

## If a Tree Falls

By Carl Peel

Thomas stood in the glow of his computer monitor and read emails while strumming through songs he would perform later that night. He deleted several spam then opened a note from his sister-in-law. *Most people don't even know about this*, she wrote. *Only the scientists do, but we're nearing extinction, the end of things as we know it.* She pasted an excerpt from an article and as usual introduced it as a "Fact."

*Fact:*

*According to a survey of scientists by the American Museum of Natural History in New York, the world is in the midst of a mass extinction, the Sixth. It is a greater hazard to humans than the depletion of the ozone layer, pollution or global warming. It will wipe out more species than the last one 65 million years ago when a meteor struck the earth and killed off the Dinosaurs. Only this one, unlike the previous five, will be*

*caused not by an outside force, but by man himself. Some projections predict half the world's species will have died off by 2050.*

*“The thing no one's talking about, Thomas” she wrote, “IS THIS IS OCCURRING WITHIN OUR LIFETIME!”*

The elevation to all capitals annoyed him. He stopped strumming, sighed and glanced over her list of links to *more evidence*: deforestation; the ever-growing population; the world's dependence on petroleum for fertilizer and other tools of unsustainable, mass food production; our unwillingness to conserve energy or control population growth. She'd signed off with a curt *“Fuck S.U.V.s!”*

Thomas chuckled at that, then wrote back: *There have been five mass extinctions, and yet there's still life. Maybe Casey will grow up and find a solution.*

He shut down the computer and ran through one more song before heading out the door.

\* \* \*

His show was in Los Angeles at the Crooked Bar, a small acoustic room underneath a larger club he'd played often in his twenties.

He was on first as usual. It was 8 o'clock and just beginning to get dark. Ten minutes later he was still waiting for any sort of audience beside the bartender and the soundman. He didn't know why there even was a soundman. It was just him, a folk rock singer with a voice and a guitar. The room was small enough to need no amplification.

Still, the soundguy, a tall man in his late forties with a graying ponytail, blue jeans and a fading black Lenny Kravitz T-shirt told him he should go ahead and start.

“Just leave the P.A. off,” Thomas told him. Then he played, casually, relaxed like he was in his living room, thinking he might as well be. Ten minutes earlier he was hoping the receptionist from the insurance office he was temping at would show up, then he hoped she wouldn’t. He didn’t want anyone to witness such a pathetic scene. Especially anyone he fancied, let alone worked with, even temporarily. He’d had bad gigs, two or three people even. He’d gotten through those by closing his eyes on the empty room, and picturing instead the fuller ones of his early teens when his mother, who would drive him to those early gigs, would sometimes stay to watch, smiling and swaying to the music. This was the first time absolutely no one had shown up.

Afterward, the bartender poured him a drink on the house, a double Scotch neat. He put a ten down on the bar feeling guilty he’d drawn no one and the bartender had made no money. “It’s the room,” the bartender said. “No one ever comes here. This place is dying.”

\* \* \*

Thomas called his brother, Rick, and asked him to put his four-year-old niece, Casey, on the line so he could wish her a happy birthday. He heard Rick yell “It’s Thomas,” across the house as if in answer to a question. Denise picked up a phone in another room and after pleasantries said, “Thomas, you should see the hills around here.”

He imagined Rick and Denise in different rooms of their house, picturing what it might look like. He’d never been there, had never even met Casey.

“The hills around here are bare. Every day there’s more.” Denise said. “They just clear cut everything.”

“Denise,” Thomas said. “It’s your daughter’s birthday.”

“Yes, and this is the world she’s inheriting.”

Thomas chuckled. Denise’s fervor, the fact she could be so focused even on Casey’s birthday, seemed frighteningly obsessive at the same time it seemed to him admirable.

“I know,” Rick chimed in. “She’s starting to scare Casey and even me.”

“I take it, Denise, your new job is going well,” Thomas said. She had just started at an environmental research company that lobbied the state government.

“It’s a job I can at least be proud of.”

