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THE LAST WAVE

Like as the waves make towards the pebb'l'd shore,

So do our minutes hasten to their end;

—William Shakespeare, Sonnet 60

One minute I'm walking on water, wearing nothing but impossibly cool boardies, hula music soundtrack, and the next ... *What the feck?* I fumble for my glasses, blink, focus ... Outside it's deepest, darkest winter. Rain lashes the window, like a Ginger Baker drum solo. The wind swoops and howls like Jimi's Stratocaster. *No feckin way!* I hit the snooze button, close my eyes, and drift back to perfect Pipeline ...

And then I remember: there's a swell today. This is the wild west coast of Ireland, not Hawaii, but surf's up just the same.

As I crawl out of bed, I wonder: is this my last dawn patrol? The last time I stuff the battered old longboard in the van? The last time I paddle out to greet the first shards of a County Kerry sunrise? I've been thinking about quitting lately and frankly, it scares me to death. My life has been surfing and music. Some people have God; I had songs, and I'm still a surfaholic ... But the last few sessions have been painful.

It's not just the physical pain. Sure, it hurts. But hey, you're still *alive* if it hurts (a mantra muttered after every painful wipeout). It's not even the fear, creeping up on you like a psycho in a scary clown mask ... No, it's the *loathing*—that's what makes me want to quit—

loathing how things are now: punks dropping-in as if I didn't exist, egos in the lineup, fights in the car park ... These days surfing is all pain, fear and loathing. But like any addict, I need one more fix.

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It's still raining when I step outside: a shroud of grey, misty drizzle ("soft rain," the locals say). I drive through the ghostly half-light, along lonely lanes threading their way between silent stone walls. Abandoned houses loom out of the mist like ruined castles, relics of a battle with nature. There's a primal feel to this place, a majestic rawness that transcends the tourist board's description: "unspoilt".

I round a corner and there she is, the Atlantic Ocean. Yes! SurfLine got it spot on. Today's the day. Big Monday. Lines of swell are marching in and breaking across the bay with military precision. These waves have travelled hundreds of miles to unload their energy here, the most westerly beach in Europe, the very edge of the continent. This moment. This spectacle. This ocean ... It's in my blood, like a drug. Quitting would be like going cold turkey.

I switch on the radio to drown out the black dog thoughts. It's tuned to Classic FM, a station I'd have dismissed as terminally uncool a few years ago. Now I couldn't give a damn which bunch of reality-TV wannabes are top of the pops. I don't need to know what's happening, trending, or just gone viral. I don't want to be subjected to the latest Industrial-Grime mash-up.

A rutted farm track winds through the dunes onto Gowlane strand. I leave the radio and wipers on, and gaze through the drizzle at the steely grey sea. Close up, the breakers are impressive. These are waves of consequence: powerful, unforgiving. This is a beach-break to challenge anybody, let alone a silver surfer.

A set rolls in and peels cleanly. The surf beckons. Adrenaline is coursing through my veins ... But as I reach for the off switch, the jagged opening chords of *Ziggy Stardust* pierce the gloom and stab me in the gut. Instantly, I'm back in 1973, at the Hammersmith Odeon, watching Bowie become Ziggy for the last time.

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He stands there, motionless, commanding the stage. Flame red hair, fluorescent make-up, flamboyant cloak. Extraterrestrial. The Spiders From Mars hit the first power chord: Kaboom! Roadies dash from either side of the stage and rip his cloak in two, leaving him in a silver miniskirt, like an alien from an early episode of *Star Trek*. Lift-off! The Spiders launch into *Space Oddity* and we're blasted into orbit with Major Tom.

I don't remember much after that. Lee and I had dropped some acid and the songs all sort of merged together, until, at the end, Bowie announced the death of his alter ego. This was the last show Ziggy would ever do, the end of an icon—murdered by his maker. A shock wave ripped through the audience. People were in tears. Even the band seemed stunned. We all knew we'd witnessed a moment of rock 'n roll history, a landmark moment.

