

THE LIGHT FROM DEAD STARS

**WRITTEN BY
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www.thelightfromdeadstars.com

**CHAPTER THREE:
STONED MEADOWS**

The graveyard is a monochrome nightmare of broken marble angels.

“One Ham and Pineapple, three Garlic Chicken...”

I’m at Thomas Winters’ funeral.

“A cheese and tomato...”

I should be coffin-side in the church surrounded by this Vincent Price horror film graveyard onto which cold hail is driving at a steep angle, forced under pressure from writhing black clouds rushing in from the Atlantic.

“Four Tuna and Sweet Corn...”

I’m across the street screaming down a phone line because I can hardly hear the voice on the other end due to the hail rattling like a round of Uzi fire on the plastic walls of the booth. My mobile signal is weaker than the stage supports at a free festival but I’m actually grateful because it means I can stand out of the rain for a few minutes.

“All deep pan, stuffed crusts, extra topping on the Tuna but not on one of the Garlic Chickens...”

This is what my life has come to; the avoidance of the truth.

“Nine large Cokes...”

It’s Thursday afternoon. It always rains on Thursdays. I’ve noticed this over the past six months. Even if you get a week of great weather, the Thursday will be cloudy. It’s surprising that I can tell any difference really as mostly it pisses down with a grim regularity.

It’s a bad day for us all. The crew and the runners will be on the case until at least midnight when people run around ‘getting’ for Don Nelson. Getting his drugs, getting him pissed, getting him pissed off. I only agreed to ‘getting’ his pizza instead of our gofer so I could get away from him.

“Read that back to me.”

The Pizza guy does this and to my amazement it’s correct, but I’ll see when they deliver. I hang up and look over at the church.

Thomas Winter is dead. The spokesman is dead and I’ve got his job.

The joint I had at the hotel has cut the afternoon with paranoia, as if things weren't edgy enough. I really shouldn't have smoked the whole thing but Jerry wanted rid of his last eighth. On the way to the funeral the stare of 'Virgin' Mary Schofield, Keith's wife, burned holes in me because I have always disliked the fact that the only reason Don Nelson is in the band is because she is his press agent. We needed a drummer and her client was looking for a band after he was thrown out of Greenslade Story, a freak band similar to Dumpy's Rusty Nuts or Captain Beefheart. Hector pays him double session fees and it bugs the shit out of us but he's a name and that sells tickets, and for this I have to listen to twenty minute 'blind alley' drum solos which I punctuate with bass notes to let him know enough is enough and my beer is going flat at the side of the stage waiting for him to cut back into the song. After the show he has the gonads to explain to journalists how he was playing eleven's here and thirteen's there, when all it sounded like was someone on acid demolishing a shed.

Anyway, like I was saying, the afternoon joint gave us all the munchies hence the pizza order and Mary giving me the fear so I had the urge to do something disrespectful, so now I'm imprisoned by a deluge of hail in a rectangular plastic phone booth watching an icy river pour around my shoes. I'm on the edge of the decision to stay here until the funeral is over, but when I see the hearse arrive and gnaw like a black rat through the barricade of soaking fans gathered under the wrought iron arch of the churchyard's entrance I dash out of the booth and the freezing hail instantly targets my dark suit and black long coat, darkening it further with thick coins of water that soak to my skin like spreading splashes of blood. Hard lumps of ice batter me and force my face into a snarl. When I reach the gates of the churchyard and show my pass to the police officers that picked the short straw for today's crowd control duty, they show me expressions even more pissed off than mine before letting me through. I struggle through the crowd of weeping fans and shrug off a cluster of tear and rain soaked girls who beg me for the rest of the band's autographs. The leeches gather and the man isn't in the ground yet. The crowd surges as a single body with hundreds of heads all shouting in my ear. I run through the tall stone angels and fat black slabs of gold engraved marble and get ahead of the Hearse and to the church entrance. There's no time to even think about getting dry so I push my hair flat and away from my forehead and walk inside the church looking as if taking a shower fully clothed is not a weird thing to do. I push onto the end of a pew near the back with Don Nelson and his girlfriend. She shows her disapproval by studying my drowned rat look with unconcealed horror. It's a taste of pure poison just to breathe the air in this grim church and register this reality, and a cold dread sweeps past me when the bearers walk slowly by the end of the pew, their arms straining to support the polished red oak casket surrounding Thomas Winters' mortal remains. Giant wreaths and wild flourishes of tied flowers crush their colours into this grey stone building as organ music drifts down to us and the priest appears from a back room. The organ music stops and in the few seconds of silence before the priest reads the evidence, I mean the service, Hector glances back at me from his second row pew and studies my soaking clothes with his loan shark's eyes. My quick nod tells him I ordered the pizza as I had threatened, and that he blames Daniel for the fan's

discovery of the church even though he knows the publicity will help. I quickly scan the pews, but I cannot see Daniel anywhere. Maybe he couldn't take this final moment.

I take consolation from the fact that inside the casket, Thomas Winter must now know all the machinations of Hector from a place beyond death, staring moodily from God's fridge door. He knows the band is to continue without him. He knows I'm soaking wet because I decided to order pizza at his funeral. He knows I'm stoned, and he knows I'll never be able to lay his memory to rest because I'll have to sing his songs every night on the tour.

The service grinds on. The priest's voice echoes into the roof as I stare at the red casket while some cry under black veils and lowered expressions. On the front pew I can see the shuddering shoulders of Jenny, beautiful in her black silk funeral wear, pill box hat and veil, as we open prayer books for the hymn that I'm going to mime because at this moment I don't think I could speak anymore than I could sing. Faint screams from the fans wrench the sacred moment away and cheat the pattering rain of its audience. After the hymn, another tape plays Thomas' favourite song, then we slowly walk quietly from the church and into the fresh breeze of an autumn afternoon, following the coffin bearers along the winding path to the graveside. The hail has stopped and the smell of damp leaves and soil brings memories of childhood rushing back on a flood of years. I'm suddenly blinded by the brightness between parting clouds and see the storm blowing away beyond the trees. Another prayer and Thomas is lowered into the hole. We say our goodbyes and throw handfuls of dirt. As a group, we walk away from the grave and into a clearing of white gravel and rose gardens where Hired Goons Security escort us to the cars. Distant squeals from the fans echo across the head stones like angered ghosts as they rob the pizza delivery guy of the food I ordered. Police helmets and batons fly. Don, Jerry and Keith are sitting in the limousine, the door open, waiting for me. I look back at the wreaths and Hector sees me as he is shaking hands with the priest. He walks toward me. His black suit and dark purple silk shirt and tie insulate him from the day but cannot conceal the Satanesque body language beneath it. He moves with the easy grace of man about to throw a surprise left.

"Larry," he smiles. If I were drunk I'd sober up immediately. His teeth really do need serious work.

"I'm going to the hotel, I'm soaked," I tell him. "Where's Danny?"

"Crying somewhere," he says with fake concern.

"Can't you turn off the bastard for a few hours? You got Thomas underground faster than a mole on speed. Let the rest of us take a breath?"

He stares at the nearest thing to a plea for peace that I have ever offered him. "You guys are the bastards," he complains. "I'm trying to run a business and you act like kids on drugs."

I put my back to him and hold the edges of my soaking coat to illustrate to him that I don't care. I step into the limo leaving Hector standing alone on the path. Don is straight into the mini bar. "Are you getting in?" Keith asks Hector, who is hanging back.