“Lucky,” Thomas said. “Let me talk to my niece, wish her a happy birthday.”

“We just put her to bed,” Rick said. “You gotta call earlier, T. It’s already nine here.”

“Can you just put the phone to her ear and I’ll sing a quick Birthday?”

“I don’t think she’s awake,” Rick said. “But I’ll see.”

Denise was still on the line. “My daughter’s going to grow up without any trees on the hills,” she said. “And no one around here gives a shit.”

“Denise,” Thomas said, calmly. He was aware of an almost grandfatherly or uncle-like tone. “People give a shit, it’s just.” He stopped; he didn’t know what to tell her.

Rick came back on the line. “Sorry T. You’re too late. She’s out for the night.”

Thomas called his brother again a week later. "I'm thinking of coming out there and playing a show," he said. "There's a festival in Chapel Hill I've been invited to."

"Chapel Hill?" Rick said. "I'd have thought you'd be playing Madison Square Garden, be a big star, by now."

Thomas laughed.

"You must not be any good."

"Yeah, I must not," Thomas said. "There are only ten people in the world who are any good. They get to play arenas. Everyone else sucks."

"All right. I hear you."

"What about you?" Thomas asked. He held the phone in one hand, and moved an African Violet plant from the kitchen windowsill to the running faucet. "You closing any big mortgages?"

"I've got some things cooking," Rick said.

"You like doing that?"

"Just glad to be out of the army. No more crawling on the ground or sleeping in the snow, away from my family. When you having kids, T?"

"I'm not." Thomas turned off the faucet and watched as water drained from the bottom of the african violet's pot.

"You need to have a son, carry on the family name."

"I can barely keep a plant alive," he said. "Besides, that's your job. I don't have a girlfriend."

"I thought musicians got plenty of tail."

“Right. Well listen, I’m coming out for this festival,” Thomas said. “I want to meet Casey.”

“When is it?”

“In three weeks, mid October.”

“We’ll be here,” Rick said.

\* \* \*

Thomas emailed the festival organizer in Chapel Hill, formally accepting the gig. *I’ve got family out there, Thomas wrote. It’ll be good to see them. Believe it or not, my older brother has never, ever, seen me play. So thanks for the invite.*

Thomas had begun playing music in clubs 25 years earlier. He was thirteen, playing bass in bands with older boys. He’d have to stay outside or in the kitchens when he wasn’t on stage in case an agent from the ATF came in and got wind of a minor in the bar area. He’d done it ever since, played music in bars with black walls, to a changing stream of people sometimes listening, always drinking, but mostly talking to friends while he and his bands played. It was comfortable. There was an aesthetic about playing music that comforted him: the weight of a guitar hanging from a strap over his shoulder, the way the body of it cradled his hip, the microphone stand in front of him like some girl he wanted to kiss. Even the positions of his arms and hands when playing were a comfort. Standing up, in front of an audience was an act so familiar and comfortable, bass notes rumbling bone deep, it was nicer than pulling up the blanket over his shoulders when he went to sleep at night.

He thought about booking other shows while he was out east but it would have had to been done months in advance. It was a shame; he’d never played on the East

Coast. He'd done two anemic swings that took him up the West Coast with a band, and through the Midwest playing acoustic shows by himself. Countless gigs in California. Still, Rick, older by two years, had never seen him play. Not even when they were teenagers and Thomas played keg parties. Rick would be there, but would always leave before the bands started, getting ripped early and pulling stupid stunts with his buddies, like the one that got a judge to sternly recommend the army. Then Rick was shipped out, first to boot camp in Georgia, then to South Korea followed by Germany. But with this last-minute gig booked in Rick's area of the world, Thomas felt satisfied that his brother would finally see him play.

