time there’s a chord change and as there’s only three chords that’s a lot. He’s worried a bust will end the tour.”

“Since when has drugs ever busted a tour?” I ask. “Christ, some of them are financed by coke.”

“Not this one.”

“No Steppenwolf?” I wonder. “I’ll miss him.”

“He was creepy.”

“He was a product of his lifestyle,” I smile.

She smiles back, “Just like you?”

“Just like me,” I nod and we clink glasses.

“Hector’s no angel either. He had Steppenwolf kidnapped and driven far away from here.”

“What if he’s a homing drug dealer?” I suggest.

“You’re funny,” she frowns and changes the subject with as much subtlety as a learner changing gear in an eighteen wheeler. “How do you deal with Hector? He’s such a sleaze.” She screws up her beautiful pink lip glossed mouth. In my mind a stadium full of adoring fans rise to their feet and a roar of triumph explodes into a clear blue sky. Suddenly I’m very hungry. “I’m going to get a snack before the interview ends, hungry?”

“Famished,” she smiles and leads the way to a quiet table in the dining area away from the band action. When we sit down she looks at me and I try to read how this is going. Her stare is unfocused and I reach for the nearest plate of food. “Muffin?”

Oh, bollocks! Who put that there?

Jenny takes the muffin and nibbles at it in a way I will never forget.

“I feel like I’m in a virtual reality game,” she says.

“Try some virtual champagne, you’ll feel better.”

I grab a bottle from a passing waiter. Jenny smiles as I tip the bubbles into her glass and she eats the muffin and tilts back her slender neck as she drinks. We glance over at the continuing press conference.

“How long do you think this is going to last?” I ask her.

“The interview?” she frowns.

“The band,” I correct.

“Jerry will pull this off. Can’t you see this band without Thomas?” she says with her mouth full of champagne and muffin. A small crumb has stuck to her lip-gloss. I point and she flicks it away with a pink fingernail. She swallows another piece of muffin and pours herself more champagne.

“He wanted me to go back to the hotel with him,” Jenny suddenly confesses.

“Hector?”

“When you saw us talking a few minutes ago, I looked at you and you were watching me.”

“I like to watch you,” I remind her. The game is up one way or the other.

“I hate Hector,” she states.

I decide to reveal my cards, "There's someone you'd rather be with?"

She stares at the muffin.

"Hector has the next part of the tour booked, did you know?"

Shit! Blown it! She changed the subject on me.

"I thought we were broke?" I ask.

She grins, "Only financially."

"What?"

"You still have selling power."

"I'm exhausted. I wanted to bank the money. Where did it go? And where is Danny?"

"He's keeping out of Hector's way."

"I'm surprised we're not dropped. Don't record labels drop bands that piss them off?" I ask.

"Usually, but then most record labels aren't run by Hector," she shrugs. "You're still under contract."

"I want that fixed," I warn. "I'm not a performing monkey."

"Yes you are, Larry. Yes you are. Thomas was a performing monkey and so was the guy before him. So was Rick Miller."

"I'll remember you said that when I return to teaching."

"You were in teaching?"

"Yeah," I say, still proud that I escaped it.

"Why did you leave it?"

"A more fun life beckoned. Same audience, less paper work."

There's a cheeky glint in her eye again as if the earlier suggestions are returning but I don't push it in case I'm off target. One wrong word and I'll look like a stalker or some rock band leech.

I feel the heat of an inspirational light bulb that flares above her head. "There's an idea; you should tour with Nine Inch Nails."

I laugh at the imagined mismatch.

"Bowie did it," she protests. "He got them on tour with him and linked himself to a cutting edge act."

“Jenny?” I say with humorous gloom. “Trent Reznor’s audience would kill us.”

I realise what a dark horse Jenny is. “I had no idea you were into that stuff.”

“Keeps me insane,” she grins and I’m totally hooked.

A loud retching noise tears the air in half and I spin around in time to see Don Nelson expel his booze high above the journalists.

“Full Nelson!” squeals Jenny with delight.

Don’s neck is bulging like a fire hose. His mouth is wider than a shark’s as his abdomen pumps like a fist under his shirt. Journalists and fans scatter like the crowd from under the burning Hindenburg as the vomit rain begins to descend. Jenny quickly pulls pen and paper from her pocket and adds the time and date to a list then folds it away.