"I'll catch up."

I frown, but Jerry closes the limo door and signals to the driver to take us away.

"Why is he staying here?" I ask.

"I don't fucking care," replies Jerry.

"How many is that?" asks Keith, nodding at Don's drink.

"Who are you, my fucking mum?"

"How many?"

"Eight," says Don, unconcerned as he pops another Budweiser.

"Just don't throw a half Nelson in here," warns Keith.

"Or a full one," I add.

Don raises his drink. "To Thomas."

Glasses clink. But I have no drink.

At the church gates the limo crawls through the police line. Fans hammer on the windows screaming their insensitive lust for a slice of the action to go with the stolen pizza. The rain clouds are gathering for a second attack, and I fight off my imagination as they form Thomas' face in the black amorphous shapes. We leave the mob behind as the country lane blurs by and the hedge rows splash their collected rain against the windows. The limo slows at a junction next to the Graveyard and I look left. I can see the JCB pushing the last of the soil onto Thomas' grave.

I look away in shock.

I have to stop the drugs!

Did I just see that?

I slowly turn my head, and as the limo pulls out onto the main road I catch the sight of Hector dancing on Thomas' grave. He seems oblivious to the fact that he is bathed in flash gun lightening from the surrounding paparazzi recording this event for immediate posterity, if there is such a thing. I look back and focus on a point in space about six inches from the end of my nose.

“Seen a ghost?” laughs Jerry at my sudden deadpan.

I smile weakly. My mouth is hanging open like luggage bays on a tour bus. No one saw what I just saw.

Rain lashes across the car and I sit back.

Oh God, we’re so fucked!

*

Hours later we drop a drunken Don Nelson outside the hotel and go to Daniel’s office just off Leicester Square. The room is a cube of ancient plaster with filing cabinets backed up against the walls and a desk cluttered with unpaid hotel bills and invoices all hidden in a mass of woodworm eaten stairwells held up with dust and mouldy brick that creaks threateningly when any pressure is placed upon them. Late afternoon sunshine is warming the side of my face through the dirt streaked windows. I’m drifting among my thoughts like a ghost, the echo of my fist against Hector’s face, the feel of Jenny against me, the questions about Steppenwolf and where my rubber chicken could be right now contradict violently with Thomas’ funeral. I retreat into the past, not hearing the voices in the office and trying not to feel the disappointment of the day and the sadness of this room without Thomas...

Ozone Layer once played a gig on a building site to protest against the bland redevelopment of the inner cities. The idea of changing things, feeding the remnants of the counter culture, burning the money and being a group representative of the ordinary people drove the band into schizophrenia. Ozone Layer came up through alternative press magazines run by idealists and people with an axe to grind. The band used the offices of the magazines as a base. They kept the spirit up. That was down to Rick Miller, who felt that the band should fly the flag of Anti corporate rock. No one thought too much about tomorrow. The band started to pull in two different directions, community versus capital gain. That’s when Rick Miller, co founder and polar opposite of Jerry Moore, insisted that large percentages of the band’s earnings go to charities.

Guess who won?

*

I suddenly realise that everyone is staring at me because Danny has asked me a question, but I didn’t hear all of it. I think we are discussing what to do next, but I could be wrong. My head is full of the past and Jenny flavoured candy floss and dope echoes. Jerry sniggers.

“er...yeah, I think...er, think that er, getting Thunderbirds to sort this one out is a good idea yeah, got their number?”

The silence in the room is heavier than Jupiter until Jerry and Keith explode with laughter.

Danny cracks and grins. "It's like Betty Ford's in here. I said, we'll need Thunderbirds to sort out the press mess we're in with the New York Times."

"Oh, ok," I nod, returning to the cold facts of the afternoon and wondering when to drop the bomb about Hector's grave dance.

"Fucking liability, where's the vomit fountain?" asks Daniel.

"Sleeping it off at the hotel," says Jerry.

"And where is Jenny?" he adds, staring at me.

"Sleeping it off at the hotel..." Mumbles Keith.

Danny is aghast. "Did you drug her?" He stares at me like I've just told him I helped OJ Simpson get off. I smile a 'none of your business' smile back at him.

"What about Don?" says Jerry.

"You fucking hired him," replies Keith.

"Your fucking wife recommended him," Jerry shoots back.

"He's a better drinker than a drummer," I add, but then wish I hadn't.

"He does it on purpose," says Jerry, standing up so he can start his usual pacing. "He hates the press after that Heroin shit they accused him of years ago."

Keith clears his throat. We glance at him but he shrugs.

"Are we firing him?" asks Daniel.

"He's my wife's client!" protests Keith.

"So get your wife to fire him," says Jerry.

"That's not the point," Keith stands up and accompanies Jerry's pacing.

"He earns twice as much as you and you're defending him," says Jerry.

"I like him," says Keith.

"I do when he's sober," says Jerry.

"What then?" I ask.

Danny claps his hands for attention. "Look, time out a minute, I've booked you into Stone Meadows for three weeks. Keep him sober. There's only one pub nearby, it shouldn't be hard. Maybe it'll blow over."

I close my eyes, thinking of Hector.

"One pub is all he needs," counters Jerry.

"So give him Shandy!"

"When are we going?" I ask.

"Tomorrow."

Jerry's eyes go wider than saucers. "We haven't written anything!"

"Edgar showed you a bunch of poems and stories," Danny tells him.

"Is he coming to Stone Meadows?" I ask.

"Yes," says Danny. "He'll meet you."

Jerry starts to sing 'Summer Holiday,' but Danny cuts him off. "This is not a holiday."

Silence permeates the office like the smoke from a freshly lit joint.

"Why aren't you fired?" Jerry looks at me with mild amusement, "You decked Hector."

Keith and Danny nod in agreement.

"When?" I ask, faking my innocence.

"When we came off stage at the Hammersmith..." begins Jerry.

"It's the Carling now..." Danny interrupts.

Keith interjects. "Don't tell Don, he'll think it's turned into a pub, anyway, fuck the Carling, it'll always be the Hammersmith. You can't change a legend." Jerry ignores him, "You decked him, remember? Right after he said Thomas was dead?"

"That's right," says Danny.

"Slipped?" I suggest.

The subject is filed away for later so I don't push it. Then Jerry returns to his favourite subject. "Where's the cash from the gig?"

"You spent it," replies Danny.

"I did not!" I reply.

Danny's face takes on a road rage quality. "You all did."

"On what?" asks Keith, the only one in the room who doesn't party.

Danny reads from a mental list, "Drugs, beer, light shows, hotel bills and attendant wreckage resulting from altercation with similar animals. Beer and drugs, oh, and did I mention beer and drugs?"

"Shit," says Keith.

"That, as well," smiles Danny. "I can't write the cocaine bill off on taxes."

"Keith Richards used to," I tell him.

"He has a good lawyer."

"Why don't we?"

"You want to spend it on lawyers as well?"

"Where's Steppenwolf?" I ask.

Jerry blinks slowly, like a lizard. Danny looks at the unpaid bills and invoices on his desk as if seeking the answer among them, "I don't know."

"Bollocks, you know..." I tell him.

"Ask Hector," advises Danny.

"I'm asking you."

"I don't bloody know, Bolivia?" shouts Danny.

Jerry stares at Danny, his expression cold. "Ok, give us five hundred quid and I'll be off for the day."

"What happened to the five hundred I gave you two days ago?" asks Danny and Jerry turns pale.