While his email was open, he read the latest from Denise. He rarely talked to Rick at all, his main contact with the remains of his family were through his brother's wife. Here she was upping the ante with an article on the threatened extinction of Brazilian Rosewood. *They use this in guitars, don't they?*

*You're right, he wrote back. The world is going to hell in a handbasket. And we're all part of it. I'll never use a toothpick again.*

He decided not to read her other email, or those from anyone else. He logged off and shut down. The computer stopped humming; static crackled from the screen like lightning through dust. He sat in the dark staring at his desk, strumming the same four chords over and over: B to B diminished, A to E, a slow melancholy chord progression — a late-night sound — that pleased him. Night blooming jasmine wafted through the open window, small flowers giving their last. He closed his eyes and breathed it in.

\* \* \*

The next day when he checked his email, he didn't bother reading Denise's note; he simply hit "Reply" and wrote her that he'd be out on the 15th. *Very much looking forward to this. Flying into D.C. Might try to play a show there and it was half the cost of flying into Raleigh. So I'll be driving down from there.*

Denise wrote back, *Great! Can't wait to see you!* Then she sent a flurry of emails detailing research done by biologists in England, who, she said, were collecting data from hundreds of independent studies. *Fact: The death of the old growth forests is not just here in North Carolina, but everywhere.*

Thomas sighed and considered the delete key, but read on half-curious.

*There are whole species of trees, she wrote, gone just in the last 50 years.* She listed articles she said promised details and examples from Brazil, West Africa, Indonesia, the Philippines, whole forests wiped out to ten or five percent of what they once were. He felt his mood sinking, like mercury into the earth of him, his body becoming heavy.

One article warned that trees can't survive without other trees, that small forests were weaker than larger ones. *This will continue, Denise wrote, Until in maybe just 20 years the trees will become so sick, they'll expel carbon instead of oxygen to survive.* She provided a link where he could read further. *Can you imagine? There'll be a rush to cut down trees just to save the earth's oxygen supply!!!!"*

It was the exclamation points that made him close the email without reading further. He wrote her a new email. *Things are always changing, sometimes for the better.*

\* \* \*

Three weeks later he was hurtling 75 miles per hour in a gold Crown Victoria on I-95 heading south through the worst downpour he'd ever been in. Gray sheets of rain slowed no one. Semis, compacts, even a motorcycle passed him. He listened to a baseball game, a playoff between the New York Yankees and the Cleveland Indians, to keep him alert as he began to tire.

He pulled off the highway when he opened his eyes to the sound of a semi's horn while drifting out of his lane, the game well over.

In the parking lot of a Day's Inn outside Richmond, Virginia, he carried his suitcase and his two guitars into a rented room, running quickly to stay as dry as possible. It was no use. Even his underwear clung to his skin. His jeans chafed his thighs with each step.

He showered for warmth, dried off and played his acoustic guitar while watching CNN anchors report endlessly about a sniper shooting people in gas stations around the D.C. area. A frightened resident, a pudgy woman with a blue-and-pink flower-print blouse and hair too blond for her face, invoked the Bible and said it was the end of days. Thomas wondered if he was far enough south to buy gas in the morning.

He woke up at 3 a.m. with CNN still on and the guitar across his stomach. He put the guitar away, then cycled through the channels twice, bored. He turned off the T.V. and tried to sleep, daydreaming about the larger audience a festival usually brings.

\* \* \*

The first thing Thomas noticed when he arrived at his brother's was how much his niece, Casey, looked like Rick when he was her age. More so in person than in the photos

he'd seen. She had Rick's and his own round nose, plus blue eyes, round porcelain cheeks and towhead hair, just as the boys both had when they were four years old. She had Rick's straight hair, though, where Thomas's had been wavy. He stood in the entry of his brother's house and recalled images of himself and his brother as children, both of their parents still alive, hope and the future barely a thought yet. Thomas became momentarily aware of his age, his status as someone in his late-thirties, solidly adult by age, but nowhere near adult when compared to his brother with his family.

Rick made salami sandwiches while Denise put on coffee. The stovetop espresso maker hissed and threw up steam. Rick said, "You need to eat, T. Get some musculature on you."

"It's creepy," Thomas said. "She looks just like you but she doesn't look like Denise at all."

