

SEAN McMANUS

A silhouette of a person's head and shoulders wearing large headphones. The background behind the head is a blue audio waveform. The word "EARWORM" is written in white, stylized, hand-drawn letters across the front of the headphones.

EARWORM

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BY SEAN McMANUS

Earworm

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Cover design by

Alan D. Robinson

Special thanks to Andy Lawn who came up with the title
Earworm for this remastered edition of the novel.

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PRAISE FOR EARWORM

"A fun novel about the problems faced by musicians in making their mark on a music industry that's falling apart. A bitter satire that works its way up to a memorable finale."

- *Metal Hammer magazine*

"Raising a number of surprisingly sophisticated issues, this book is enjoyably cynical about the seemingly cold-hearted and impenetrable nature of the record industry and peppered with a number of highly comical cameos from the cream of rock'n'roll, which ensures that it never feels like heavy going."

- *Record Collector magazine*

"McManus keeps the action moving at a good crack, and the ideas trip out lightly in snappy dialogue. All round, the novel is a great genetic splicing of ideas and action, culminating in an incendiary showdown almost worthy of a Bond movie. Along the way it slips in telling observations about taste and commerce, culture and technology, creativity and consumption."

- *David Jennings, author of Net, Blogs and Rock'n'Roll*

"The novel satirises the music industry and the clichéd types that populate it, the lead character an affable fellow who you can't help but like - his meditations at his monitor screen, desperately trying to sort ideas, will be familiar to most of us who create music either for a living or for love. Amusing and well written."

- *MusicTech magazine*

"This is the most enjoyable, imaginative and perceptive insight into the plight and possible future of the music industry, a novel that illuminates as well as entertains. The best thing about it is its insight into how the music industry works, why it is dying and where it may very well be going. The twist at the end fooled me but fitted in perfectly with the themes of the book. When I finished reading, the story made me feel optimistic, that there was an exciting new beginning for the music business. The book is well worth buying if you like pop music itself or if you're interested in the machinations of the music industry."

- *Mike Edwards, singer, songwriter and guitarist with Jesus Jones*

"I cried 'til I laughed. There are some great ideas in here... and a few I hope the industry never hears about!"

- *Colin Vearncombe, multimillion-selling singer, songwriter and independent record label manager*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sean McManus is a professional writer whose books have been published by Dorling Kindersley, John Wiley, Prentice Hall and other leading publishers. This is his first novel.

He has written for magazines including Musician, Making Music, Melody Maker, and Future Music. He writes and records his own electronic music, which you can hear at www.sean.co.uk/music. He has seen nearly 300 different bands live and is still counting.

Sean's books include:

- Raspberry Pi For Dummies (with Mike Cook)
- Scratch Programming in Easy Steps
- Web Design in Easy Steps
- The Customer Service Pocketbook (with Tony Newby)
- The Interviewer's Pocketbook (with John Townsend)

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CHAPTER 1

The Bigg Records building looked like it was made from reclaimed gravestones. Two girls in school uniform were carving the name of a boy band into the stone with a key, as thousands had done before them. A third girl stood lookout and chewed, staring straight through Jonathan as he came around the corner. She blew a pink bubble and made it burst as he was level with her. It echoed in the alleyway and scared three pigeons into flight.

It had taken Jonathan ten years to create the perfect song. His iPod purred in his hand as he set it playing. The essence of all the music he ever loved had been distilled into three minutes. Even now it made the hairs on the back of his neck go electric.

There were no windows below the third floor, and the only door he could get to was the main entrance. A neon 'welcome' sign hung over it but its gentle glow did nothing to change the building's funereal appearance. It was like a smiley face painted on a tank: it said 'have a nice day', but only as it crushed the life from you.

Was he really welcome here? Bigg's people's people hadn't even returned his calls. Funny way to treat your saviour, he thought. With companies like this, he had decided, you just had to blag your way in and then convince them afterwards that you were justified. It's easier to seek forgiveness than permission. He looked up at the building towering over him and the skies seemed to darken. Gargoyles leered at him from the roof.

Jonathan took off his iPod and pulled a cigarette from the box

in his inside pocket. There was another smoker loitering outside the entrance. His eyes were heavy with make-up and his spots were covered with a pink paste. Jonathan had seen his face somewhere before but couldn't place it. It felt like a logo you see on a lift each day that buries itself deep in your head despite you never consciously noticing it. Clipped to his trousers was a security pass.

"Got a light?" said Jonathan. The man silently extended his lighter and lit Jonathan's cigarette. "Thanks. Don't I know you?"

"Maybe," said the man. He grinned like he'd had a coat hanger fitted as a brace. "I'm J-Rok. From Icicle Star."

"Of course," said Jonathan, quite certain he had never heard of him. "You did that song! How does it go..?"

J-Rok traced a rainbow with his hands as he belted it out. "I've been away away away, but now I'm here to stay-ay-ay." The schoolgirls pointed at him and laughed.

Jonathan was at first startled and then embarrassed at J-Rok's outburst, especially as his voice was too short to reach the high notes without standing on tiptoes. Jonathan didn't know if he was expected to clap, join in or throw a quid at J-Rok's feet. "You're good," he lied. "I saw you do that on some TV thing, I think."

"Yeah, I sang better on the Saturday Show. The units went through the roof after that. We've been filming an insert for kids TV today. It'll go on the website when we know the TX date. Check it out."

"I certainly will." Jonathan cocked his head at the Bigg Records building. "So what's the studio like then?"

"Co-ol, you know," said J-Rok, looking up. "It's like a computer factory or something. Cleaner than a hospital. Yeah, not hard, I know. But with all those gadgets and stuff, they've got to look after them. Make sure the songs are perfect."

Jonathan eyed J-Rok's day visitor pass, which was clamped tight to his trouser pocket with a metal clip. Jonathan couldn't take it without arousing suspicion or possibly being arrested for indecent assault. "I bet they keep security tight too, with all that kit and superstars like you all over the place."

"Not really," said J-Rok, matter-of-factly. "Once you're past

reception, it's a pretty relaxed culture. Beanbags, lava lamps, you know. You've just got to chill if you're gonna be creative."

"Well, I'd better let you get on," said Jonathan, dropping his cigarette and stamping it out. "It's been a real pleasure." He extended his hand and J-Rok shook his fingers.

Jonathan turned to leave and then spun back on himself. "Wait a minute!" he said. "This is kind of embarrassing, but could I have your autograph? I just know you're going to be big. It would be cool to show people I was into your stuff at the start." Men in their thirties don't normally autograph-hunt boy bands, but Jonathan knew J-Rok's conceit would see him through.

"Sure," beamed J-Rok. "Got some paper?"

Jonathan handed him a train ticket out of his pocket and a biro. J-Rok shook the pen and etched swirls in the cardboard with it in an effort to get it to work.

"I've only got one other autograph," said Jonathan, while J-Rok warmed the pen nib in his mouth. "Prince. He signed a napkin. He just wrote 'P' on it but everyone thinks I did it. I hope my friends believe this is really your autograph."

"I'm sure they will," said J-Rok. "This is still a pretty rare autograph, you know."

Probably your first request, thought Jonathan. "Hey!" he said. "I've had an idea. That's got your name on it. Do you still need it?" He pointed to J-Rok's visitor pass.

J-Rok took it off. "I'm outta here. They want it back though."

"They must have hundreds," said Jonathan. "I'm sure they don't really need it."

J-Rok turned it over and tried to write on the back of the pass, but the biro just slipped across its plastic surface. "Do you really want this security pass?"

"Well, yeah," said Jonathan. "As a souvenir of meeting you." Was he detecting a note of suspicion in J-Rok's voice?