"What five hundred?" complains Keith, "How come I didn't get five hundred? I was broke too."

"Alright look, you can all have five hundred each if you just fuck off and get writing. Stone Meadows is tomorrow and the place isn't cheap. Just go!"

Danny gets the money from a wall safe and hands it over.

"I'd give you five hundred for Don but you'd only split it."

"He'd get a thousand would he?" I say.

Danny grits his teeth and we head for the door but his parting shot is still to hit us in the back.

“Oh yeah, three things,”

Damn, we almost made it to the door.

We turn to face him like three question marks on a blank sheet.

“Go on,” says Jerry.

“Hector is going to be at some of the gigs.”

“Why?” asks Jerry.

“He wants to see his investment.”

Jerry flicks back his long hair. “I don’t want him near us.”

“Me neither,” I add.

“Nor me,” says Keith.

“Tough shit,” mutters Danny.

“When is the USA tour going to be announced?” I ask, and Jerry and Danny fold like a bad poker hand.

“Sit,” he says, giving in. “Thanks Larry.”

“What’s USA? Uther Side of Accrington?” asks Jerry, putting on an accent.

Danny pulls a thick document from his desk draw.

“Read and weep,” he says, throwing it on the desk. I walk to the desk and open the book. The first page is titled ‘Tourniquet,’

“What’s this, a first aid course?” I ask.

“It’s Hector’s plan to tour in a tightening circle until the money you wasted is recouped and we go into profit. I’d like some money?”

“You get your share,” complains Jerry.

“I get my share of Hector. Terminal Records has three big acts and the other two don’t run around like...” he struggles for a simile.

“Kids on drugs?” confesses Jerry.

“So why do it?”

“This is fun. Larry was a teacher. Keith at some distant point is his life almost ended up an estate agent.”

“Don’t remind me,” chirps Keith.

“You remember the past don’t you, Danny? We were a freak band. No money, we played for free,” says Jerry.

“That was Rick Miller. I seem to remember you wanted the money. Now you’ve got money you spend it all on coke and mushrooms and beer and uppers, downers, women, and whatever else.”

“We’ve got houses and cars, what else is there?”

I have to wonder.

“Let’s not get into the free spirit argument again, you couldn’t keep your trap shut about the USA tour so here it is,” we all sit down and Danny sits behind his desk like he’s reading the news. “You go to Stone Meadows then Stone Henge.”

“Wonderful.” moans Keith.

“After Henge it’s, wait for it...” says Daniel trying to cheer us up with a surprise, “Europe!”

“Where in Europe?” asks Keith.

“France, Germany and Italy.”

“Is one of the gigs Munich?” I ask Jerry. “Because that’s where we lose Don. If the beer festival is on we may as well hire another drummer right now,” I notice Jerry is looking at the floor and smiling not too pleasantly. No one reacts to my comment.

“After the Europe section we fly to the States.”

I feel ill. I feel like I need a thousand holidays. I love the band and I love the life but everyone needs a rest, not just sleep.

“I’m nearly at burn out,” Says Keith.

“Me too,” I echo.

“What difference does it make?” says Jerry, and I acknowledge that once again Jerry has no real home except the one before his microphone stand with the mirror fixed to it so he can watch his face while he plays to a full house. The news given, Danny relaxes. “Hector is stopping off at a few shows in each section of the tour, just to say hello.”

“Not to remind us that he hates us?” I ask. “He’ll drop us from the label after he’s made his cash back. Why don’t we just tell Terminal to fuck off and get another to sign us?”

“I can’t guarantee another sign up in this state and as the Don fountain just puked on the New York Times...”

No one argues so we say good bye to Danny, five hundreds in our pockets, and troop out of the office like a weary army with nothing ahead but war and parties. Just before we get to the door an alarm bell goes off in my head.

“What was the third thing?” I ask Danny.

“What?”

“You said there were three things, Hector, the tour, and?”

“Oh yeah, I booked you a gig.”

We all turn and face him again.

“You did what?” I ask him.

“Booked a gig. You know? That bit where you play before a live audience and they cheer and all that?”

“When?”

“Tonight,” says Danny. “Didn’t Hector tell you at the Hard Rock?”

“You know he didn’t.”

Daniel curses.

“He was getting his face slapped,” I tell him about the New York Times journalist and Hector following her to the Ladies room. I see Danny mentally filing it away under B for Blackmail.

“Where’s the show?” asks Keith, the resignation in his voice reflects my stare.

“Shepard’s Bush Empire. There’s a few bands on so you won’t be lonely. You play four songs and then you’re off so don’t panic. It’ll stave off the cash drought.”

I feel weak. These days I can’t tell if I’m going to fart or faint.

Danny looks at me. “Get Jenny out of your bed and tell her to call me?”

“Jesus Danny, are we doing warm ups now?” complains Keith.

“The whole thing is sorted just get out and play while I get health and safety healthily and safely bribed.”

We leave the office cash in hand and no where to go for three hours.

I was going to mention the incident with Hector at Thomas' grave, but I think I keep quiet, let Danny find out for himself. My treat!

*

Keith and Jerry head back to the hotel, eager to give Don the good news about Stone Meadows and his future as a shandy drinker, so I call Jenny and she comes to meet me at Starbucks. While I wait for her I sit outside with my back to a warm brick wall, glad not to be part of the rat race around me, and not for the first time feeling that I exist outside of the time streams of life. Here today gone tomorrow, that's me. Jenny arrives smiling and beautiful in jeans and a pale jacket. She kisses me and a waiter takes our order.

“I've never understood this Starbucks thing, why do I need a manual to order a coffee?” I ask. Jenny laughs and the sun seems suddenly warmer now she's here.

“We got the good news,” I tell her.

“Think you'll enjoy it?”

“You missed the part about the gig.”

“What gig?” she frowns.

“Daniel booked us a show in three hours.”

“He did what?” she frowns, “where?”

“Shepard's Bush Empire with a few other bands.”

“That's cruel.”

“That's Hector,” I tell her. Then I add, “you should have been at the funeral.”

“No thanks,” she shudders.

“There a shit storm coming,” I whisper, trying to break the news gently.

“Another?” she replies, unconcerned.

“I saw Hector dancing on Thomas' grave.”

Jenny stares in disbelief.

She frowns at me. "Were you stoned?"

"A little," I grin. "But I saw what I saw."

She realises I am serious. "Oh God!"

"The others missed it. We were in the car leaving the church yard."

"Did anyone else see it?" she asks, turning pale.

"Twenty paparazzi," I smile. "A few more people should know by now. I bet it's on the web page."

Jenny starts to laugh.

"What's funny? It's your job to clean up this mess."

"Not any more."

"What's that mean?"

"It means I won't be at the show tonight. Will you be ok?"

"It's only four songs. The crew must have set up already, that means it'll be no big deal for the fans if there's others on as well. I bet some dick films it and puts it out on disc as one of our best performances."

"I enjoyed your performance earlier," smiles Jenny and I almost blush.

"The tour will be bearable with you along."

"Ah," she says.

With a timing that is supernatural, a cloud covers the sun and the air becomes chilly. "What is it?"

Jenny sips her coffee. "I'm not coming."

I stare at her. "To Stone Meadows?"

"On tour..."

I knew what she meant when she started to talk. I just didn't want to hear it.

"I'm not working for Hector anymore and I don't want to be your girlfriend or anyone else's."

"But we..."

"I know and it's been great but, too many strings. I'm sorry."