"She does too," Denise chimed in. She made a face at him, one Thomas imagined she'd give to Casey if Casey had said something childlike, rude and truthful. In it, her full row of straight white teeth showed. Thomas wondered if she'd had orthodontia work or if she just had great genes for teeth — he and his brother had neither.

Rick pulled two white mugs down from a cabinet. "Denise wasn't involved in the whole childbirth thing. I sloughed off some cells and grew Casey in a petri dish."

Thomas regarded his brother and his wife. They were large compared to him. Rick had filled out over the years, becoming muscular. That was part of the adult/not adult feeling Thomas had. He'd never filled out in the same way and stood three inches shorter than his brother. Even Denise was taller.

Rick opened the refrigerator and pulled out a pint of half-and-half. "By the way, thanks for babysitting tonight while I go to work."

“I can’t baby-sit,” Thomas said.

“I’m just kidding. Denise’ll watch her.”

“Are you guys not coming to the show?”

“All the way in Chapel Hill? Nah, man, I’ve got to work.” Rick poured half and half into the mugs.

“Where’s work?” Thomas asked.

“Mortgage Broker’s office.” Rick opened the refrigerator again.

“At night?”

Rick stood with the door open, the smell of something spoiling wafted through the kitchen. “I go in, in the mornings, then am home in the afternoon to pick up Casey from day care. I go back around four or so, after Denise comes home. I’ll probably work until nine tonight, there’s a lot of paper to fill out.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No joke, T. I’m not like you, I’ve got responsibilities.”

Thomas ate his sandwich and drank milky espresso, saying nothing more about it. Inside he felt numb, his energy draining away. He thought back to their conversations. Thomas had told Rick he was coming out to play a show. He didn’t actually ask him to come, he just assumed. He’d felt the numbness before. When his ex-girlfriend, Amy, had asked him, after seven years, if they were going to get married, he’d laughed, wondered to himself how a marriage would work in the life of a touring musician and said *maybe*. When she left, he felt this same shutting down inside, a dull hum, his body’s reaction to the realization of a communicative and emotional blunder.

At three-thirty, Rick put on a tie in the bathroom mirror and splashed his cheeks with an after-shave that reeked of alcohol.

Thomas leaned against the bathroom's door jamb, watching him. "You're really not coming?"

"Sorry, T. I told you," Rick said. His tone was one with which he might scold his daughter. "I have to work tonight. Is that okay if I earn a living for my family?"

"Yeah, of course. I just..." He left it at that. He suddenly felt foolish for wanting his brother to come see him perform, dumb for coming out for a gig at all. Who was waiting for him to play a show anywhere anyway? That he'd expected Rick to take the day off, to drive the hour to Chapel Hill, to notice him at all? It was foolish.

Thomas watched his brother kiss his wife and tell her that Casey was down for a nap. Rick picked up a file of papers from a desk in the corner of the dining room and took a set of keys off a hook near the door to the garage. He stopped and turned in the doorway. "All right, T, have a good show. I'll assume you're coming back here tonight unless you hook up with a lady." He flashed his jagged smile then closed the door behind him.

"Why is it," Thomas asked Denise. "He seems ten years older than me instead of two?"

"He's just Rick," she said. "He's older than everybody. He's trying to be your dad."

\* \* \*

Thomas left the address and phone number for the Local 508 Club in Chapel Hill on a sheet of Casey's drawing paper. He leaned against the opening between the small dining room and the living room. "I left the club's info on the table," he said. "Just in

case.” He hoped Denise understood that by “just in case,” he didn’t mean an emergency, but in case they wanted to go. He hesitated a moment, not sure if he should point out the difference.

He wondered what his mother and father would think if they were alive to see him today. Both had died incredibly young, heart attack and cancer. Would they wonder what he was doing playing small clubs more than twenty years later? Working a string of temp jobs? Rick had retired from the army after 20 years. Their father had been in the military. Certainly they’d be proud of Rick.