“Imagine playing a gig like this,” I yelled to Lee. “Must be better than sex.”

He grinned at me. “Yeah man, that's what I've been saying for the last three years. We've gotta find a bass player and a drummer.”

Lee and I had been messing around with guitars and writing songs together since school—nothing too serious, just a couple of rebels searching for a cause. Ziggy was the catalyst. After the gig, we dyed our hair and got a band together: Lee on lead guitar and vocals; me on rhythm guitar and “vocals” (well, vocalised noises, anyway); Lee's mate, Pete Smith, played bass; and the drummer's name was Simon Spedding, but everyone called him “Spud”. (He had a shaved head and spots like a potato, but man could he lay down a groove.)

We called ourselves the Star Men—a lame reference to Bowie’s seminal song, *Starman*. With hindsight, it wasn’t the cleverest name for an obscure rock band, but we stuck with it through that eventful decade.

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The track ends and there’s a pause—just the wind, surf, seagulls ... and then the deejay: “David Bowie died last night.”

I switch off the radio, but I can still hear the music as I rummage in the back of the van, searching for the surf wax. It takes forever—and these days my mind is like my van: rummaging through the clutter is like sifting through quicksand.

So, he’s gone. But I’m still here. What now?

I was born the same year as him, 1947, a good year for a musician to gatecrash the world. We came of age in the sixties, lit the blue touchpaper in the seventies, crashed and burned our way through the eighties and nineties, and grew old disgracefully in the new millennium. They were good times to be a surfer too, an endless summer ...

But what now?

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Somewhere out in the Atlantic, the wind whips up white horses and my last wave is born. It joins a set and hastens east, towards the pebbled shore.

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I struggle into my ancient wetsuit and paddle out to join the locals. They nod politely. For a while we share waves and I forget about Bowie and going cold turkey. I can still just about cut it, once I’m up and riding, with a style I can call my own, honed over the years. It’s about flow and timing and respecting the wave, rather than shredding it.

As the sun climbs out of the dunes, a pack of punks invade the lineup. They scowl at

my classic longboard, my vintage wetsuit, my bald head, my cruisey style. Respect? Forget it. But y’know what? As the Sex Pistols put it: “... and We Don’t Care!”

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We were on the road for most of the seventies, Lee and I. The Star Men played hundreds of gigs and we were local heroes for our fans, but we never really made it. In the end, it was punk music that finished us. For a while, nobody listened to songs with more than two chords.

At the time, I hated the Sex Pistols—mindless thrashing around by kids who couldn’t even play their instruments. Now I get it. *Never Mind the Bollocks* resonates with me. We Don’t Care is a baby boomer’s battle cry. We really *don’t* care what you think of us. Why should we? The best decades were ours. What have we got to lose?

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I paddle deeper, distancing myself from the pack. The swell is building—and so is the crowd. A tipping-point arrives when the numbers become critical, but an unspoken code determines the pecking order: hotshots, locals, punks, grommets. There’s no respect for age, but I have experience on my side.

The horizon tilts and bends as the set arrives. Geometric lines refract and converge on us. Everybody paddles furiously, cursing and scowling, clawing towards them ... But I’m already in prime position. I let a couple roll through, and then I spot my wave. This is The One. Steep. Glassy. Perfect.

I paddle as hard as my protesting shoulders allow, scramble to my feet, somehow make the drop, and I’m up and running—or rather, *walking*, on water—for the last time?

An eerie stillness. I’m in the eye of the storm. Just the hiss of water beneath me. I trim the board with subtle shifts and lean into a swooping bottom-turn. The board accelerates up

the slope until I'm vertical, hanging under the lip, poised between a sweet top-turn and disaster. Now I'm ...

Weightless.

In the moment.

In the zone.

Alive!

The moment lasts for a few tenths of a second, but there's a whole lifetime compressed, right there.

I race down the line, and as I carve through the punks, scattering them like confetti, there's a song playing in my head. Bizarrely, I'm singing "The day the music died" and thinking about John Lennon.