“It’s ok.”

“I can see it isn’t.”

I shrug.

“You’re not in love with me, are you?”

“Whatever gave you that idea?”

Thank you God, I’ll take my martyrdom now.

“Shit, sorry,” she shakes her head, “I just want less hassle. I was looking at being a PA for some ice skating team. They don’t do as many drugs as rock stars.”

“How do you know?”

Jenny smiles and sips her coffee. “You’re all right Larry. You really are.”

We stare through each other until the afternoon shadows grow long over Leicester Square and the hum of the traffic soothes me. We sit for what seems a long time.

“Is this about Thomas?” I ask her.

“No,” she replies. “Is your decision to stay on this treadmill a reaction to his death?”

I shrug.

“I have to go,” she says.

“I should get to the gig,” I tell her, making my own excuse. We finish the coffee and stand up. I want to hug her but don’t know if I should but then she decides for me and we hold each other for a long time. She pulls away and we wave goodbye and I watch her until she turns the corner. There’s a book store next to the Starbuck’s and it’s getting ready to close. I go in and hunt down the William Burroughs section and find Nova Express. I always read some Burroughs on the road. The prose is fractured like the life I lead. The girl behind the counter hurriedly wraps the book and is eager to be away from her place of work. I almost ask her ‘what’s the rush?’ as she’ll be back here in twenty four hours hurriedly wrapping another book and eager to be home. I go out to work and I come home six months later and find that things have moved on without me. Friends have gone, stores have opened and closed, but I have no cobwebs. I spent my youth getting rid of normality and succeeded too.

I call a cab and head for the gig.

I’m still wearing my funeral suit.

*

King Crimson were the last band I saw at the Shepherds Bush Empire; A rare appearance before they ran back to tax free Seattle. It was a good show, very loud. Musical karate some guy in Genesis once called it. Now I'm going to be on the same stage and the feeling of strangeness comes over me thinking of those places that put on the Beatles and the Stones and Hendrix and everyone else, then one phone call later I'm on the same stage. I walk around to the stage door and see a new tour bus parked with the door and luggage compartments open next to the hired equipment truck. There are a few people stood around in the cooling air and my breath is visible in the security lights of the building. I bet Hector doesn't know about the new bus, that's another shit storm on the horizon.

"No, he doesn't," says Danny, seeing my stare as he comes out of the building, "don't tell him until its too late."

Mick and Allen are loading the cases we won't need tonight back into the luggage compartment of the bus when a taxi squeals into the yard, sliding off the main street and into the loading bay. Jerry and Keith get out of the taxi. They are carrying a bleached and naked version of Don Nelson. He looks like a pack of dogs attacked him.

"Where was he?" asks Danny.

We're used to seeing Don Naked. He drums in a pair of shorts because of the heat from the stage lights. Danny gives the cabbie thirty quid.

"Where are his clothes?" I ask.

"Still in the fountain," says Jerry.

"What fucking fountain?" Danny asks.

"He wasn't at the hotel. We've been driving around looking for him. He was asleep in a fountain two streets away."

"So he's sober?"

Don comes to life when he hears the word sober. "I'm ok. Get off my arse!" he complains and fights for balance until Jerry and Keith let him go. Mr. Short climbs from the tour bus to see what the shouting is and he starts to laugh when he sees Don. I love the road crew. Never will you find such a bunch of reality distorted yet totally organised and committed lunatics with hearts of gold and livers of concrete. Road crews are men of steel. Superman couldn't handle a night on the town with them. Weaker men have turned to Jesus after one tour working at the pace they do in any weather at any time of day or night. My favourite roadie is Mr. Short. Six feet six of indestructible human being with a voice like Satan. The police are frightened of him. It once took four cops and a dog to get him to calm down after one incident with a snooker table and a support band who complained he hadn't set their gear up

to satisfaction. Mr. Short has other problems and quickly moves on from the sight of naked Don.

“That bunk wouldn’t fit a fucking mouse! I am supposed to sleep folded double?” he complains, jerking his thumb back at the bus. Then he clocks Don Nelson again, standing in the nude with Jerry and Keith.

“Full or half?” he asks.

“Full. At the Hard Rock Café,” laughs Jerry.

“I’m all right for Christ’s sake!” moans Don.

“You’ve got a show in two hours,” says Danny.

“I feel sick!” Retorts Don at this horrifying news.

“Get him on the bus and into some clothes before a sparrow thinks its lunch time,” says Keith.

Don’s too shattered to register the jibe and Jerry bundles him onto the bus. We are all laughing now. Mick and Allan continue to load the gear, singing as they do, but Mr. Short still has his gripe.

“Where am I going to sleep?”

“Take the biggest bunk at the back,” suggests Danny.

“I can’t stretch my legs.”

I leave the argument behind and get on the bus. It looks comfortable. Big seats. I always sit at the front and watch the road or read my Burroughs because at the back where the crew and the rest of the band sleep there’s always a beer spillage that finds its way onto my lap. I go to my bunk and look out between the pulled back curtains as I change out of my funeral suit and into less constrictive jeans and shirt. I see Danny handing Mr. Short a fifty pound note. Jerry frowns at me and I slide onto a bed after dumping a pile of clothes near Don. Our pissed drummer is making an attempt to stand and dress at the same time and I can hear him fumbling around in the narrow space between the seats. The beds are arranged like bunks on a submarine, fitted into the rear of the bus where the back seat would normally be. The one problem is that some unlucky sod has to sleep on the top one furthest back, right over the engine, a guarantee of no sleep when the bus is rocketing down the motorway. On previous tours Mr. Short took this bunk until he cracked due to the sleep deprivation that eventually lead to the four cops and a dog incident. Mr. Short now has a bunk near the band but they are too small for his bulk and looking at the arrangement of beds on this new vehicle I can see his problem. There is a wooden cabinet at the end of Mr. Short’s bunk and he can’t put his legs over the edge. It takes Don twenty minutes to get into his clothes and when he’s done he looks like he slept in them. The man was born scruffy. He flattens his wayward hair when Jerry shows him a mirror.

Keith suddenly boards the bus. He looks scared.

“Duck!” says Keith, and rolls onto his bunk.

I look out of the window again and see the vast bear like frame of Mr. Short walking toward the bus and pulling the rip cord on the biggest chain saw I have ever seen. The huge machine blasts into life and roars like a world war two Messerschmitt and Mr. Short’s face turns bright red and I swear I almost see steam coming from his ears. We all take cover as the vast roadie charges aboard gripping the saw and applying it expertly to the base of the wooden cabinet. In seconds the offending furniture is reduced to slices of chip board and the air is filled with shavings and the stink of petrol exhaust. The cabinet shredded he turns off the saw and lays it across the seats. He clears up the wreckage in his huge hands and carries it back along the bus, dumping it outside at Danny’s feet.

Whistling, he returns for the saw.

“Sorry about the noise lads,” he says as he leaves the bus and walks away across the car park.

Danny climbs aboard. “He hired it from a tool shop.”

I shrug and look for my pillow.

“Got some good news and bad news,” says Danny. “The good news is that Hector’s not coming, the bad news is...”

Jerry and Keith and I all look at Danny. Jerry sits up too quick and cracks his head on the bunk above as he strains to see out of the window.

Shit! Mad Max!