“Denise,” Thomas said. “I’ll be back pretty late.”

“All right. Drive safe. Drive slow, save gas. Oil production peaked in 1979. It’s all downhill from here.” She smiled, letting him know that while the fact might be true, she was also just joking around.

“1979?”

“That’s what this article says anyway. There’s debate.”

“You always read that stuff?”

“Have to for work,” she said. “You know how you’re getting up there?”

“I mapped it earlier and printed it out,” he said. “You don’t want to come along?”

“Can’t. Casey and all,” she said. “Maybe if I’d have known earlier, I could arrange a babysitter, but.”

Thomas nodded. He thought of saying there’d been three weeks, but didn’t.

Thomas gassed up the Crown Vic at a station just outside Rick’s neighborhood. He looked around for the white van the news reports all said the sniper shot from, always at some gas station. Each one had been farther south. The last shooting had been just over the border near Richmond. It was a guessing game about where he’d strike next. Thomas

stood between the gas pumps, as most people were doing if they weren't back in their car laying low with the seat all the way back, out of view. When done, Thomas started the car quickly and followed the directions north along Route 24.

It was a two-lane road. Dusk was coming on. The lush vegetation and woodlands he saw on his drive down to Rick's through Virginia and upper North Carolina were missing. Small hills looked denuded. He drove by weedy cotton fields with rundown supply shacks. He kept noticing another crop he didn't recognize: field after field of mangy stalks drooping golden brown leaves. It wasn't tall enough, and was too sickly looking, to be corn. He'd been driving half an hour before he realized it was tobacco.

He passed a small curing shack and imagined himself as a tobacco farmer living in it, alone, miles from anyone, working the fields to stay alive. He didn't want to imagine it. He had his own life. There weren't many, he thought, but there were people he was related to, and he had some good friends. He should have told his brother this was important to him. He should have asked him back when he booked it to take the day off, come see him in Chapel Hill. He'd known even then that there probably wouldn't be another chance for Rick to see him perform.

By the time he reached town it was dark. The tobacco farms had given way again to hills and trees and neighborhoods, the roads curving in different directions. In the dark, after the turns and curves, he couldn't tell north from south. He leaned forward to look up through the windshield of the Crown Vic; he saw nothing in the stars he could recognize, no constellation that would help him. Even if he had seen the Big Dipper, was it north in the fall? Or east? Was it even visible this time of year? He didn't know. What he did know, or sensed, was that he'd missed a turn somewhere and found himself, not on a main street in town, but in some suburb that could have been anywhere, and that he had

to pee. He bounced his left leg and began shuffling in the driver's seat. He passed a new-looking shopping complex in a large clearing and saw a Barnes and Noble. He decided to stop, knowing a clean bathroom could be had and perhaps directions.

After using the restroom, he walked through the store toward the exit. A clock on the wall told him it was 7:45. He was going to be late. The muscles in his shoulders tensed. He'd flown across the country to play one show, and suddenly might miss it. In the Film and Music aisle, he noticed a man he guessed to be thirty years old. The man wore tight black jeans and a yellow T-shirt from the band Death Cab for Cutie. His hair clung to his head in three shades of fucked-up platinum blonde "Excuse me," Thomas said. "Can you tell me where a club called Local 508 is?"

"Yeah," the man said. He moved gray-yellow bangs away from an eye, revealing a ring through his eyebrow. He pointed out to the road. "Just turn right at the first light and follow it for a mile. It's on the right at the end of a long strip of businesses, past the University."

"Thanks," Thomas said. He hesitated, wondering if he should mention he was not just going to the club, but playing at it, a too-rare bit of self-promotion. The man's attention was back to the flap of a book called *Rock in the Digital Age*. Thomas turned and walked to the door wondering if he himself looked as ridiculous as he felt the guy who'd given him directions had looked. Probably more, he thought. Here he was wearing slim black jeans and a tight green logo T-shirt as if he were twenty.