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December 8, 1980. I'd just caught my first wave, aged thirty-four, and I was stoked. Lee was a keen surfer and he'd been giving me a lesson. I was hopeless, but already helplessly addicted, a grommet surfaholic. Driving home, high on adrenaline, news of Lennon's death came on the radio, and we listened in stunned silence as *Imagine* played in memoriam. With hindsight, it was another of *those* moments—another landmark moment: his death, my first wave.

The Star Men split up after that. Our fans were in tears at the end of our last gig. I was gobsmacked how much we meant to them. Their grief reminded me of when Bowie killed off Ziggy at the Hammersmith Odeon. It brought home to me just how powerful music is; how it connects us like nothing else; how it binds us together and allows us to share these moments.

I didn't see Lee for another three decades. We went our separate ways, and for us it *was* the day the music died.

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Angry shouts from the punks, as I charge through the crowded lineup, but I don't look back, and y'know what? We Don't Care! Some of the locals hoot as I fly past. They have no idea it's my last wave—just that it's a beauty, and they celebrate in solidarity.

I'm nearly in the channel now, but I hold my line to the bitter end. A last look of panic from a surfer in my path, then just white water, the shore-break, and terra firma.

So, that's that. Closure. The end of the endless summer.

Every wave ends like that: a *petite mort*, an orgasm soon forgotten. But the first and the last ... you ride *them* for the rest of your life. A piece of me remains frozen in that freeze-frame moment of bitter-sweet perfection—and a few more are etched in my memory ...

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December 4, 1993. I was in Australia, surfing pristine reefs on the West coast. I'd just scored some of the best waves of my life, aged forty-seven and surfing better than I ever would again. The fear and loathing were still a millennium away. Sitting in a beach bar, stoked after my best-ever session, I caught a snatch of furiously complex music.

“That sounds like Frank Zappa,” I said to the barman, incredulously.

“Yeah mate, he just died today.”

I stared at the surf, said nothing, filed the moment away—another snapshot for the hindsight album.

Perfect sets were still rolling in. Wave after wave peaked, then crashed onto the pebbles, spilling its energy spectacularly. Each was unique. I'd never surf waves like these again. I felt like I did when Hendrix died: nobody would ever make music like that again.

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My teeth are rattling as I struggle out of my wetsuit. No more freezing bollocks and ice

cream headaches. Can't say I'll miss them, I tell myself—but it's a lie.

I chuck my board in the back of the van and switch on the heater and radio. They're still playing Bowie tracks, a song from the final album, released just two days ago. "There's nothing left to lose," he sings. The voice is shaky, but unmistakably, defiantly, Bowie. I sit there listening, grieving, wondering how much time I have left and what I'll do with it now.

So, he's gone and I'm still here. What now?

The track ends. I turn off the radio. There's just the slow, steady rhythm of the surf, ebb and flow, and the seagulls' plaintive cries. I sit there for a while, watching the surfers draw lines on the cold, grey sea ... and I know I won't be back.

Driving home, shivering, I'm numb, inside and out. Salt water drips from my sinuses, leaving a bitter, metallic taste. I turn up the heater full blast, and as I thaw out, another fragment of memory emerges: two lines from a Shakespeare sonnet ...

*Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end.*

I was a student when I read those words, long before I surfed my first wave. We analysed them in my English literature class, dissecting the poem like a corpse, with an intellectual scalpel. Now, half a century later, I finally understand them—viscerally.

We are all really just waves, energy on the move, between birth and the pebbled shore. One second there's energy and the next it's gone. The wave breaks. The energy that was David Bowie moved on ... But he was still making music, reinventing himself, defiant, as his minutes hastened to their end.

And that's the key, I think, as I leave the beach behind: live in the moment, in the present tense, without regrets or hindsight, not mourning that last ride or fearing the next wipeout. Live in the moment—because who knows how many are left.

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I'm nearly home now. The rain has eased, the ocean is behind me, the mountains are just showing through the mist, and I'm thinking about the last time I saw Lee. He asked me if I was still surfing.