“Shit, that nearly went into the lights!” I laugh.

Above the wails of disgust is the New York Times journalist. I watch as she bursts from the crowd around the table, her smart grey business suit hit dead centre. She charges past us screaming at the top of her lungs how she wouldn’t wipe her arse on Ozone’s CD covers. Vomit is dripping from her note pad and the camera swinging around her neck. A few seconds behind the journalist, Don the vomit king is held at arms length by Hard Rock security who march him like a live grenade toward the door. I follow the action anticipating the inevitable, and true to form, Don explodes onto a crowd of girls all wearing Ozone shirts. They react badly to the sight of their drummer hero distributing puke like a Beverly Hills garden sprinkler onto their fresh clothes and they scream, alerting the other journalists to the event.

“Six Half Nelsons and a full Nelson,” says Jenny, “this one indoors.”

“Not bad,” I agree.

The swing doors crash shut behind the vomit splattered girls and a level of normality returns as the Café music system starts to play the Sid Vicious version of My Way. Jenny and I explode with laughter just as Hector marches past us. His face is a train wreck of emotions as he heads for the Ladies room to straighten things out with the New York Times.

Jenny calls after him, “Get me some tampons!”

“Fuck off, Jenny!” he sing songs back with sarcasm.

At the bar the PR train is rolling and the puke damaged fans are hustled by the crew and offered fresh tour shirts and drinks, but when I glance over at the table where Café staff are cleaning up the rock star puke, I see Jerry staring over his uneaten burger. The remaining thunder not stolen from him is rolling over his face and the lightning of true hatred is in his eyes. Our

stares connect for a moment and I get the message. Don is finished. While I'm still staring at Jerry, I say to Jenny, "He threw my rubber chicken into the crowd."

My comment goes unheard as Hector bursts out of the ladies room, a red hand print on his face. His stare could cook every steak in the place from frozen. Well, I guess that's the end. If I couldn't get fired for punching out the boss then this should do it. I may as well pack and get an early flight home. The vomit festival should land on the next news along side the Thomas Winter obituary.

"I'm gone," says Jenny and leaves me sitting alone. In a second she is through the doors and onto the street. Reluctantly I return to the press conference and sit down with Hector.

"Did I miss anything?" I announce and watch Keith cover his eyes with his hands, no doubt wishing he had a book to hide in. The press attention turns to me and the questions come fast.

"What colour eyes do you have?"

"Bloodshot."

"Do you think you can replace Thomas Winter?"

"That's not the plan."

"Where is the band playing next?"

"I don't know."

"Will there be any ex members of Ozone at the funeral?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"We don't know what planet they moved to."

It goes on and on and the universe turns through its cold aeons as the Hard Rock segues to the limo. I don't remember the ride or getting out and passing through the lobby of the Nova Hotel but somehow I'm at the door to my room. Once inside a sudden wave of exhaustion washes through my legs and splashes my eyes as I lie back on the bed and listen to the muffled rumblings of the hotel's innards and the mumbling traffic of London beyond the windows that slowly merges into the sound of my dreams.

One question echoes back to me and wedges like a splinter in my mind...How did Jerry know that Thomas was dead? We were on stage. Hector knew...but Jerry?

The music came from the environment, mostly drugs and festivals. In those days Ozone Layer consisted of musicians on their way to being acid casualties and beyond. Only Dacey Del Torro, an insane bass player who lasted a few albums broke ranks with his heavy use of speed, working for nine days straight doing shows and then hibernating like a vampire when the speed wore off. They must have been the good days. No safety Nazis to ruin the fun. There are no dangerous rock stars anymore, only contrived smack heads living on temporary notoriety with a team of rehab guys waiting to pull them back from the edge and an accountant to mind the cash. At the start, Ozone Layer played every festival they could get to. The gear balanced on a flatbed truck that never saw an MOT and a dash full of speed and LSD. The summer of Hell was here and the past was dead. The survivors wanted danger and heroin, strobe lights and epileptic fits. Ozone Layer gave it to them with a sound system that was more a weapon than a transmitter of amplified music...

A knock at the door and my dream shatters into static like changing from the history channel back to reality TV.