"You'd better wait here a minute." J-Rok disappeared through the revolving door and marched up to reception. Jonathan panicked. Had he been rumbled? Was J-Rok reporting him? Jonathan was probably on camera. His heart jolted as J-Rok pointed at him and the receptionist looked him up and down.

Then J-Rok left the desk and came back outside. "Got one!" he said, holding up a marker. "Linda's always good for a pen. It isn't permanent ink, though."

"I'll put Sellotape on it later."

J-Rok finished writing his name, blew on the ink and then handed his security pass to Jonathan. As Jonathan was about to take it, J-Rok jerked his hand away again. "Don't tell anyone," he said. "Security would go berserk. If I see it on eBay, I will hunt you down."

"No worries," said Jonathan, laughing gently. He imagined J-Rok confronting him to tell him how disappointed he was in him. J-Rok wasn't so much the type to throw a TV out of a hotel window, as the type to throw the remote control on the bed once he'd found a cosy drama he could watch while sheltering from the strange, unfamiliar world outside. If J-Rok had any guts, he'd be smoking inside his record company building, instead of skulking around the streets in make-up. Real music was made by mavericks but Bigg Records could take the most unpromising material and turn it into fool's gold.

J-Rok gently lowered his arm. Jonathan took the pass and squeezed his fingertips against the cold plastic.

"Thanks," he said, reading the name on the sticker. "It'll be safe with me, Jervais."

CHAPTER 2

A white bird flew into the Routemaster's cab and perched on the steering wheel. The bus pulsed to the drumbeat as the band jammed on the top deck.

Simon stood, barefoot, on the zebra crossing. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the catalogue number carved into the road, alongside the stripes. The bus thundered towards him. It was so close that Simon could feel the heat of its engine and it wasn't going to stop. He crouched and sprang onto the Belisha beacon, and the bus faded into a red mist beneath him.

From here, Simon could see the roofs of St Johns Wood were painted with lyrics. Only the first lines and rhymes were bold. His eyes swam when he tried to read the rest.

A man in a smock, juggling sheep, popped up from behind a patch of shrubbery, like toast from a toaster.

"Wake up, Si," she said. "It's Shepherd's Bush."

"Huh?" said Simon. He opened his eyes to see a tube logo whizz past as the train accelerated out of the station.

"We're nearly there," said Fred, sat beside him. It sounded like she was yawning, but when Simon looked, he could see she was applying lipstick, looking in a tiny mirror. She smacked her lips and clicked the lipstick shut.

Simon panicked when he realised he didn't know where his guitar was, but then saw the case propped against the other side of the glass, just inside the train door. He rubbed his eyes.

"Tired?" Fred was plucking at her hair. It was short and teased

into spikes, making her head look like a sloppily iced cake.

"I dream of a good night's sleep," said Simon. Twigs of blood were lodged in the corners of his eyes. "I swear I snore University of Death sleeve notes."

"You should be ready for anything they throw at you then."

He wasn't. He knew it. He'd spent all week with his scrapbook and CD collection. He'd even skimmed the hagiography again, a cheap rush-job from when anything with the band's logo on it sold. But now his brain had casseroleed the names, dates and lyrics, leaving a mulch of disconnected ideas. "Have you seen this show before?"

"It's new," said Fred. "For some digital channel. UK Puppet Gameshows, or something."

The train slowed to a crawl. "Fred?" Simon spoke tentatively.

"Uh-huh?"

"You will take this seriously, won't you?"

"Course," said Fred. She angled her make-up mirror to check how her breasts looked in her black silk shirt. With a satisfied smile, she snapped the mirror shut and slipped it into the pocket of the brown leather jacket that dwarfed her. It had RAF wings stitched to the front.

"Only, well, you know."

"Chill out, Si," said Fred. "I've got general knowledge licked. You're the biggest University of Death nerd. The questions are a mere formality. This is our fifteen minutes of fame. Enjoy it."

The train drew into a station. "White City," announced the driver. "Alight here for the BBC."

"This is us," said Fred. She collected her flightcased keyboard from the seat opposite.

Simon shivered with nerves. "Break a leg," he said.

* * *

Simon flinched and the make-up woman recoiled. "Watch it!" she said. "I could have yer eye out with this."

He forced his eyelids wide open and didn't dare blink. The woman spoke into a walkie-talkie as she stroked his eyelashes

with mascara: "Not much to go on. We could spray glitter in his hair, I s'pose. He looks like a newsreader on a camping holiday."

Simon's t-shirt was covered with swirls and eddies of colour: mostly blue and yellow, but with splashes of brown. A belt with a skull-shaped buckle held up his Asda jeans, which had started life black, but now had round stains all over them. It looked like his trousers had been used as a coffee table.

The make-up woman clipped her radio to her belt. She covered Simon's eyes with one hand and sprayed his hair with the other. After she had lifted the excess glitter from Simon's shoulders with a sticky roller, she took her clear plastic satchel of chemicals to the next podium.

Simon was roasting. Each light was like an open oven pointed at him, and he'd been waiting for twenty minutes. He untucked his t-shirt from his trousers and flapped it. The counter they made him stand behind was made of cardboard, part-covered in sparkly paper. He wanted to break a bit off to use as a fan, but there were too many people flying around.

Simon sized up the competition: two strutting pretty boys, barely out of school, too young to have suffered for their art. What did they know? Thirty thousand screws hand-sorted into bags of fifteen was a four track recorder. Eight thousand envelopes stuffed with catalogues and carefully sealed was a half-decent guitar. Seven hours with glassy eyes, hands on autopilot, imagination flying free: that was a new lyric, or perhaps even a melody. About thirty jobs in fifteen years had given Simon a bulging songbook.

He always knew their break would come. Tonight, it had. He and Fred were going to play their greatest hits-to-be on the BBC. On the other side of the studio, he could see the stage waiting for them in near-darkness. Their instruments were plugged in and ready. So were the other band's.

All Simon and Fred had to do was answer a few questions – or to be exact, a few more questions than the other team – and they would be on.

Easy.

Hopefully.

Simon watched absent-mindedly as a woman was zipped into the weasel costume, and the wardrobe assistant scurried away. The weasel bounced a couple of times on the spot to limber up.

The lights clicked and dimmed. It felt like a fire going out.

One of the runners walked Fred to the centre circle and stood her on a yellow cross taped to the floor. Fred looked briefly over her shoulder to wink at Simon.

A man in headphones counted them down: "In seven, and six, and five, and four..."

Disco lights sprinkled the room with coloured flashes. Someone in the shadows behind the camera clapped with his arms in the air. The audience put down their polystyrene cups of wine and joined in. There were only about twenty people, most of them probably staff, so they beat their hands quickly to make it sound like there was more of a crowd.

The man in headphones held up three fingers and folded them down in turn. When he reached zero, he punched the air and cheesy synth horns heralded the arrival of the weasel. It lolloped onto the stage, stood behind the quizmaster's desk and waved at the cameras.

"Welcome to Pop Goes The Weasel," said voiceover man with a tone of plastic excitement. "Where a talent for pop and rock is *weasily* recognised!" He was throwing his best TV voice into it, but it couldn't levitate the script above the standard of kids' TV. "Willy the Weasel is ready. The audience is ready. Now let's meet our first team tonight."

A videographer with a rubber chicken dangling from his camera charged up to Fred. She came face to face with her reflection in the glass lens. Fred waved, just as she'd been taught. "Fred is Swedish but lives in London," said the announcer. "Her favourite band is the Eurythmics."

The cameraman charged at Simon, who took half a step back. "Her band mate is Simon, whose stage name is *The Thing*," said voiceover man. Simon smiled weakly. "His specialist round will be his favourite band, University of Death. Together, Fred and Simon are called Goblin. With a little *elf-confidence*, they might just win tonight. Remember: they're playing for their own gig on the

BBC at the end of this show. Now, let's welcome our quizmaster... Willy... *the...* WEASEL!"