We run the length of the bus and push Danny aside, scrambling to see the person we never thought would hold a driver’s license ever again. But there he is, standing like Clint Eastwood in his tattered olive green uniform with the red line down the side of the pants. The oldest bus driver Greyhound ever had. This is the PSV holder equivalent of Attila the Hun.

“How you doing lads?” says Max in his Belfast lilt.

“When did you get your license back?” I aks.

“Who says I have?”

No one laughs.

“Don’t sweat your beer out,” says Max producing his card license which he spins at Danny like a playing card. Danny tries to be cool by catching it but he misses and it skids along the ground, stopping at Keith’s feet. Keith picks it up and studies it. “Not forged?”

“Cheek,” laughs Max.

Now the nightmare is complete. Patrick ‘Mad Max’ Flynn is driving us on tour. Rumour has it he rolled up an hour late to a show with King Crimson on board. The band ran on stage, plugged in and played Lark’s Tongues in Aspic at one hundred and twenty decibels. Their set lasted an hour and a half and when the lights came up they discovered they’d played before two hundred and fifty old ladies who had been expecting a chamber orchestra. Max took the band to the wrong venue. Twelve of the old ladies went to hospital with shock.

Inside the Empire the real shit hits the fan. Terrorised by the arrival of Mad Max and freaked by the small dressing room, we contemplate the AWOL status of Steppenwolf, except Don Nelson who is still asleep and probably doesn’t know he’s at the gig. Jerry and Keith are behaving like inspector Morse and Mick and Allen are smoking cigarettes and looking confused. The ghost of Thomas Winter is a subject no one will breach but he’s here in spirit.

Jerry is pacing. Tempers are short. No drugs. No Steppenwolf.

“I spoke to him at the hotel before we went to the Hammersmith,” says Jerry, referring to the last performance. “He said he would see me at the gig...” he shrugs. “You were last on stage Larry, did you see him?”

Keith saves me when he interrupts, “He wasn’t back stage when we finished,” he says. “That’s the point.”

“God help me,” grumbles Don in his sleep.

“I don’t care about you, fucking piss head two left hands,” Jerry snarls at Don, “I want to know where Steppenwolf is.”

I could spill the beans about my conversation with Jenny and the truth that I already know, when the drug receptors in Don’s brain suddenly activate. He sits up and looks around at the dressing room and the ragged clothes he’s stuffed himself into.

“How long?”

“Forty minutes,” I tell him.

“Right, ok, no problem,” he says looking around and trying to get himself together, “where’s Steppenwolf, where’s my drugs?”

“No Steppenwolf for Christ’s sake!” Jerry yells at him.

There is a second of silence before Don erupts from his seat and heads for the door. He charges out into the corridor and not caring who hears, starts shouting, “Where’s my drugs! Where are my fucking drugs?”

Jerry contemplates sobriety and then kicks the door shut after Don.

“Fucking brilliant,” he spits, pushing back his greasy shoulder length hair. “I have to put with this in a state of straightness?”

I scowl at his dramatics. “How many Steppenwolfs do you think there are waiting to replace him? There’s probably at least twenty out in the bloody crowd.”

“They should be in here with us!” says Jerry.

I shrug. “I can go one gig without.”

The door crashes inwards as if propelled by a tornado and Danny staggers in holding Don by the collar.

“Score this idiot something before they hear him in Bolivia,” he says to everyone and then leaves.

Allen the roadie stubs out his cigarette. “Back in five,” he says.

I start to tune my base. I’m singing tonight.

No Thomas...

*

1981: With the departure of Rick Miller, Jerry steered the band into more financial waters and Ozone changed line ups more than Jerry changed his strings. The fans know who came and went over the years and who they all were and in what order, but I was never one for history, but there was one singer Ozone took on for a USA tour that Jerry thought would be perfect. As usual he talked the then manager, a guy named Peter Midden, into hiring him after we saw him sing for his own group, who were called The Addiction. Strangely enough that’s what became of him. His name was Graham Halliday and he was the first and only American to join the band. He was a tough guy too. He grew up in the Bowery and adopted a brutal ugliness from the many beatings he suffered as a child. His face was covered with tiny scars from razor blades where the gangs had cut him for fun. After a career high of playing New York basement clubs and restaurants he suddenly found himself in the glare of the press, the lust of the groupies, the land of Bolivian marching powder, the intoxication of the Jag show room and the police cells at JFK airport. This heady mixture led to heroin, divorce, car crash, rehab and a black listed passport. The band came home early and left Graham in a clinic. Various keyboard players, drummers and singers came and went. The band fell out of the charts but stayed solid on American FM radio as an AOR band. That’s Album Orientated Rock, to the uninitiated.

I always thought it stood for Any Old Rubbish.

*

And that’s exactly how we played tonight.

But not any old rubbish, Don Nelson driven rubbish. He was all over the place. We only had to do four songs and I thank God that only a small section of our audience saw us due to our surprise appearance, but Don couldn't even get through twenty minutes. Halfway through 'Chemically Active' I stopped looking over at Danny who was side stage with his head in his hands. Don changed time and missed beats and dropped his sticks. I could hear him gagging for breath. The drum chaos had a knock on effect and Jerry sliced through his strings more than once, giving the crowd ample time to shout crap at us. I sang the verses of 'The Man from Maybe' in the wrong order and looked at the multitude of faces changing all at once from happy and singing to confused horror while Keith stood stock still and sweated. The four songs felt like ninety minute epics of disaster and from centre stage I looked over at the clean spot on my Jupiter Four where my rubber chicken used to sit.

No Steppenwolf. No Thomas. Fuck you Hector!

After the gig we sit in the dressing room despondent and sullen. Don is asleep in minutes and I start to change while Danny complains about the gig quality. I ignore the comments. I have the weight of Thomas Winter on my shoulders. Jerry takes a call on his mobile and after a mumbled conversation he cuts the call and leaves the room. The door to the dressing room is open to the corridor as I look in the mirror and see his reflection walk passed a few minutes later carrying can of petrol and a sledge hammer. I shake my head as Danny calls after him to come back.

"Don't worry, its unleaded," Jerry calls.

I look at Danny. "Harder to put out, but you can't say it isn't green."

I roll a joint and wait for Jerry to return from putting another bootleg tour shirt salesman out of business. Outside the gig the fans are waiting. They shout and scream and tell us we're shit and all the rest...I live with it. Tomorrow they'll have forgotten.

*

I wake up on the tour bus.

We're at Stone Meadows. Last night's chaos is fading as my hearing returns.

I smell farmyards and freshly cut grass. I hear birdsong and Jerry and Danny talking as they have their morning joint in the warm sunshine. Stone Meadows is a country farmhouse converted to a recording studio by an eccentric individual we know as King Charles. He's made a mint with bands like Cross City Traffic and Rancid Washing Machine recording here over the years, and at two hundred an hour the place does very well. It's a regular Terminal Records studio and we usually have a week of rehearsals and try to 'get it together' but due to the pressure of Hector we have turned up empty handed. I climb off my bunk and stand up holding onto the nearest seat rest

as a head rush hits me. The bus is empty. I must have slept like a log after the show and they've left me to it which is good because I like waking in the country quiet, taking my time to dress then wandering over to the kitchen part of the farmhouse where cooked breakfasts sizzle on a huge stove. In the kitchen Keith is sitting at the wooden breakfast table eating from a plate of bacon, sausage, eggs, tomatoes and mushrooms. Coffee gurgles in a pot and newspapers are spread across the table among the bottles of sauce. After 'good mornings' I pull up a chair and look at the column headings.