"Its open," I call, having a flash vision that it might be Thomas Winter dripping with rain and soil and wanting to know if I could hammer in the last nail. I hear the door handle turning and resisting the operator. Shit, I locked it. I'd forgotten. This is probably Hector come to return my punch. I climb off the bed and look around for a weapon but a head rush sends me crashing sideways into the bedside table. A small reading lamp topples to the floor. I steady myself with my right hand outstretched to the wall. Its only a thousand yards to the door so I valiantly set off. When I reach it the knock comes again.

"Just a sec," I call as I turn the key and twist the handle.

Framed in the doorway is Jenny. She is wearing her tight pink skirt, her pale pink satin blouse is tight and her stocking feet are without shoes making her a few inches shorter than I'm used to seeing her. She is holding a bottle of champagne in her left hand and tall glass goblets in the other.

"I was wondering about that muffin?"

Her smile lingers on her lips like her perfume in the hallway long after I have pulled her gently into the room and locked the door.

It's five in the morning when I wake up to the sounds of vast merging parties spreading through the hotel. I can hear at least three different sound systems from different locations somewhere below the room. I sit up and see that Jenny is getting dressed.

"Is that noise in my head?" I ask.

"Another band checked in."

“Who?”

“Rancid Washing Machine.”

I frown, “I’ve heard of them.”

“Support act six months ago, Liverpool Empire.”

“Oh, yeah, the nut cases who bikes rode on stage.”

“Drinks downstairs?” she smiles buttoning her blouse over her bra.

“We could have a party here?” I suggest and see a flicker of something on her face. “Is that regret I see?”

“I just want...you know?”

“We never talk about it, do we?”

“What’s to say?”

I shrug and agree. We’ve been on and off like this through the tour. I pull on my clothes and comb my hair. When we leave the room the first thing I see is an early edition tabloid on the floor. I reach down and pick it up. The headline is all puke and Thomas Winter, and the next gig.

“Stone fucking Henge,” I curse, “great timing Thomas.”

My eyes dart over the column words. According to the tabloid the death of Thomas Winter is going to haunt us for a long time. I look at Jenny, my ‘what’s going on?’ expression prompting a response.

“Hector decided not to tell you that the fans are heading for Stone Henge by the thousands. The web site chat room is loaded with messages that the gig should now be a tribute.”

“And is it?” I ask.

“I don’t know, I can’t get the wanker on the phone,” she snarls.

“Where’s Danny?”

“At the party I hope, come on let’s mingle.”

The party is in the Hotel’s function room where the floor is worn thin from thousands of wedding parties. Keith holds up the paper so I can read the headline.

“Does he think I’m going to sing at it?” I shout at him over the noise.

Jerry walks over, swallowing his food and looking irritated. "Are you going to announce that you aren't going to do it? Hector won't cancel."

"Fucking blackmail," I tell him.

Jerry shows bitterness not experienced in the band since Rick Miller left. He might be in charge of the band but he's no spokesman. The charisma of a lead singer has always eluded him and he knows it. Now he's got me on vocals instead of Thomas for the simple reason that I have no lead singer charisma either and he might be in with a chance to shine standing to one side and ripping his guitar strings to deafen the first twelve rows. I went to see Dacey Del Torro's band, Speed Freaks last year. Dacey is a Phet head and an ex member of Ozone. He played on our only number one single, Electra Glide. Dacey's been breaking records in the decibel record books. When I saw him play he was touring his album The Pro-phet Nostril Dammus, and during 'Power Drill Orgasm,' he outdid a Jumbo Jet at full throttle. I couldn't hear for two days and I was fifteen rows back.

The function room door opens and Edgar walks in. There's a collective cheer of welcome as he waves a thick manuscript at us. The rest of the band appears out of the party woodwork and Daniel slides over as if on skates. Jerry almost chokes. "Been writing, Edgar?"

"Spot of typing," Edgar grins through his beard.

"How's things?" asks Keith eager to get his hands on the pages. Keith's the bookworm, and the chance to get his hands on Edgar's latest product is like putting a treasure map in front of Indiana Jones.

"Could be better, could be worse," says Edgar.

"You looked tanned," says Daniel.

"Los Angeles," smiles Edgar.

There are collective impressed whistles.

"Mr Hollywood," says Daniel.