The weasel waved at the camera with both hands and wobbled its head from side to side. Its face couldn't move, so body language was everything. "Fred, you're first. I have to say, that's an unusual name for a lady." Willy had to say it because it was on the autocue, not because it had just occurred to him, as his stilted delivery made clear.

"It's Swedish for peace," Fred said. "Mum's a bit of a hippy."

"That's lovely." Willy wasn't listening and would have said the same if Fred's name had been Vomit. "You've got one minute to answer four general knowledge questions about music. One wrong answer and you're out of the game. Got that?"

Fred nodded. Coloured lights helter-skeltered around her and converged at her feet.

The weasel held the question cards up to its neck, where there was a gauze through which the woman inside was looking out. She took an audible breath and then began: "Start the clock. If I wanted to kill Sinatra using a Taser, which experimental American composer might I employ?"

Simon was taken aback. This was way more cryptic than he expected.

"Frank Zappa," said Fred. Nice one.

"How many arms has a Def Leppard got?"

"Nine," said Fred. It sounded like a guess. Simon crossed his fingers. The only thing he knew about the band is that the drummer had one arm.

There was a long pause before Willy conceded. "Correct. Which of these royals has not had a UK number one single? King, Queen or Prince?"

"Say again?" said Fred.

"Remember, time's running out."

Simon could see the floor manager holding up a kitchen clock. The red hand had got to six. Simon watched Fred's puzzled expression on one of the monitors and willed her to work it out.

"Which of these royals has not had a UK number one single?" repeated the weasel. "King, Queen or Prince?"

“King?”

“Correct,” said Willy. “Last question. You’ve got 20 seconds to answer but you must get this right. What is the name of John Lennon’s first wife?”

Simon stifled his laugh. He had been afraid they’d throw a real humdinger in at the end. If he and Fred failed this round, all their cramming and rehearsal would have been wasted. And they wouldn’t even have got to play a song. But this was just too easy. Everyone knew this. What’s more, he’d read Cynthia Lennon’s book, and bored Fred recounting endless detail. She’d be grateful now. As long as she paid attention and didn’t answer ‘Yoko’, they were through to round two.

Fred stopped herself blurting it out and put a finger to her mouth. For a moment she was lost in thought. A smile flickered across her face, then hid again. Then she answered, with absolute authority. “Imogen.”

A gasp came through the speakers and the same synth horns that had cheerily opened the show parped a funeral march. Simon swore to himself. The producer glared at him.

Willy shook his head. “I’m sorry. It’s Cynthia,” he said.

“The fuck it is!” said Fred. “You’re joking, yeah?”

There was another gasp in the studio, but this time it was real.

“Language. Can we do that again please?” called the director from the back of the room. “Keep rolling.”

“It’s Cynthia,” repeated Willy.

“It’s fucking Imogen,” said Fred. “This is a fix!”

Willy looked for support around the studio and then settled his gaze on Fred.

“What do you think you’re staring at?” she said. “I’ll deck you in a minute! You wanna spend more time on research and less time... up a rodent’s arse!”

Willy shrugged.

“Don’t shrug at me!” shouted Fred. She charged at the weasel and pushed it over on to its back. It rolled from side to side and fought to get upright. Fred jumped astride it and punched its soft head over and over again. She smashed one of the ping-pong-ball eyes off its face and it bounced away, making a pock sound each

time it hit the floor. The woman inside shouted, but her microphone had fallen off and her voice was muffled by the costume. Willy's legs kicked about helplessly, as Fred repeatedly punched his head.

Simon put a hand on his counter and jumped into the air to vault it, but it crumpled under his weight. He yelled in pain as he landed on his outstretched wrist. The cardboard podium folded on top of him. He rolled out of it and stumbled over to Fred, dragging a strip of glittery paper that had glued itself to his shoe. As Simon approached the pair of them wrestling on the floor, the weasel hit his legs. It felt like being smeared with a teddy bear.

Fred was still punching Willy, knocking his head first to one side and then to the other, alternating her left and right hook. As she lifted her right arm into the air, Simon grabbed it to stop her. Fred tore her arm from Simon's grip but she didn't punch again.

Fred collapsed onto the weasel like it was a bed, exhausted. Willy rolled uneasily but couldn't right himself or roll her off.

When her breathing had returned to normal, Fred stood up, smoothed her clothes and walked off the set.

"Cheating bastards!" she shouted. "Her name is Imogen!"

* * *

Simon didn't say anything to Fred but kept swearing to himself. He had assumed they would be sent home or arrested, but the TV studio wanted to record the contestant debriefing before doing anything else. The show must go on. Fred was sitting in one of the interviewee chairs, biting her nails.

Her top two buttons were missing. The shirt gaped open, flashing cleavage. The buttons must have come off in the fight, although Simon didn't notice them until Fred came back from wardrobe.

A woman hobbled in, her hair in a net and a clipboard in her hand. She plumped herself down in the chair opposite Fred, rolled up the leg of her jogging trousers and rubbed her calf. "Calmed down now?"

"Yes," said Fred. Sweat was still dripping from her hair.

"Don't mention it," said the woman.

"Sorry?" said Fred.

"Yes, that. Don't mention it. I'm not *that* bruised, anyway." She prodded her tender knee and sucked at the air in pain.

"Oh my God! I didn't realise it was you," said Fred. "I just so bought in to the weasel thing I forgot it was a real person inside."

The woman's lip quivered. "You are sweetie!" she said, her eyes going watery. "It's nice to get some credit for a change! I know it's a crap role, but I've always put my all into it. I do everything for that rodent. Without me, the director can't even get his stupid Willy to stand up. Oh, gosh, I mean..."

"Sokay," said Fred. "We know."

The woman rolled her trouser leg down again and invited Simon to sit in the other chair beside Fred. He flopped himself down with such force that the chair legs squeaked across the floor. The cameraman nodded to confirm they were filming.

"How do you feel?" asked the naked weasel.

"Gutted," replied Fred. "Totally gutted. We had a great set worked out. All original stuff, too. Now we'll never get to play it."

"How did you get that Lennon question wrong?"

"I was so sure," said Fred.

Simon exploded: "How can you be so sure about something so obviously wrong?"

"All right!" Fred shouted at him. "Don't go on about it!" She turned back to the camera. "I remember the day Lennon was... the day he died." Fred rubbed one of her eyes. "Mum was crying. She started singing one of his songs. It was the first time I'd heard it. To me, it always sounds funny to hear it without a Swedish accent now. It was so simple, so beautiful. Mum said he had written it for his wife."

"Which song was that?" asked the interviewer.

Fred sniffed and began to sing softly. "Imogen, there's no heaven," she sang. "Imogen, there's no hell."

Simon stared at Fred aghast and the interviewer laughed.

"What?" said Fred. "What's funny?"

CHAPTER 3

The laundrette smelled of bad socks and blue stripe washing powder. As he swept the floor, the manager sang 'All you need is fluff'. He put on a comedy Liverpudlian accent that was neither.

"Mad, eh?" said Simon to a woman who was folding her underwear. He cocked his head towards the manager.

The woman looked at Simon like he was some kind of freak, and turned her back on him.

Simon took another length of string and tied it to a pair of his underpants, leaving a bobble hanging off, then threw them into the washing machine.

The bell above the door tinkled as Fred came in. "Hey, Si!"

As loudly and aggressively as he could, he snipped lengths of string from the ball and let them fall into his clothes basket. He didn't reply.

"Your flatmate told me you'd be here."