"Have you seen this?" Keith says, pushing the tabloids my way.

I look at the perfectly captured image of Hector in mid cavort over Thomas' grave. I pretend to be shocked with my 'what's going on?' expression prompting a response.

"Hector, in his infinite wisdom, has also decided to tell the fans at Henge that we're playing it as a tribute to Thomas," he says, indignant as he continues to eat.

"And are we?" I ask.

"Danny can't get the wanker on the phone," he snarls, puncturing a fried egg.

"I think we should play it as a Thomas tribute," I tell him.

Jerry enters the kitchen, catching the conversation and looking irritated.

"What's your problem with that?" I ask as Graham, the studio's chef comes into the room, wipes his hands and sets a massive fry up before me.

"Have you forgotten what he put us through? Fucking maniac!" spits Danny, following Jerry in and pulling up a chair. I wonder what Jerry and Danny were discussing out by the tour bus. I'm holding onto the big grenade, ready to pull the pin.

*

The studio is a basic but expensive set up, a booth that holds the gear and the band and a smaller room with a large glass sound proofed window where the producer and the engineer sit before the mixing desk. We have learned never to switch off the recording gear as the real gems often come unexpectedly and by accident. It's fun to play back the in-between song chatter and the small arguments about tuning up or which key to use. I once got hold of a tape of us recording the last album and edited all the chatter together to make a nonsensical speech and we played it as an intro to the shows. Daniel wasn't amused as he was the most prominent voice always yelling about how much things cost. I'm at the keyboard rack with the notes of Edgar's poem 'Memory House' before me. We're going to have a go at a rough jam to get a feel for the words. I can see Edgar in the control booth with Terry the producer and Simon the engineer. Sitting with them with his head in his hands is Don Nelson. Jerry is plugging his Gibson into the amps and

gritting his teeth. We are all trying not to look at the empty drum stool. I'm thinking of the pissed off roadie who assembled his kit for nothing. Don looks like he couldn't hit the ground. I'm programming a bass pulse to give us a guide through the try out so at least we might get an idea of how fast to play if it gets to a completed song. We try the ideas out and I think I get a fairly good riff going and I have to say it sounds interesting considering we came in here with nothing prepared. As I play I can see Don asleep on the studio couch. Mentally, there must be bits and pieces of him lying all over the floor. Jerry knows he's useless like this and Keith is saying nothing but we exchanged a glance this morning that says Don will be the next victim of Jerry. Danny gives a thumbs signal and then gestures that he has been on the phone.

*

Lunch is at the local pub. We are all here, including Don who has mysteriously recovered in time for the midday pint. It's warm outside, a perfect day, so we decide to eat in the beer garden. Keith is wearing a striped shirt and shorts and we laugh at his thin white legs as he sits before his ploughman's lunch delivered by the waitress he fancies.

"You'll never land her dressed as a deck chair," says Jerry.

Keith ignores him. Danny has bought Don a pint and is trying to engage us about the morning's work.

"Could have used a drummer," says Jerry.

"Fuck off," mutters Don.

Jerry smiles as Don takes a swallow from his pint and then spits most of it onto the grass. "This is fucking Shandy!" he roars and stands up to go back into the pub to order his second and third pint. Families and business men enjoying similar lunches look over with curiosity and then drift back to their food. Jerry lets his fork drop to his plate and looks Danny in the eyes.

"I'm sick of him! I'm sick of him being sick. I'm sick of seeing him being sick. He is sick. He's sicker than..."

"All right you've made your point, I'm trying to fucking eat!" I tell him.

Jerry turns on me. "He wants rid of you!"

My heart goes quiet. "What did you say?"

"He saw you setting up that base pulse this morning and he knows you can replace him in the studio."

"Bollocks," I tell him.

"It's true," says Jerry.

"So what?" adds Keith, "The question is can we go on with him?"

“No,” says Jerry.

“Last time I looked, Danny was the manager of this band,” I tell him.

Jerry gives me a look that says, “Oh really?”, but Danny doesn’t see it.

“I want you to fire him,” Jerry tells Danny.

“Now?”

“Now,” says Jerry, “at lunch.”

“Why?”

“He’s on twice the money we’re on and for what? His old band’s passed glory? Where are they now? Where is he now? That fucking studio is costing us two hundred an hour. Shall I bill him for this morning?”

“He’s got a point,” I add. I’ve never been close to Don. He thinks he’s Gods’ gift to drums. Don comes back to the table. He has a pint of lager in each hand. He picks up the atmosphere straight away and I cringe.

“What’s up?”

“You,” Says Jerry.

Danny takes over. “It’s the considered opinion, Don, that you should leave the band.”

Don stares at each of us in turn. “Why?”

“You’re holding two of them,” says Jerry.

Don lets go of the drinks as if he didn’t realise he was carrying them. “I make this band,” he says to everyone’s amazement. “Who is going to sack me, the worst bass player?”

I take a breath and think about causing shit.

“The best bass player in the business is Jack Bruce and I played next to him for two years.”

In one instant I decide I’ve had enough. I could go home early. Fuck this. Last night, during our four song gig at Shepard’s Bush Don performed a five minute version of his twenty minute solo then stood on his drum stool stark naked and wired like a fuse box on speed, raised his hands like Jesus for all the press to see then spectacularly and in what seemed like slow motion, keeled over into his drum kit scattering the symbols and stands and chime racks and his row of V drums. A set of Rota Toms bounced passed me and off the stage into the front row in a bizarre imitation of my rubber chicken.

"If that's the way you feel Don, I'll leave." I get up and go into the pub. I think I'll order some champagne. I'm at the bar a few minutes when Danny comes in after me and asks me to sit at a corner booth with him. I like Danny, he's a good manager; always there when you're broke, so I give him the time of day.

Danny looks straight at me. "We're sacking Don."

"Ok," I nod.

"I think you should tell him."

"Why?"

"He wanted you out."

I think for a moment. "Jerry is behind this. He's using you."

"You leave Jerry to me," smiles Danny.

It's been strange day. Woke up in the country, had breakfast, improvised a song structure from a short story, left the band for five minutes after an argument with Don, rejoined, and now I get to fire him.

"Where is he?"

"Still drinking," says Danny. "Jerry wants you in the band. It was you and him who put things back together after the last label fired us."

I get up from the corner booth and walk out into the bright sunshine. Everyone sees me coming except Don who has his back to me. The two pints he bought have gone. Drained already. I walk around in front of him. "Don, I think it would be a good idea if you left."

"Fuck off," says Don and leaves the table.

The last I see of Don Nelson is his back as he walks toward the pub. Danny comes out and takes a long drink from his bottle of lager.

"We need a drummer," says Jerry, happy that things have once again gone his way.

"Know any?" asks Danny.

"Bound to be a few wannabies floating around," Keith groans.

Danny sips at his pint. "And then there were three."

"Can I get three times my wage?" I announce.

Jerry and Danny splutter over their drinks simultaneously and look at me wide eyed. I spread my hands. "I play bass, keyboards and now I'm singing."

“Congratulations, notoriety is yours for the taking,” smirks Danny.

“And I was going to retire,” I shrug.

“No one leaves this band. Hector takes you to a village like The Prisoner. All the ex members of Ozone live there,” winks Danny at Keith. “I wonder if Steppenwolf’s there?” he adds.

“What do you think happened to him?” tests Jerry.

Danny shrugs. “Maybe he found a band that takes more drugs than you,” he pauses, “no, that’s not possible.”