"Fuck that. You wouldn't believe the shit I've been through. Harlan invited me to write a medieval fantasy film for an executive. No fucking idea. I told a studio gofer that felatio was one of the three musketeers."

Jerry is chewing and laughing and I start to roll a joint.

Edgar spots it and frowns. "Not for me thanks, I've got a rough chest after the smog."

"Getting worse is it?" I offer.

Edgar fixes me with his thin grey eyes as if recalling the place. "Breathing in at rush hour is lethal."

Then Edgar, size twelves firmly on his feet, innocently states what everyone in the room had avoided and marches like Hitler into Paris. "Where's Don?"

Keith decides to be spokesman and I notice that Jerry doesn't look up, "having his breakfast."

Edgar frowns. Then the penny drops.

"What's he having?"

"Jack Daniels," says Jerry.

"Getting worse?" asks Edgar.

"LA smog," I add.

"Have you read the paper?" asks Daniel, changing the subject.

"Full or half Nelson?"

"Full," Jerry tells him, "indoors and all over the New York Times chick."

"Nasty, should I have a word?"

"Be my guest if you can find him."

Edgar is about to step out of the circle but he hesitates. "I er, know everyone is probably saying this, but I'm really sorry to hear about Thomas."

We all mutter our thanks, even Jerry. Edgar means well and no one here would upset him. Not after the inspiration he has provided. Then he drops a bomb. "Oh, and speaking of missing persons has anyone seen Steppenwolf?"

We all fall silent. Expressions hover over drinks and we look quickly at each other. Jerry drops into spy mode. "Not recently, why?"

"He owes me two hundred quid. I called the office when I got off the plane and they hadn't seen him, what's the girl's name on the front desk?"

"Sherry," says Keith.

Edgar clicks his fingers. "She says someone saw him leaving the Hammersmith with some big thugs."

I lock stares with Jerry and pick up the fraction of a barely imperceptible shake of the head.

"Really?" says Jerry.

"Got into a Rover," adds Edgar oblivious to Jerry's 'leave it' signals.

“He’ll show up,” Jerry assures him and then mouths the word ‘later’ to me.

“Expect so. See you later?” Edgar steps out, leaving the manuscript with Keith who starts to read, unable to hold his curiosity.

Edgar is a fantasy and science fiction novelist who lived near Ozone Layer in the crazy days. He’s a brilliant writer, has won fantasy awards and wrote the screenplay to a favourite film of mine, *The Time of Forgotten Lands*. Edgar pops in for an evening drink at the pub, likes his antiques, particularly Victoriana, and makes a very good living at what he does. He’s been married three times but is strangely relaxed, concerned about his friends and steers clear of his enemies. His voice is educated and he wears casual suits or denim and a sometimes a peaked cap. In complete opposition to this image he looks like a biker. His beard is long and grey, his girth fairly substantial and at six feet tall his presence always noticeable. Keith is still reading the manuscript and I glance over and see poems and long paragraphs. Keith is wide eyed and chewing. “We could do something with this.”

Keith passes me a page of prose headlined, N code. It’s a poem of images and I can hear the tune in my head. Thomas would have loved it too.

The first time I met Thomas Winter was a weird existentialist grey day. Ozone was off the road. It was the Hector era and the Danny Judd road manager phase, and the Thomas Winter insanity saga. Jerry had asked him to join every time they met on tour. Thomas had his own band, ‘Starship Winter.’

Thomas phoned and asked me to lunch at what he called, ‘HQ’ to discuss ‘strategy.’ When I got to his house he was in full cold warrior personality, dressed in a First World War officer’s uniform and peaked cap. That I could handle. That was Thomas. It was what he had done to the house that freaked me. Approaching from the main road I turned into country lanes and followed them for two miles, then out of the hedge rows appeared a flat grey bunker...ground floor only. I almost turned the car around and called him on my cell from a pub to tell him I can’t make it, but I’m curious and this might be too good to miss. I turned the car into the driveway and looked at the sombre rectangular edifice. The windows had gone, bricked up and painted military grey leaving only narrow slits in the brickwork usually populated by machine guns. Stepping from the car and into the silence, I found that I was suddenly sweating. Inside the bunker, Thomas had lost all touch with reality. He was commanding a war between himself and the record company using the fans of *Starship Winter*, who were mostly Ozone fans as well, as an army whom he intended to incite to riot. He was disgusted at the price of shirts, CD’s and tickets and the money Jerry was earning as song writer. On a huge oak campaign table in the centre of the room Thomas had converted our tour route and itinerary to military ordnance maps and was tracing the co ordinates with a slide rule and dividers. I recognised our European tour map with coloured plastic arrows stuck to it. He’s tells me that sacrifices have to be

made and if the war is to be won some of the army must be lost in forthcoming battles. By army he means the fans, by battles he means gigs and his weapons are drugs. I ask him what type of war he is expecting and he looks at me with an expression of horror and tells me it will be a psychic one.