Their last words had been on camera yesterday. Since then, his inbox had been clogged with copies of the video, which the studio had leaked to promote the show. They had cut from Fred saying her name was Swedish for peace to the final question where she lost it and dived at Willy. There was a close-up as she smacked his eye out. It repeated in slow motion. Over and over. Then it cut to the interview. After Fred sang 'Imogen', the camera zoomed in on Simon's stunned expression. His eyes bulged like they were straining to grow stalks. His mouth hung open. He had been cast as the straight man and looked an idiot.

"Anyone can make a mistake," said Fred. She kept her distance and leaned against the window.

"Yes," snapped Simon. "But you didn't, did you?" He took a fistful of shirt and knotted string around it. As he tightened each loop, the shirt's fibres released a cabbagey whiff.

"What do you mean?"

"Can I ask you a question?" he said.

"Sure."

"Will you answer honestly, though?" He threw the shirt into the drum.

"Oh yeah, I expect so."

"That weasel-smacking thing." Simon faked an air of nonchalance. "Did you plan it?"

"What on earth gave you that idea?"

"But did you though?" He was tying concentric circles of string around the knee of a pair of trousers now.

"I can't believe you sometimes." Fred went to the hot drinks machine and pumped it full of small change.

"You're dodging the question, Fred!"

"I'm insulted you even asked." The machine dropped gooey soup into her cup. She shook the cup, but the liquid didn't stir, so she tossed the whole thing into the bin.

"Christ, Fred," said Simon. "You did, didn't you? I've spent all week reading University of Death sleeve notes and rehearsing our set. I took time off work. I can't believe you let me do that."

"I made you famous, didn't I?"

"That's what our music's for," said Simon. "I thought we agreed to take the band seriously."

"I am!" pleaded Fred. "I'm working my arse off to get us noticed. What do you suggest we do instead? Post more demos?"

"Hardly," said Simon. "That's a complete waste of time." He was winding string around a sock.

"Good. That's one thing we agree on, at last."

"From now on, I'm hand delivering them."

"God, Si. You don't get it, do you?" She shook her head in wonder. "Nobody will even listen to us unless we're already famous."

"You don't get it," said Simon. He threw someone's stray sock at her. "We could have been arrested. And for what? Nothing."

"Oh there was just one thing," said Fred, with a triumphant giggle. "Must have slipped my mind. We did get a gig out of it. They saw the video and booked us."

"Where?"

"The Corpse."

"That's only round the corner!" Simon slammed the door of the washing machine with such force that it made Fred blink. "Bert'll let us play there any time!"

"The video should bring a crowd in, though."

"Yeah, well, I'm busy." Simon shook powder into the drawer and clicked it shut.

"You don't know when it is yet."

Simon punched the plastic buttons and rattled the silver dial round. "When is it?"

"Next Friday."

"I'm busy."

"You're lying."

"Yes." He sighed. "You're wasting my life on these stunts. I just don't... know... any more."

There was a long silence. Simon slotted the money in and pushed the coin feeder shut with the heel of his hand. The window on the washing machine flooded. His University of Death t-shirt swam to the front. Dove's face rubbed against the glass.

"I said sorry. I don't know what else I can say. Will you do the gig? Please?"

"I don't know," said Simon.

"No messing around this time," said Fred. "Guide's honour." She held up two fingers in an offensive gesture, which either meant they really did do guides differently in Sweden, or she was taking the mickey again. Simon didn't know which any more.

"I'll think about it," he said.

"Seven o'clock."

"I said I'll think about it."

There was an uncomfortable pause. Simon peered into the washing machine window to avoid looking at Fred. "Is that why

you're here then? The gig?"

"No," said Fred. "Just thought I'd, you know, catch up. How's things?"

"Crap."

"Oh, well." Fred folded her arms. "What on earth are you doing with your clothes?"

"Washing them."

"What's with the string?"

"I've decided to stop fighting the machine," said Simon. "The dye always runs, whatever I do. So I've given in."

"How?"

"I'm letting it tie-dye my clothes. That way, they'll always match."

"Yeah, but think of the look!"

"Some very fashionable people wore tie-dye."

"In 1967 and '89."

"So we're probably due again now!" Simon was shouting. The laundrette manager swept the space between them and eyed them suspiciously.

"I'd better go," said Fred. For show, she moved her whole arm to look at her watch after she'd decided to leave. "See ya Friday? Maybe?"

"Maybe."

"I am sorry."

"I know." Simon knew Fred didn't mean any harm. It was one of life's mysteries how she could be so calculating and yet completely oblivious to the impact she had on other people's lives.

Fred held eye contact with Simon for a moment longer than necessary, and then she left. For about five minutes, she waited at the bus stop opposite the laundrette. Just before her bus arrived, she waved to Simon and blew him a kiss. He gave only the slightest nod in reply.

CHAPTER 4

Simon's flat looked like his wardrobe had exploded. Clothes dangled off the furniture everywhere, and clung to the walls. He had smoothed his best shirts against the mirrors and picture frames so they would dry flat.

A pair of pants was pinned to his notice board, along with some photocopied sheet music and some of his own chord sequences. His guitar was on its stand under it, with a halo of empty space around it, as if it stood on sacred ground.

It was 1.35 in the morning. Simon couldn't sleep. He gently touched the strings of his acoustic guitar without taking it off its stand. They whispered a simple song, but in the still of the night it sounded like a shout. He thought he heard his flatmate stir but it might have been the pipes. He didn't want to wake him, so he left the guitar alone.

Simon flicked through the TV channels but paid them scant attention. Instead he stared just above the TV, at the photo of him and Fred. It was clipped in the frame she made him from clothes pegs in the sixth form. The shot was taken at a friend's wedding. They were dressed in their finest and stood close, but apart.

Could Simon forgive her? He wasn't sure. How could she betray his vision for the band like that? And make him look so stupid in front of the whole world? The band meant everything to him, but he wasn't sure if he could go through with it any more. He didn't know what any of this meant for their friendship either. The prospect of that being over worried him at least as much as

the idea that their music was finished.

He needed a good heart-to-heart, but who can you talk to if you're annoyed with your best friend? Besides, you can't phone anyone at 2am unless someone's died.

He went to his computer to check his email. A damp sock sunned itself in the warm glow of his desk lamp. There were two new copies of the 'Pop Goes the Weasel' movie, but no real messages.

What now? He stared at the computer. For the first time one of the default icons caught his eye.

'Talk to me'.

He clicked and a window flew open, inviting him in. He gave his nickname as 'thing' and picked angelA from a list of available chatters.

```
angelA> a/s/l?  
thing> Sorry?  
angelA> new here?  
thing> Yes  
angelA> ok ill be gentle with ya  
angelA> age/sex/location?  
thing> Ok: 32 male London  
angelA> 27 F london :-)  
thing> Is there an AngelB on your cloud too?  
angelA> don't think so. wat u listening to?  
thing> University of Death  
angelA> they're great. stay dead rocks  
thing> Are you a fan?  
angelA> i love their music.  
thing> They're my favourite band  
thing> I had a dream I was on stage with them once  
thing> playing guitar.  
thing> It was one of my greatest experiences ever  
thing> even though I was asleep.  
angelA> that so funny  
angelA> how did u get into university of death  
thing> They used to play it at parties I went to
```

angelA> when was this
thing> When I was at school
thing> In the sixth form. Yeah, I know.
thing> Nobody but the fans plays their stuff now!
angelA> thats for sure
thing> Have you ever dreamed of a band?
angelA> beatles
thing> Did you play an instrument?
angelA> i played recorder
thing> It must be cool to feel like you're in The Beatles
angelA> not as good as the rolling sontes though
thing> Sontes?
angelA> stones. pedant!
thing> Sorry. Why do you prefer the Stones?
angelA> beatles do thought music. stones do emotion music.
thing> Let it be? Yesterday? Day in the life?
angelA> yeah, except the dreary ones ;-)
thing> I wanna hold your hand?
angelA> you're sweet LOL
thing> You'll make me blush.
thing> What does LOL mean?
angelA> laugh out loud
thing> It's like a foreign language. This is my first chat.
angelA> thought so ;-)
angelA> youll pick it up ok
thing> Do you chat often?
angelA> do i come here often? you making a pass?
thing> I didn't mean
angelA> sorry. Giot to go. I'll be back in a bit.
thing> Okay. Maybe chat later?
<angelA has disconnected>
thing> bye. Take care

What now? Simon didn't want to go to bed. He wasn't relaxed enough to sleep, and anyway angelA might come back and chat some more.