He’s joking I know, but the possibility that Steppenwolf has moved on to weed pastures new is not something we can rule out. There’s serious tour mayhem going on out there as we speak. Nine Inch Nails, Marilyn Manson, Sunna, Cradle of Filth, Static X; all maniacs with personnel in the band or road crew that love their stuff. These days Ozone orbits at a lower level, watching the famous have their fame. We’ve been there, seen it, shagged it, snorted and smoked it, and still doing it. Sometimes I think I’m the only one who complains about the money situation or the fact we’re on the treadmill. I think Keith and especially Jerry have found it’s their home. I wonder why I just didn’t quit when I had the opportunity during the row with Don or the punch to Hector. We’re not trying to prove anything anymore other than the fact that we can stand up for two hours a night. But the albums still sell and the magic is still there for the fans. As long as we throw in some hits from Wonderland Avenue, Requiem for Doomsday Parties and some golden oldies from Aqua Sky and Syntax by Fax we’ll always be safe and I need the money, and where the money went is starting to bother me. For one reason or another, things are going missing from this band; Drummers, singers, cute Personal Assistants called Jenny and a drug dealer. These constant thoughts echo around my head, *‘Where’s the money, Larry?’* They softly whisper.

*

Back at Stone Meadows, Don’s drums have gone and so has Don and that means his stuff from the tour bus will have gone too.

“He can move when he wants to,” says Keith.

“You better have the afternoon off and look through Edgar’s notes,” says Danny.

“Where are you going?” Jerry calls after him.

“Get you another drummer before Don calls Hector and we have world war three.” The door slams and Danny is gone.

Left to our own devices we decide to do some mushrooms instead of writing. The day’s been a pointless mess so far and we might as well have fun. Jerry and I know a great place to get mushrooms so we set off on foot toward the woods. Stripped down to shorts and shirts we are just leaving the

farm's grounds when Edgar pulls up in his Jaguar and climbs out. Keith bursts into a smile when he sees that Mary is with him. I watch them hug and kiss and he pulls her along by the hand.

"I got a call from Don, what happened?" says Mary.

Keith tells her, and Mary, Don's publicity agent, gives me a look.

Don was her client and I have just lost her a serious income until she finds him another gig. I don't let on that Keith was in agreement, arranging divorces is not my reason for being in this band and I wish it didn't have to be this way but money does strange things to people. I apologise to Mary and I get a shrug of partial forgiveness. She cannot deny that Don is a drunk and a liability. It's not the first time this has happened.

*

I am lying in a clearing of the forest staring at thick shafts of ancient sunlight reaching through the canopy of leaves. The ingested mushrooms are kicking in. The world is floating and small friendly creatures are scurrying by just on the edge of my vision. There is no music but the music in my head, a lazy pulse pattern travelling slowly from one end of my mind to the other. It's so peaceful here, green and golden. The music in my head slows to a drifting chord change of soft moods gently punctuated by the echo of a single high piano note, randomly touched. I see the future. I have to stop playing the bass when I finally leave Ozone and move permanently onto the keyboards. The answer is there. I could create soundscapes. The mood shifts and the mayhem of Shepard's Bush pours away into the shafts of light to where Thomas Winter waits for us and we can play in a band together and be gloriously and monumentally stoned.

Still wired on the mushrooms we stagger back to the studio. Simon and Terry have gone home and Jerry has started the recording gear and switched on the mixing desk. We are trying to play but Jerry bursts into fits of laughter every time he is counted in and sits on the floor, tears rolling down his face, then he recovers and starts playing again. Keith and I try to follow the riffs he plays. I feel light headed and when I look at the neck of my bass. My fingers are sinking into the strings as if the guitar were made of chocolate. For some reason I find this incredibly funny and sit on the floor laughing just as hard as Jerry. Somewhere in all this is an album. We play for an hour and the mushrooms begin to settle and a feeling of creativity begins as though we are psychically connected through our instruments. I recognise at least four basic song structures that can be manipulated into one long epic. The fans love that. When we used to put albums out on vinyl it always frustrated me that we had to stop after twenty minutes because the album had to continue on side two. Now we spread the ideas into an hour. We are not missing Don. He'd be hammering and bashing away like a DIY nut putting up shelves and pissing us off when me and Keith want to talk about a chord change. I don't know what it is about drummers. They always have to be hitting something. When you ask them to stop because you're trying to think or talk they give you a blank look and continue bashing away. The session drifts into evening. We've moved

onto joints, the coffee and cigars of a mushroom session. The lights are low and Jerry is playing some slow chords. Keith is enhancing them with angelic choral effects on his Oberheim and I have put my bass away for now and improvise a melody on the Jupiter Four while sitting cross legged before it. And that when a song comes out of nowhere. Jerry improvises the lyrics to a piece we will call The Graveyard of the Failed. When it's done and recorded, we know it needs no further work and decide to hide it as an un-credited bonus track for the fans to find with clues on the web page. The dust free patch on the Jupiter Four where my rubber chicken sat has gone now. Someone must have accidentally cleaned it. The rubber chicken reminds me of the Hammersmith show. I don't remember falling asleep, but I dream of Thomas Winter...

It's Sunday evening on the last day at Stone Meadows.

We've been here three days, smoking and recording, taking mushrooms and drinking. The album is done. When it's mixed it'll go to press. Danny has called John Koutheart and told him the name of the album is 'The Graveyard of the Failed' and to get cracking on the CD sleeve design. There are seven tracks on the album; Sound Killer, Fractured Journey, Demons in Life, N Code, Panic Street, D-Construction and Losing What I Never Had. This last song is for Jenny but I keep that to myself. Memory House is a bonus track. We have used two new devices on the recording of the album. I now have a custom made pulse box which allows me to play any of my synthesisers from just one keyboard. Simon the engineer rigged it up for me one afternoon and now that we are agreed that we are to be a two keyboard band everything went spacey and more psychedelic. A great move was Jerry asking Edgar to sing the vocal to his poem N Code. He did it in a punk voice and it came over really funny and mean, seeing this giant biker type in a suit belting out the words and giving it some Johnny Rotten. The other new device was a dummy head stereo microphone. This looks like the helmet from ancient Chinese armour and when plugged in and fitted to the microphone stand Jerry and I could both sing into it at once and it get a dual vocal sound without overdubbing. Good things have happened here. Our holiday at the studio has borne fruit and we haven't seen or heard from Hector. There's been no word from Don. Things have settled into a pattern of musical acceptance without Thomas for a while and the ideas have changed without his input but the signature sound of the band has remained as though bigger than each individual.

Its twilight and we are outside the studio with Mary who has arranged a photo shoot with Shark Pressely, the 'in' guy at the publicity agency. He takes some GQ style shots of us posing with shades on and trying not to laugh.

Then the outside world arrives, and it all goes fucking wrong.

Hector doesn't come as threatened, but he's sent the next worst thing.

I am standing in front of a twenty year old kid who only seconds ago had roared up in his Porsche and spilled out like a violent liquid. The kid is wearing jeans and a sports jacket over his sweatshirt. He has short hair and is clean shaven. The best smile he owns spoils his face.

“Hey, Ozone, how’s it going?” he talks with the lazy drone of a semi educated football hooligan mixed with puppy dog enthusiasm. I half expect him to jump on Jerry’s lap and lick his face.

“We’re done,” says Danny when Jerry doesn’t answer the kid.