I walk to the bar to get a refill hoping I'll run into Jenny but I run into Jerry. He has his mobile to his ear and when I approach he cuts the call and pushes the phone into the top pocket of his shirt.

"What's up?" I ask.

"You talk to Jenny, don't you?"

I smile. "Among other things."

"All right lucky boy, don't rub it in," Jerry looks at the ground. "Where's Steppenwolf?"

The question almost catches me off guard. "Hector got rid. What's the deal? We can live without him can't we?"

"You're a shit liar Larry, what's going on?" he asks me, deadly serious. Then it clicks. "You're not hooked on something he cooks, are you?"

"Don't be fucking daft."

"So what then?"

Jerry bites his lip. "He has something of mine. He was supposed to give it to me at the Hammersmith gig but..."

"What was it?" I ask, mentally begging him to tell me.

"Something personal," he stammers. "Did Jenny help Hector shift Steppenwolf?"

"No," I tell him without hesitating and covering for her. I don't like the look on Jerry's face right now. "Do you want to hire a detective?" I ask.

He raises his eyebrows quicker than my rent. "Might be an idea. It's that important?"

"Tell me what it is," I ask again. I'm so close! Steppenwolf gave me something just before I went on stage at the Hammersmith and I had no where to put it, so I stuffed it up the arse of my rubber chicken where I stash my drugs.

"Can't," he replies.

"Ark of the Covenant?"

Jerry smiles, being coy.

“Holy grail?” I shrug, “If it’s that important won’t Steppenwolf be on his way here?”

Jerry wipes his lips with a shaking hand. “What if he’s dead?”

“That makes Hector a murderer,” I tell him equally serious. “Jerry, what are we talking about here?”

“Maybe nothing,” Jerry says and shrugs.

At that moment the door of the hospitality suite smashes open. Don and Edgar stumble in trying to hold each other up but Don slips and falls to the drink splattered floor. It’s like the opening scene in Star Wars when the imperial troops burst in. Everyone is holding drinks instead of guns but the reaction is the same. The door is blown off its hinges, not by explosives but by the road crew from Rancid Washing Machine. They look mean and cruel, like Goth barbarians. They all have scrap-metal jewellery in their faces and wild red and black hair. One of them is yelling at Don. Jerry grabs a bottle, ready to smash it over the nearest head. There’s a splash and something lands in my drink. I turn to the direction of the throw expecting to see Steppenwolf suddenly reappeared and grinning and not looking the least bit guilty that he tried to spike me with something insane, but instead of Steppenwolf I am confronted by a giant roadie with a grin on his face. I look into the amber waters of my pint and see a cube of pool cue chalk slowly dissolving at the bottom of the glass. Calmly I grip the pint and get ready to throw the contents into the brute’s face when my foe is dragged backwards by one of our own crew. A massive entity called Mr. Short.

“Leave it,” I say to Mr. Short, “it’s not worth the hassle.”

Mr. Short decides he’s going to sort it anyway and takes his opposite number outside. The bar area is suddenly very loud. The juke box is playing Led Zeppelin’s Trampled Under Foot, people are laughing and shouting but the sound of war rises like a mushroom cloud over a city as fists on flesh, grunts and the unmistakable clatter of someone landing heavily amongst rusty dustbins invades the room. The road crews charge at each other and tables and chairs turn to matchwood. Glasses and bottles sail over my head and I see Jerry and Keith ducking out of a side door and waving at me to follow. Bar staff dive below the pumps, one of them reaching for his mobile. In the lobby we skid to a stop like the Keystone Cops. A doorman in full uniform and long red coat sees us. “Can I help you gentlemen?”