He looked up. Most of the wall behind the computer desk was

covered with a poster of University of Death, which Simon had recovered from a bus shelter and framed. Dove was biting the air, his teeth like tombstones in a field of red and green face paint. His body was folded around an electric guitar shaped like a skull with a dagger plunged into it. Dove's eyes were locked on to the photographer's lens.

Simon punched in the website address for Dove's blog, which he knew off-by-heart.

Dear all

Ich bin ein Berliner! Even though the weather is Wetter and the sausages are the Wurst, we're having a fantastic time here in Germany. Our German fans have made these gigs truly memorable for us.

We're staying in a luxurious hotel previously used by the high-ups in the East German government. When we're on tour, our hotel is our creative space, so we like to spoil ourselves a bit. For us, the songs we write here will always carry the spirit of this fantastic tour. The sight of the Berlin Wall all over the place is sure to inspire some great new sounds and we've been listening to famous Berlin albums like Achtung Bono and Low to get into the spirit.

We are delighted with the support our new record label Bigg Records is giving us. There's a 2CD retrospective in the pipeline – more news as we make it.

And London, look out! We're coming to you next. Tickets on sale soon!

Love and Peace,
D/ove xx

Dove was coming to London. Simon's head rushed with all the songs he might hear reinvented on the stage. University of Death

was a part of his DNA: the melodies were tangled like ivy around his twisted ladders of identity, the roots planted in his school days. Playing those old albums was the closest thing he had to a time machine. All his friends had been into them then, but only he had stuck by the band as they fell out of the charts and released increasingly experimental and patchy albums. Simon had even collected the dance remixes. And Dove rewarded his loyalty with moments of sheer genius: guitar lines that could break his heart or make him laugh at their audacity; lyrics with wit and verve that stunned with their simplicity; and rhythms you couldn't dance to, but couldn't sit still to, either.

Simon had spent more on University of Death music and merchandise than any other cultural product. But he'd never seen them in the flesh before. He had to be there – right down the front. Just the idea of being in the same room as Dove was a thrill.

Simon imagined what Dove was doing right now. He would have come off stage a few hours ago, but was probably still buzzing. Maybe the band went on to a club to jam, or perhaps they crept back into the venue after the audience had left to work on new material. Dove might even have rented a local studio to lay down some demo tracks.

Simon looked into Dove's eyes on his poster and wished he could talk to him about his own music. Dove would understand.

But they were destined to be forever on opposite sides of the star/fan divide. If for no other reason, then because whenever Simon thought of Dove, whatever he imagined him doing, Dove was always in his face paint and fine stage clothes.

* * *

Dove was in paisley pyjamas, sitting on the floor of a walk-in wardrobe in Berlin, with the door slightly ajar to stop the lights going out. The sound of clinking glasses and a drunken hubbub came from the hotel room next to his but it was quieter in here. This closet was the closest he could get to peace and privacy.

There were remnants of make-up in Dove's eyebrows, but he had removed as much as he could be bothered to. He was wearing

his reading glasses, with his long, black hair tied back.

The guitar tuner sat on the tiny safe, beside a steaming cup of peppermint tea that Dove had left to cool. He plucked a string on his acoustic guitar and watched the tuner's needle bounce and settle around the middle as he twisted the tuning peg and plucked again. He could hardly hear the notes over the racket from his neighbours, but he tuned the guitar strings one by one anyway.

As heavily as he could, he strummed the guitar and tried to concentrate on the sound it made, screening out the noise of the party. His music was deadened by the costumes hanging on a rail down one side of the wardrobe, but he could feel the vibrations and used his imagination to fill in the notes he couldn't hear. He was yearning to sing, but knew he had to save his voice for tomorrow's show. So he gently hummed along with the guitar and concentrated hard, until he eventually reached a trance-like state, where only the music and he existed.

The door jerked open. Dove jumped.

Creak stood there in his underpants and a crew t-shirt, clutching a bottle of whisky by its neck.

"Christ, Creak," said Dove. "How did you get in here?"

Creak held up a key card. The rest of the band usually had interchangeable keys, but Dove's room was supposed to be private. "Why are you hiding, man?" said Creak.

"Only in solitude do we find ourselves. I'm trying to write."

"Shhhh!" said Creak. He put his finger to his lips and damn-near missed. "I won't tell anyone your secret. It's our secret now. Wait – I could drum on a bin! That would rock!"

"No. It wouldn't."

"Please y'self," said Creak, clearly put out. He took a swig of whisky and rubbed his arm across his face to dry his chin. "We're having a party," he confided.

"So I hear."

"Why don't you come for a drink?"

Dove glared at him. "Think, Creak! Besides, I'm busy. I'm trying to write."

"Write tomorrow."

"When?" Dove stood up and rested his guitar against an

elasticated suitcase stand at the back of the cupboard. "I spend all day on a bus where the air is thirty per cent methane, thanks to your exclusive curry diet."

Creak shrugged and dropped a splash of whisky on the carpet. "'Snot my fault."

Dove put his hands on his hips: "I glimpse the world's greatest architecture, landscapes and people... as they fly past our bus window. I spend my evenings in a chrysalis, nourishing my body and transforming myself for the stage. During the show, I am a puppeteer who has hanged himself with his own strings. I have choreographed every sound and every move, right down to the frowns. We sleep in hotels where the only thrill is finding one the Gideons haven't discovered yet. My window on the world is CNN, for Christ's sake. If I can snatch twenty minutes in a wardrobe to throw some chords together, trust me, it'll be the creative pinnacle of my week."

"Keep your hair on."

"Oh piss off," said Dove. "Really, please, just piss off."

"Hey, man," said Creak. "Chill out."

"And get the hell out of my wardrobe!" It is difficult to assert yourself when you are ordering someone to leave you alone in a cupboard, but Dove gave it his best shot.

Creak waggled his finger. "Someone's getting grumpy and needs a sleep!" he cooed.

"Get out!" Dove stepped towards Creak, but Creak stood firm in the doorway, sucking on his drink without taking his eyes off Dove. Dove pushed him.

The bottle slipped from Creak's hand and hit the floor and the neck smashed off. The whisky escaped into the brown fibres of the carpet. Creak looked at it sadly and then turned to Dove with anger. "Man," he said. "What you do that for? You broke my drink." He pushed Dove's chest, forcing him to take a step back into the closet.

"Ungrateful bastard," said Dove. "Without me, you're just a man hitting things. I make you the drummer you are. Don't you think I've earned some peace?" Dove pushed Creak, but even when Creak stepped back, he didn't stop. Dove kept pushing and

Creak stumbled backwards, scooted across the room until his calves were blocked and he fell face-up onto the bed. A chocolate mint resting on the pillow glued itself to the side of Creak's forehead.

"Please, just go now," said Dove, walking back towards his built-in sanctuary.