“I’m Wayne. Hector sent me to hear the finished product.”

“Its music, not a fucking tub of lard,” says Keith.

Wayne takes a step back. “Sorry, guys, office talk got me for a minute.”

I can’t believe I’m seeing this person. Who the fuck talks like this? He’s done way too much coke and looks as though he hasn’t slept for months. There’s a ringing bell quality to his face like he’s still vibrating from a hit. And speaking of hit, here’s the reason Hector sent him.

“Hector’s looking for a single?” says the kid.

He shouldn’t have asked. We pitch titles that relate to Hector’s faux pa at the funeral.

Jerry: “Singin’ in the grave?”

Keith: “Gravy train?”

Mary: “Stone free,”

Me: “Head like a hole?”

“Ok, enough,” says the kid, raising his hands in mock surrender.

“Where is Hector?” asks Jerry.

“In hiding,” says Wayne as if it were old news.

“What?” I laugh.

“He got death threats from the fans.”

“Good for them,” I shout. “What was he thinking?”

“I have no idea, but he travels with a bodyguard now.”

“I love it,” says Keith.

“What about this single?” says Wayne.

“There’s one,” I offer, “Fractured Journey.”

Suddenly, Jerry speaks up. “I think Demons in Life is better.”

“Can I hear both?” asks Wayne.

We take him inside and into the booth. With the lights low and the speakers up to ten we blast the two songs at Wayne, hoping to ruin his hearing. Afterwards, he sits and stares.

“Fractured Journey was good, and so was Demons of Life,” ponders Wayne as though he actually decides this stuff for a living.

“Make your mind up,” urges Danny.

“Demons in Life,” says Jerry, “that’s not a choice, that’s the single.”

I sit back and gaze lazily at the ceiling. Poor naïve kid. Jerry doesn’t want Fractured Journey to be a single because he had nothing to do with the writing. Keith and I wrote Fractured Journey because of the twin synthesiser set up and it came from that. When Demons in Life goes into production as a single Jerry gets a writing credit and the rest of us don’t. Wayne thinks it’s a band gripe.

“What about a single that’s not on the album? You know a belting classic rock track?” the kid air guitars with his hands, getting into some imaginary groove he would have no idea how to produce.

“Like Electra Glide?” I ask.

“Yeah,” says Wayne, thinking he’s actually getting somewhere.

“You want another three minutes of crap?” I suggest, getting pissed off.

“Well, three minutes, yeah. This band has so much singles potential. You could be number one again.”

“And go on CD UK? Can’t wait,” says Keith, not hiding his disgust.

“Come on, it’s not impossible...”

I decide to cut him off. “You’re talking to the wrong people.” I tell him, remembering how I spent an afternoon rolling a coke bottle along the strings of the Rosendorf piano for the start of Fractured Journey. That was the day I bought a sequencer and we worked eighteen hours still high off another day on the mushrooms until everyone fell over then we limped to the pub laughing like the two old guys from the Muppett show.

“We don’t write singles. We like long tracks and concept albums. If you’d have known anything about us before you pulled up in your Porsche you’d have known that,” says Keith.

I announce I'm going to the pub. Everyone follows, leaving the A&R man to contemplate his answer to Hector.

*

Fun was to be had in the pubs near Stone Meadows.

One in particular was the Stag and Antler run by Lionel, an old ex navy man who owned the place and frequently had lock-ins. Lionel drank Woods' Navy rum, and when you're plastered on that stuff you know no fear. On past Stone Meadows recording sessions someone has taken my car keys away because of musicians killed on the drive back through the woods from being in the pub all day. We spend the evening in a state of drunken relief that Don is gone and Hector is under guard and afraid of his own shadow. The album is done and waits for mixing, then a few rehearsals and the rest of the tour. Drunk though I am, I promise myself again that this will be the last one.

I raise a glass to Thomas Winter.

Later on, Danny will pick us up with Mad Max at the wheel. On previous tours we had no bus. A truck would take the gear and we would follow in two cars. There was an early car that Jerry would always use after he had breakfast at about ten and there was a late car for if you had been up all night. This left about four in the afternoon. The early car stopped at country pubs along the way. There was a kid no older than Wayne the A&R slave driving the early car in those days. Mr. Short found him homeless after a gig and gave him a job road crewing. He bought him shoes and clothes and had him work as a gofer but if he got something wrong he would take the piss. I once went to the kitchen area at a show and found this kid gaffer taped to a hat stand.

*

In the morning we are ready to leave Stone Meadows.

I walk out of the farmhouse with my bag and find Jerry out by the bus with his mobile to his ear. When I approach he cuts the call and pushes the phone into the top pocket of his shirt. He looks worried.

"Where's Steppenwolf?" he asks me, his face taugth with the beginnings of anger. "I'm not going to ask you again."

The question catches me off guard. I've never seen Jerry like this before, and I don't like how he is looking at me.

"You know I don't know," I tell him. "Still want to hire a detective?" I ask.

"Might be an idea," says Jerry. "Why hasn't he called?"

"I don't know," I tell him again.

“You don’t know much do you?” says Jerry, still threatening.

“What are you trying to say?”

Jerry exhales like a father to his son on discovery of a lie. “I’m saying that I just spoke to a lighting guy who was back stage at the Hammersmith. He saw a guy in a long coat hand you something just before you went on stage.”

“So?” I stall.

“What did Steppenwolf say?”

“He said ‘give this to Jerry.’ You’d already logged on to your ego trip and thrown yourself at the adoring fans, remember?”

“Fucking coke,” nods Jerry. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrug, playing this out.

“Ok, what did he give you?”

“If you were expecting him, you tell me,” I frown, sick of this mafia shit.

“Come on Larry, we’ve been all over the fucking world together?”

His friendly angle doesn’t cut it with me. “You’re up to something to line your own fucking pocket.”

Jerry smiles. “You don’t know what it means, do you? The piece of paper he gave you. There were some numbers on it?”

“Ok, yeah. So what are they?”

Jerry smiles again. “You let me worry about that.”

“Has it anything to do with Steppenwolf disappearing?”

“It has everything to do with it. Hand over the numbers Larry; you have no idea what you’re getting into.”

“What about Jenny?” I ask. “How much shit is she in?”

“She quit, remember? She doesn’t know anything about it.”

Jerry is getting really tense now. He may hit me.

“You’re out of your depth Larry. Do yourself a favour and give it up.”

“I haven’t got a clue. I didn’t have time to read it.”

Jerry waits impatiently. “You really don’t know?”

“No,” I tell him.

Jerry nods, satisfied for now. “I hope so for your sake Larry, or you might be the next to disappear.”

“I doubt it. You can’t risk it. I may have put it somewhere safe.”

The silence from Jerry is beautiful.

“You cunt, Jerry,” I snap at him. “You think I’m fucking stupid? You think I don’t see what goes on around here? What about Danny?”

Jerry sniffs, “Tomorrow, Danny and me are going to see a lawyer, a really nasty one. She’d use Hector for a dildo. I guess you’re in. Want to come?”

“Sure,” I nod.

“Everything will be explained to you at the meeting.”

I nod. “Ok, deal.”

Jerry reaches into his pocket and hands me an appointment card.

Jerry’s mobile rings and he answers it.

Seconds later he cuts the call. “We’ve got a new drummer.”

I nod and start to walk away, then decide to ask, “What’s the lawyer’s name?”

“Lurisa,” says Jerry. “Lurisa Badsugar.”