“Where’s my fucking room,” shouts Jerry.

“Third floor, turn left sir.”

We charge up the main stairs and run along the soft carpeted halls. At one of the intersections we collide with Jenny.

"I'm holding! I'm holding! Where's my fucking room?" Jerry yells at her.

"Where's MY fucking room?" whines Keith.

"Jesus Christ!" I moan as sirens shatter the night.

We all yell 'fuck!' at once and head along the next corridor. I reach into my back pocket and find my room key. I look at the small plastic swipe card.

"There's no fucking number, how I am supposed to know which room?"

"Did they tell you at reception?" asks Jerry.

"That was hours ago!"

"This way!" shouts Jenny. I stare at her like the angel she is and we scramble into her room and look with horror at the bed which is covered with neatly arranged packs of cocaine, speed, Mandrax, Nembutals, Ecstasy, Mogadons, weed, a hunting knife and a Three Fifty Seven Magnum. Jenny covers the cache with the duvet and runs to the window. "It's spreading."

Jerry pulls back the duvet. "Can I have some of this?" He says, holding up a bag of pills.

"Careful with it," she warns.

Jerry swallows one.

"After you," I say, and in a few minutes all of us except Jenny and Keith have had one. The effects are calming and I sit by the window with Jenny to watch the battle while Jerry lays down on the carpet to study the light shades in detail.

"What's all this shit doing here, Jenny?" asks Keith.

"It's a Steppenwolf stash. I keep finding them in the tour gear. I was getting rid of it."

There is a knock at the door and we all freeze.

Jenny trots to the door. From the window ledge I see that she opens the door to a uniformed policeman.

"Morning miss," nods the officer.

"Morning," Jenny smiles too sweetly at the uniform.

"Sorry to bother you but we need to check the room for damage."

"The fight's downstairs?" says Jenny.

“I know, we’re taking them outside now, but the management want us to check all the rooms.”

I look at the duvet and wonder what the stash is worth. ‘About ten years,’ my imagination answers. The officer steps into the room and sees three stoned semi famous rock stars playing statues in an attempt to look sober. He glances at the bed and the tangled duvet then nods his thanks at Jenny and leaves. We all exhale with relief and I roll onto the floor and stay there as the noise of the fight recedes and the sun rises, shining its weak light through the Ozone.

One hour later, everyone has gone and so have all the drugs and the weapons. I use the small bathroom and wash my hands and face then go out into the corridor. At the elevator I wait while it rushes up to my floor. The doors open and I almost step into six inches of soil.

I take the stairs.

The breakfast area is a massive pile of broken furniture and fittings. Cleaning staff sweep debris across the floor. I look around for somewhere to sit and I see Keith waving at me from a distant corner of the room where tall wooden screens decorated with Japanese prints have been erected to form a temporary partition between us and the wreckage. I sit opposite Keith and a waiter takes my order for a full breakfast and coffee. He walks away with fury in his step.

“There’s soil in the lift,” I tell Keith.

“I know,” he says through a mouthful of bacon. “I emptied the potted plants out last night.”

“Any reason?” I grin,

“No,” he shrugs.

I pour myself some coffee and see Danny step out of the lift, shaking soil from his shoes. I wave to him and he circumnavigates the pile of wreckage to join us at the table.

“Soil in the lift,” he says.

“That was me,” says Keith.

The waiter returns to take his order. He is a kid, a student maybe. His face is bright purple with anger.

“You ok?” Danny asks the waiter.

“No, I’m fucking not,” replies the kid.

I start to grin.

“Five years I’ve been stuck in this shit hole and you lot come in and wreck the place without even getting arrested.”

“It was the road crew,” says Danny, “apart from the soil in the lift.”

“That was me,” says Keith.

“Here,” says Danny, taking a wad of notes from his pocket. He peels off three hundred and gives it to the waiter. “Get us breakfast then have a room on me, my treat.”

The kid stares at the three hundred and walks away. Breakfast is accompanied by the sounds of sweeping and the gathering of wreckage. Checking out at reception I am told that Jenny left a message that she has moved to another hotel. As we leave in the tour bus to go to the police station to bail out the road crew, I see a top floor window smash and a TV sailing into the cold morning. I follow the falling cube until it shatters across the pavement.

I wonder if the kid looked before he threw it?