He only had his back turned for a moment, but it was long enough for Creak to attack. He shoved Dove from behind, and propelled him towards the cupboard. Dove tripped on the uneven floor at the entrance and time seemed to slow down. He arced through the air and his guitar rushed towards him; the knots in the wood, the wire sprouting from the tuning pegs, the grime on the frets. Every detail screamed at him: back off. He tried to move his arms away from him, so that they wouldn't hit it, but his body was on a collision course. Dove wriggled, but he was falling so fast with nothing to press against.

His shoulder slammed into the guitar, snapping the neck from its body. The sound of splintering wood was accompanied by a dull echoey chime, the final sound the strings would make. It was like the last gasp of a dying man.

"Sorry, man," said Creak from the door. "I didn't mean to..." He shook his head sadly. The chocolate unpeeled itself from his forehead and plopped onto the floor.

Dove rolled himself into a sitting position and rubbed his shoulder. "Please, go now."

"I really am sorry, man," said Creak. Dove heard the room door click shut as Creak left.

Dove picked at the wreckage, but there was no doubt his first guitar was destroyed beyond repair. He hadn't just lost a tool of his trade. He had lost the sound of his earliest songs. He could replace the guitar, but it was handmade and no two are identical. His music would always sound wrong to him now. Besides, he had so many memories tied up in that instrument. It had seen his first and last drink, his first and last groupie. It had given birth to his first and – the way he felt now – maybe even his last song.

Dove mourned for ten minutes before rising up from his cross-legged position. He cradled the guitar's corpse carefully in two

hands, trying to keep it as close to its designed shape as possible. He stretched it out face up on the bed, fetched its hard case from inside the door and placed it on the duvet alongside. With the delicacy of an undertaker, Dove opened the case like a coffin, settled the guitar into its red velvet lining, and pressed the lid gently shut.

* * *

Simon had been browsing the web for hours. The chat window flashed and he clicked on to it again.

angelA> you still here?
thing> Yes.
angelA> cool
thing> Where did you go?
angelA> when
thing> Then
angelA> to eat. the food was burning
thing> It's a bit late for dinner.
angelA> im on a seafood diet
thing> When you see food you eat it?
angelA> when i see food i eat it! LOL.
thing> How much did you eat!?
angelA> ?
thing> I mean, you were a long time.
angelA> oh. a friend phoned.
angelA> she missed her train. needed a taxi no
thing> The phone is soooo last century!
angelA> one chat and u r bill gates
thing> LOL
angelA> :-) youre learning
angelA> wat have u been doing?
thing> I've been reading websites.
angelA> u been online all the time?
thing> Yes.
angelA> u been waiting for me, sweetness ;-)

thing> I just left this window open while web surfing.
angelA> so do you work?
thing> I'm in a band.
angelA> cool. full time?
thing> Not yet. Hopefully by the end of the year.
angelA> do you sing?
thing> Yes but I play guitar mostly.
angelA> u a good singer?
thing> Not bad. I used to have a lisp at school.
angelA> a lisp?
thing> I sort of whistled when I said words with S in them. That's why they called me Thing
Because my surname is Singh.
angelA> what's your first name?
thing> Simon. What's your real name?
angelA> Angela.
thing> Doh! Nice name. Do you have a nice surname too?
angelA> i like to be anonymous. wats your band called?
thing> Goblin. We have some creative differences though at the moment.
angelA> all the best bands do
thing> There's just me and a girl called Fred in it.
angelA> where did u meet her
thing> At a school party.
thing> We've known each other half our lives.
angelA> wat happened
thing> She was new in the school. Didn't know anyone.
thing> I asked her to dance
angelA> did she
thing> Yes.
angelA> wat else happened
thing> Nothing, sadly. We were just kids anyway.
angelA> why sadly
thing> She was a total babe.
angelA> isnt she now then
thing> Oh yeah!
thing> She still gets wolf whistles.

angelA> classy
thing> But I'm over all that
angelA> good
thing> It would never have worked anyway
angelA> why not
thing> She's too f#ck!ng annoying!!!!!!
thing> Pardon my French
angelA> de rien
angelA> is Fred your girlf?
thing> No. I don't have one. Do you have a boyfriend?
angelA> tell me about your creative differences
thing> She's too fame hungry
angelA> how?
**thing> She just keeps coming up with stupid ideas
to try to make us famous.**
angelA> what's wrong with that?
thing> I want our music to make us famous.
angelA> what did she do?
**thing> Last week she wanted me to take pictures
of her naked for a magazine**
angelA> did you?
thing> No. It would be too weird.
angelA> did someone else?
thing> That's funny. Never thought of that. Perhaps.
thing> She said it would be a quick way to get a fan base
angelA> but what do you think?
thing> We wouldn't want to shake hands with them!
**thing> Plus we shouldn't have to sell our identity
to play music.**
angelA> that doesn't sound so bad though
thing> That's only one example.
thing> She's made me a laughing stock on the internet
thing> And she wasted my time
**thing> She went behind my back and manipulated me
to try to make us famous.**
**thing> I sometimes think the fame matters
more than the music to her**

angelA> so ditch the bitch
thing> Watch it!
angelA> sorry my bad
angelA> but shes holding u back
thing> Sorry. I'm just a bit confused.
thing> I don't know whether to play our next gig or not
angelA> u don't know
thing> I don't know if I can forgive her for this last stunt
angelA> who is your hero
thing> Dove
angelA> what would dove do
thing> Let me think...
thing> He'd never miss a chance to play a gig.
thing> Come to that, he never pretended to be best
friends with all his band mates either
angelA> problem solved
thing> I'm not convinced. Shall we change the subject?
angelA> ok
angelA> hav u heard the new flamewar album
thing> Can't say I've ever heard of them.
Why do you ask?
angelA> cos they are a bit like university of death
thing> How so?
angelA> they sound like university of death in early days
thing> Cool. They were better then.
angelA> i got a discount token if u want
thing> Where from?
angelA> a friend works at the record label so i get loads
angelA> ill send it over so u can download some free songs
angelA> u will probably be hooked like me
thing> Great. thanks.
angelA> im tired now
thing> Me too.
angelA> it would be cool to chat again.
thing> Yes. That would be nice.
angelA> perhaps tomorrow?
thing> Sure!

angelA> u r different to most people i chat to
thing> In what way?
angelA> nicer
thing> Thank you. I'm pleased I met you tonight.
angelA> voucher code on its way
thing> Got it.
angelA> got to go.
angelA> early start 2morrow
angelA> that will hurt
thing> See you tomorrow.
angelA> sweet dreams
<angelA has disconnected>

CHAPTER 5

The girls from Boymad writhed on a mirror in their slippery swimming costumes. The blonde one bit her lip and rolled her eyes in ecstasy while the ginger one mouthed the lyrics and licked her lips between each line. Framed by the silver edge of the video screen, they looked like they were trapped in a lunar capsule. The sound was off. In the lobby space, nobody can hear you scream.

The walls and floor were made of black marble. Exotic trees were dotted around the atrium, dusting the skylight. It looked like the levels above had been cored to make room for the trees, leaving balconies on each floor that lined the building all the way around and overlooked reception. Busybodies shuttled around the balconies, burdened with papers, posters or puppy-dog pop stars.

There were brightly coloured sofas for guests and a coffee table, on which this week's issues of the Financial Times were neatly arranged. There were no music papers there, though. Bigg Records firmly put the business into 'music business'.

Jonathan marched through the rotating door and towards the lift, a box of cables in his arms, and his head down as he passed the reception desk.

"Can I help you?" called the receptionist as he came level.

"It's not that heavy, thanks, Linda." He had remembered her name from when he got the pass from J-Rok a week ago, and hoped that she didn't remember his autograph hunt. "Just awkward."

"No," said the receptionist. "I meant, where are you going?"

She was wearing hoopy ear-rings so distractingly large that Jonathan wouldn't have noticed if she was a giraffe.