Thomas parked on the same block as the club. Not a good sign, he knew. It was five to eight. He should have been loaded in and ready by then. He brought his guitars in and heaved them onto the front of the stage. He hopped up and began plugging things in: his electric guitar to a tuner, the tuner to a kill switch, that to a distortion pedal, then into

one of the two amps, a Vox AC-30 the promoter had provided as part of the backline. The acoustic went straight to the P.A. He did it all in a nervous hurry.

A large man Thomas guessed to be 300 pounds walked to the edge of the stage while Thomas was changing out a bad cord. “You Thomas?” he said.

“I am.”

“I’m Jay,” he said.

Thomas was on his knees. He put the guitar pick he held in his mouth and reached out to shake Jay’s hand. “Thanks for having me,” he mumbled around the pick. “I’m sorry, I’m late. I had trouble finding the place.”

“No worries,” Jay said. He breathed heavily as he talked. “Take your time. We’ll probably wait until some more people get here.”

Thomas stood up and looked around the place, noticing for the first time that it was smaller than he expected, and almost empty. There was a man and woman playing at a pool table at the far end between the bar and the entrance. A couple people sat in seats along the side walls. He counted nine bodies in the room including the bartender, staff and the girl collecting money at the door.

Three people walked to the stage. They were all young, nineteen or twenty, and looked like another band to Thomas: a tall skinny kid in an orange Adidas T-shirt carrying a guitar; a short Italian-looking fellow with a lot of dark, curly hair; a pudgy girl with Betty Page bangs, in a babydoll dress. Thomas took her to be the singer.

“Are you on first?” The guy in the Adidas shirt asked.

Thomas nodded.

“You have a band?”

“Used to. It’s just me tonight.”

“You mind if we put our stuff up here? We’re on right after you.”

Thomas liked the idea of having the empty stage to wander around on. He couldn’t imagine encroaching on some other band’s stage set up. But he shrugged his shoulders. “Why not? There’s room. I’m just going to use the Vox over there,” he said, pointing to the amp at the back of the stage.

He tested everything, making sure all the guitar sounds he wanted were coming through. He stepped on the kill switch to make sure he had it hooked in right, that he could mute the sound between songs and tune while he told some story, that the acoustic output was making it to the PA. Everything worked.

He leaned his guitars against the amp and walked off stage to the bar. He ordered water, no ice, for his voice.

Jay, the promoter, shuffled over and said, “We should probably get going. I don’t want to get too far off schedule.”

Thomas glanced around the room while walking up to the stage. He didn’t notice anyone new. He pulled the guitar’s strap over his head, stepped on the kill switch and struck a D minor chord to make sure he had sound.

Conscious of the empty club, he didn’t wait for the soundman to introduce him. He strummed out the opening chord progression to his first song — B, B diminished, A, E — and closed his eyes. He tried to imagine his mother there listening. He breathed in, finding it difficult to remember what her face looked like exactly. It had been so long ago. You can’t forget your own mother’s face he thought. He tried to imagine his brother showing up as a surprise, the whole working thing just a josh.

He opened his eyes and stared at the only thing the lights would allow him to see: a bit of wood grain in the paneling on the wall across the room illuminated by a sconce.

He wondered what type of wood it was, if it was endangered. Thomas played the chord progression once more, to get himself back around to the beginning. He stepped to the microphone and sang, "I want to wake up / in the morning / and see...."

He sang by rote. His mind wandered. He pictured himself driving, through forests, up the East Coast. Maybe he'd find an open mic in D.C. Then he thought no. He knew. He might not ever play a show again. He'd just drive. He thought of the sniper. Perhaps the sniper was some environmentalist kook. Didn't want people driving so much, or flying across the country or using rare woods for guitars.

His eyes adjusted to the light. A girl, sitting against the far wall, stubbed out a cigarette in an ashtray and walked toward the bar. Someone he couldn't see laughed at a joke he couldn't hear. The young bushy-haired drummer of the next band sat at the side of the stage, drumming his sticks against his thighs, excited, the way Thomas used to be.

###