I said yes, while I still can, I do.

"Right. Good for you. The thing is..." He paused for a couple of beats, then he told me he had cancer and he didn't have much time left.

I said nothing for a moment. What could I say? We'd been through so much together. The waves we'd shared. The songs we'd written. The band. The landmark moments ...

"It's funny how things turn out, eh Rob?" He stared at me until I shrugged.

We rolled a joint, had a few beers, and listened to some Hendrix, Bowie, Lennon, and Zappa. Then we got the guitars out and struggled through some of the Star Men's old set, giggling when we couldn't remember the chords. And then we were talking again, weird shit, and nothing could stop us ...

We talked about whether we'd want to go on living if we were paralysed from the neck down. Lee wasn't sure. He could handle not being able to surf, but if it meant the end of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll ... maybe not—especially if it was the end of sex.

I told him that as long as I could listen to music I'd probably want to stick around.

He frowned. "Yeah, I s'pose so. I mean, look at Dylan. He's stuck around long enough to get a Nobel Prize. Who knows what I can achieve in the next few months, in-between the chemo sessions?"

I grinned. "Too right, mate. That's the way to leave the stage." This was the Lee I loved. If anyone could give death the finger, it was him. "Like the other Dylan said, 'Don't go gently...'"

He locked eyes with me, nodded, and suddenly we were twenty-five again, belting out *Starman*, pink hair and mascara, a room full of kids jiving to our groove, fire in our souls.

I embraced him, waved goodbye, and drove away.

It was the last time I saw Lee. The last wave.

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I'm back home now, thawed out, and the black dogs are on the run. Going cold turkey won't be so bad, I tell myself. You just have to find another passion, a different drug—something without the fear and loathing. So come on, make a clean break and move on.

I get my knackered old wetsuit from the van, grab a pair of scissors, shred it, and chuck the pieces in the bin.

That's the spirit. Move on up, as the song says. Onwards and upwards ... How about paragliding? You sit down to fly those things and I bet there's no agro. Or maybe you should just forget about this extreme sport malarkey? Perhaps it's only ever been a distraction.

Yeah, all those years when surfing was your "religion", were you really just *distracted* (opium-of-the-masses style)? Did you lose your way and lose your *self*? Perhaps you surfed to *forget* yourself.

So, were they lost years? It's a shocking thought, but yeah, maybe it's time to remember who you really are ...

I gaze around my living room at the shelves of treasured vinyl, the framed photos of the Star Men, the vintage Gibson Les Paul, and my old Vox AC30 (the amp of choice for the Beatles). I flick through the albums, find Ziggy, and stare at the iconic image on the cover. When I heard it on the radio this morning, I was wallowing in nostalgia and self-pity. Now I need some of his courage, his resilience, his ability to reinvent himself.

Okay, he's gone ... BUT I'M STILL HERE.

My twelve-string acoustic is sitting there in the corner, gathering dust, untouched for the last decade. I pick it up, stroke it like a dog that's been left unloved for too long, tune it, and tentatively strum the intro to *Rock 'n' Roll Suicide*. It was Lee's favourite track on the album and the Star Men used to cover it. Whenever we played the song, it seemed to touch a nerve, and it became a kind of manifesto for us. Lee used to joke that he'd top himself before he turned thirty—ironic, really.

So, what now?

I try a bit of improvisatory noodling, allowing my fingers to rediscover long-forgotten riffs. A tune emerges. I hum it softly, then chant random syllables until they become words. Eventually, tune and words coalesce into a hook. I repeat the chord sequence, letting it build, until I'm in full cry, stomping and hollering, belting out the chorus to the first new song I've written in ... how long? Thirty years?

I grab a pencil and scribble the chords and lyrics on the back of an old envelope ...

THE LAST WAVE—CHORUS / HOOK (Em | G | A | D)

We won't go gently, or mourn the past.

And we don't care, can't you see?

So live in the moment, cos it won't last.

And save the last wave for me.