"Got to take these to the studio." Jonathan pulled the end of one of the cables out of the top and showed it to her. It looked like an eel swallowing a matchbox. "I'm knackered," said Jonathan. "I've been running all over London to find these, Linda. There's an orchestra waiting."

"Odd. I would have thought they had loads."

"Not like these. They really are very important cables." Jonathan winced inside. Don't overdo it, he thought. He tried to strike up a rapport. "Do you know, I've been looking for some ear-rings just like that!" He didn't mean it to sound sarcastic. "For my girlfriend," he added, swiftly. "Where did you get them?"

"Do you have a pass?"

"Of course!" Jonathan balanced the box in one hand and flashed his security pass at her with the other. He allowed the box to slip a little, so he could slap both hands back on it again to stop it falling. Any longer and she might have got a clear look at the pass and notice the date on it. Jonathan hadn't been able to replace the name sticker because it was watermarked, but he was sure Jervais was enough of a nobody that it wouldn't matter.

"That pass is no unaccompanied access. I'll call the studio for an escort," said Linda, glassily. As she reached for the phone, Jonathan could see his plan falling apart before it had even begun. He urged his brain to think faster, but all the ideas just kept crashing into each other and breaking up.

The revolving door spun someone new into reception, and they both were taken aback to see he was wearing purple plastic trousers. Linda recradled the phone theatrically and looked him up and down.

"My demo!" he announced, swaggering up to the desk and holding a jiffy bag up by the bottom corner. "The name's Rockard."

"One moment, please," Linda said to Jonathan. She turned to Rockard and nodded towards a dustbin with the word 'DEMO'S' painted on the front of it. "Drop it in the bin," she ordered.

Rockard walked over to it and peered over the edge. It was half

full of padded envelopes like his, and smelled like damp cardboard.

“You will listen to it, though?”

“I’ve got to go,” whispered Jonathan, as he crept off.

“I promise you I’ll listen to it even if nobody else does,” said Linda. Rockard smiled and let the package fall into the bin. The receptionist listened to the gentle thud it made as it landed on the other packets.

“Thank you,” said Rockard as he left, and the receptionist allowed herself a smug smile.

She turned to where Jonathan had been standing, but he had already gone.

* * *

“Bigg Records welcomes the sales team to the marketing conference: 9th floor,” said a sign in the back of the lift. That seemed as good a place as any to start. Jonathan pressed the button and it lit up, but that was all it did. The lift stayed firmly on the ground floor and the doors gaped open. If anyone hunted him, Jonathan was exposed. Dove scowled at him from a poster promoting a forthcoming compilation, while directionless jazz tootled through a tiny speaker.

Poking his head around the door to see if anyone was looking for him, Jonathan saw a woman wearing a woolly hat and a reflective jacket walk through the revolving door. She slung the demo bin over her back and walked out with it, grunting as she went. A moment later, she returned swinging the bin in one hand.

Jonathan had worn an open collar shirt to look casual lugging his box through reception but it was time to smarten up now. He rooted around in the box and found the end of his tie and the sleeve of his jacket. He tugged them out, careful not to tear them under the weight of cables. The jacket was a bit creased, so Jonathan shook it before putting it on.

In the bottom of the box were his tools: a torch, a camera, a tape recorder, a pen and pad, and a packet of cigarettes. Jonathan loaded his pockets and patted them down, looking in the

mirrored wall to check they didn't bulge too much.

The doors crunched shut. With a ping Jonathan was up and away, into the ogre's lair.

* * *

Jonathan exited the lift on the ninth floor and left his box of cables behind. He was immediately confronted by a registration desk. There were about twenty badges laid out on it, which meant they were expecting a good crowd. That should be easy to hide in, he thought.

"Can I register you before you go in?" said a woman parked behind the desk.

"Sure," said Jonathan. "I do just need to visit the gents first, if that's okay?"

"First on the left," she whispered, cupping her hand to one side of her mouth.

He dodged into the toilet for a few minutes and slipped out when the woman was distracted by another arrival. It was easy enough to sneak into the meeting room. Jonathan gravitated towards the refreshments at the back.

"Have you tried this coffee?" said a man beside him, holding a silver jug. He spoke like he had plums in his mouth, but they were actually sausage rolls. His chin was flaked with crumbs. Jonathan busied himself with the milk so he didn't have to look. "The beans have been chewed and regurgitated by weasels," the man continued, talking with his mouth full. "Adds fantastic flavour. Good for you, too. It's a completely natural process, you know."

Jonathan thought about whether he really wanted to drink coffee so bad it made a weasel throw up, but he didn't want to break his cover, so he took a cup. "Thanks," he said, insincerely.

"Haven't seen you before," said the man. "The name's Roger."

"I'm new," said Jonathan. He picked a common name at random. "I'm Andrew." Jonathan let Roger have the upper hand as they shook.

"Which region you working?" said Roger.

"I could tell you, but I'd have to kill you," said Jonathan,

arching his eyebrows and injecting what he mistakenly thought was a hint of James Bond into his voice.

"I guess you're going for salesman of the year, then. Bully for you. You've got to stand out to survive." Roger sipped his coffee and grimaced a little. "I reckon there's a cull coming. Have you seen the figures for FlameWar?"

Jonathan shook his head.

"Viral marketing," said Roger. "It's the future. It's not hitting many people yet, but everyone it touches ends up buying. We'd better watch our backs or we'll be on the scrap heap."

"I always do," said Jonathan. "So, what's it like here?"

"Here's some free advice..."

"Always useful!"

"If you want to blend in, just set your shoes on fire. You'll run around screaming and flapping your arms and you'll look just like every other bugger here."

They took neighbouring seats at the oval table that dominated the room. Before long the room was full. All the walls were white and shiny, reflecting the harsh ceiling lights like a constellation of suns.

"Okay, guys," said a man, standing up at one end, apparently oblivious to the fact that about a third of the group was female. He was wearing an extravagantly spotted tie and had red-rimmed glasses. "Let's kick off this information touchpoint, shall we? For the newcomers, I am the marketing honcho here at Bigg, but you can call me Jake. Or if you're filing a report of missed targets, you can call me 'Jake, Sir'!" He laughed theatrically, but nobody else joined in. Jake still spoke with the fake American accent he had adopted to blend in when he studied at university in California.

"Guys, I've ringfenced some good news to start today," Jake said. "We've got the best of University of Death coming up this quarter. Should be a big campaign."

"We're pinning our hopes on that?" groaned a man sat next to Jake. "We'll never shift it."

"Sure we will!" said Jake. "Let's not forget that Dove has been called the saviour of rock and roll."

"Oh yeah? By whom?" asked the man.

"It doesn't matter. In marketing we use the passive voice."

"It's not true though."

"How long have you worked here?" said Jake. "By the time we've spread it all over the internet, it will be indistinguishable from the truth."

"Dove's been called a few other things too."

Jake thumbed through his papers. "Hmmm...Q said he was legendary. NME said his first album was seminal."

"Which means a pile of wank, doesn't it?"

"No, it means influential." Jake paused a moment. "At least, I think it does. Anyway, what's your problem?"

"You are all dead in the water." The man got up, wrote 'I resign' on the wall behind him in thick marker pen, tossed the pen on the table and walked out.

"I won't lie to you," said Jake. "I've got some serious baggage to check in with you guys today. It's badsville, USA. So, anyone else not got the bulbous balls we need to get out of our mess? Better go now if you think your nads can't take it!" He looked around the room but nobody returned his gaze. "Good. This room is a church of positivity. I want us to worship at the altar of gold-plated strategic thinking today. I'm going to open up my kimono now."

He wasn't wearing one. Jake adjusted his tie, though, and for a moment, Jonathan thought he really was going to strip off.

"Our research shows that 32% of our customers buy music largely because it is fashionable," said Jake. "Risky business! Fashions change! 43% use music to drown out other noise, putting us in direct competition with earplugs which cost a fraction of the price. A full 4% of those surveyed only played music to 'mask the sounds of their love-making from neighbours or flat sharers'. So now you know why those live albums are such a hard sell." He gave in to a self-indulgent chuckle. "Nobody wants to grunt to the finale with 100,000 people cheering only to have them demand an encore, hey guys?" He had clenched his fist as he said 'grunt' and waited at the end of the sentence for a wave of laughter to sweep the room. It didn't.

Jake shook his head. "Hell, sales are so low that ringtones top

the chart. More people buy music to use as an alarm than for entertainment. This is mission-critical, guys. Most people just throw an album in their MP3 player and wait until it chooses to play it. They don't care if they hear it or not. They're only buying out of habit and these are our best damn customers. So, we need to drill down to the real problem and dig ourselves out of our hole. We need to bore a tunnel through to the other side." His confidence trailed off with the quality of his engineering metaphors. "Let's brain dump!"

Jake threw the marker pen and it tumbled through the air, heading straight for Jonathan. Jonathan watched it as it got nearer and got ready to catch it, but Roger reached across and snatched it from in front of his face. "I'll take this one," he said to the group. "You owe me one," he hissed to Jonathan.

"Lob me a thought grenade, Rodge!" said Jake.

Roger stood up and walked to the wall behind him. "Here's my idea," he began. "People always say that music isn't as good as it used to be. My granddad said that, my dad said that, my kids say that. Even I've said it once or twice. What happens if we follow this to its logical conclusion? I'll tell you. The greatest record ever is 'Mary had a little lamb' by Thomas Edison."

"Excuse me but I'm not sure I've heard that," said a woman on the other side of the table. She had lipstick on her teeth.

"It's the nursery rhyme," said Roger. "Edison invented the phonograph and this was his first audio recording. Indeed, *the* first audio recording. I say we put it out as a single." On the wall behind him, he scrawled 'Edison single'. Jonathan then realised why the walls were so shiny. It was as if a normal whiteboard could not contain the marketing department's ingenuity: they had built a conference room with *whitewalls*.

"Full respect due for ideas input, yah," began Jake. "But I think we'll have to haul anchor and let that one drift. There's no way it'll sell."

"Certainly not," said Roger. "But it would have to make them think, wouldn't it? People would question their attitude towards today's music. Maybe they would start listening to the radio more, and then go on to buy singles again."

“Now that’s thinking outside the box!” said Jake. Roger tossed him the marker pen, and as quick as he could, Jake tossed it back out to the woman with lipstick on her teeth. “You’re on, Mandy.”

“Right,” she said, standing up and holding the pen with both hands. “So my idea was inspired by my Mum buying a panpipes album. I know she’s got no taste, but I was thinking that maybe the market for people with no taste could be worth targeting. One analyst firm estimated it could be nearly six billion worldwide.”

“How nearly?” said Jake.

“Well, I think they just took the world population and subtracted the number of people working as analysts, to be honest. But our own experience suggests there’s a lot of people in this demographic.”

Jake nodded. “Exploiting the unimaginative is the basis of the world economy.”

“I’ve been doing some research,” said Mandy. “Did you know that a musician’s every movement in the studio, every strum and keypress, is stored by computer in a format called MIDI? It means the musicians can record a performance and then change the sound of the notes. So they can play a keyboard and make it sound like a violin or something afterwards.”

Jake drummed his fingers on the table. “I know I’m not Jean-Michel Jarre, but I have picked up the odd bit of music technology working here,” he said. Others around the table were rapt with attention.

“Anyway,” said Mandy. “What if we take those MIDI files, swap the instruments around and release something like ‘U2 play The Panpipes’? It’s perfect! you could hear the Edge himself pipe the riff to ‘Where the Streets Have No Name’. The heavy metal bands could sell their tunes to people with no taste, even if nobody wants to hear their growling. It’s a new, low-cost, high-margin product that extends the reach of our creative works to new listeners. What’s more, fans of the original albums will probably buy these new arrangements too.” On the wall behind her, she wrote ‘The best panpipes album in the world ever!’ and drew a little smiley face next to it.

Jake nodded. “It’s win-win-win! I reckon we can green light

that one pretty quickly. I'll run it past Clive. We'll get it in the pipeline as soon as possible." He stressed the name Clive, to make sure nobody missed that he was on first terms with Mr Bigg.

Mandy threw the pen, and Jake caught it and slid it across the table to the far end, where a mousy man stopped it falling onto the floor. "Okay," he said, with a nervous sing-song in his voice. He didn't stand up, and he avoided eye contact with everyone. "First we had records, right? Then we had tapes for portability, so people bought their records again. Then we had CDs, so people could listen in higher quality, so they bought their records and tapes again to hear the hi-hat and triangle. Then we introduced downloads so people could get music faster."

"Yah, and so we didn't waste any money on packaging," said Jake. "Faster, cheaper, more profitable. What's your point?"

"Well, people have bought three or more copies of Dark Side of the Moon, but only one copy of OK Computer. It just doesn't seem right. It's high time we introduced a new format." The man pushed the pen and it skidded across the table, back to Jake.

"That's firing on all cylinders," said Jake. "I'll take an A to get the tech guys back at base to invent some new way of storing music. Kevin, what's your idea?"

He threw the pen high in the air. Kevin stood up to catch it, fumbled it and followed it under the desk. There was a thump followed by a powerful burst of swearing. After a few seconds, Kevin's head appeared first, then a hand, an elbow and his whole body as he lifted himself back onto his seat. "Got it!" he said, rubbing his forehead and holding the pen up with the other hand. "I was thinking about all those demos we get sent."

"Yah, some are like demos in the political sense: against music, they're so bad," said Jake. "Haven't played any for decades. We send three dustbins of CDs to Africa every day. Poor people make toys from the likes of Donkey Wank Blanket's CD. That's all they're any good for."

"Right," said Kevin, "but some of them are so bad they're funny. People buy 'funny'. I thought we could do a compilation of demos called 'Now that's what the dictionary would call music, but we beg to differ'. No studio costs. It's a money-spinner."

Kevin wrote 'Demo compilation' on the wall behind him and threw the pen back to Jake at as awkward a trajectory as he could.

"It's a rights nightmare," said Jake, stretching his arm and catching the pen with ease. "But we'll look into it. Now, who hasn't chipped in?"

He looked around the room. Although there were plenty of people who hadn't spoken yet, he stopped looking when he reached Jonathan. "You," he said, throwing Jonathan the pen. "Let's see if you've got anything to add."

Jonathan stood up and addressed the group. He didn't want to be the centre of attention, but since it was forced upon him, he resolved to carry it off with aplomb. "You could try getting some decent bands in," he began, momentarily forgetting his cover story. "By which I mean *we* could try. All of us. Just because our customers are losing interest in music, doesn't mean everyone is. Loads of people buy direct from independent bands on the internet. We could sign these bands and use our marketing muscle to put them on the world stage." All eyes were on him. He was winning them over. "Just imagine the power we have! To discover truly great bands, real artistic visionaries, and get their work into every home in the world! If we lead with quality, the sales would surely follow!" He looked around the table, breathless, and nodded a mini bow. After a moment's pause, the sales reps clapped wildly and banged on the table. He had convinced them!

And then he heard their laughter.

"Nice one," said Jake. "We have a joker in the pack!" He formed a cup with his hands in the air, and waited for Jonathan to throw the pen back. "Okay, everyone. That's a wrap. Let's get back to the coalface. Same time next quarter. Remember, don't just hit those targets. I want to see them demolished!"

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