

Chapter 3

Infamous



PSYCHOTHERAPISTS COULD EARN plenty of overtime analysing our global lust for staying in hotels where terrible murders, drug-fuelled suicides and sexual escapades have taken place. For thousands of us, the very proximity to a scandal, even if it happened ten or fifty years ago, is enough to count as luxury, and on the surface that sounds neither a normal nor healthy condition for the human mind.

To be there – in the very room where Michael Hutchence’s body was found, where Sid Vicious murdered Nancy Spungen, where John Belushi overdosed with the call girl, where Fatty Arbuckle indulged in the orgy that cost him his career, or where some of Led Zeppelin took part in one which enhanced theirs – is to be almost part of that famous event. It is the chance to feel history and notoriety all around you. It’s not just the ghosts of people but the ghosts of the event itself, the echoing note of infamy which can take decades to fade. Such is the indelible mark that some events leave on their location.

Ask anyone over 40 and with even a vague interest in 1970s music why the Chelsea Hotel in New York is famous and they will doubtless tell you: ‘That’s where Sid Vicious stabbed his girlfriend to death.’

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How about the Chateau Marmont on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood? ‘John Belushi and the hooker – he had a heroin and cocaine overdose.’ Or the Sunset Tower just down the road, of which guest Truman Capote wrote: ‘I am living in a very posh establishment, the Sunset Tower, which, or so the local gentry tell me, is where every scandal that ever happened happened.’

There are more. The Ramada Inn on Union Square in San Francisco got instant fame on 22 January 1949 when the cops burst in to Room 203 and found jazz giant Billie Holiday nestling a stash of opium. The Landmark Hotel on the Twenty-nine Palms Highway in Hollywood earned similar status when Janis Joplin was found dead in Room 105 on 4 October 1970.

Room 501 at the Sheraton Plaza La Reina (now the Sheraton Gateway) near Los Angeles’s international airport was splashed on newspapers worldwide after the car designer John DeLorean was set up and videotaped there by the FBI in a cocaine sting in 1979. The feds had gutted a television and filled the space with a hidden video camera. DeLorean won in court using entrapment as a defence. A television is back in there now with all 1596 channels of glorious cable television. Maybe they should have left it empty.

Luxury hotels are wide open to scandals such as these because of their transient and often famous clientele. If you are a Hollywood movie star or international rock deity, it is far more convenient to shag your bit on the side or take your drugs in a hotel room rather than at home, where you might have, for instance, a family, who wouldn’t consider it entirely appropriate behaviour.

Such notoriety can make or break a hotel’s reputation and its future, and in the above examples – and in many more – scandal has brought the hotel incomparable publicity,

future bookings and economic success.

The lonely and lovely Joshua Tree Inn in the desert of Southern California was little more than a highway pit stop before rock musician Gram Parsons (from the Byrds and the Flying Burrito Brothers) settled down alone in Room 8 to a leisurely evening of booze and drugs. He overdosed and died, aged 26.

I remember Parsons's death because it happened the day after my sixth birthday, and although he meant nothing to me at the time, I became instantly obsessed with the beauty of the motel's design and the wide open spaces beyond it that I saw on crackly black-and-white television reports.

Architecturally low-set in classic desert 1950s style, the hotel was built in a horseshoe shape but with sharper angles and a big roof easing down either side from an adobe-style central chimney stack. It was bathed in sunlight and had vines draped over the porch and awnings. It was different and striking and I wanted to go there and check in. It took me another 20 years but I finally went and slept in Room 8, which has been renamed the Gram Parsons Room. I drank as much of a bottle of tequila as I could without throwing up, smoked a joint and, rather pathetically, fell asleep in a chair. Not exactly a hard-core rock 'n' roll evening, but I felt the Parsons spirit wafting through the room before my eyelids fell.

Some desperate-to-be-hip establishments actually go looking for this sort of trouble. Getting on the front pages for the wrong reasons can sometimes be a deliberate attempt by the hotel to foster an edgy reputation. The owners and managers calculate that it is worth the risk. Anything for a bit of publicity.

For the most part, however, infamous hotels have had notoriety thrust upon them. They were merely going about

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their daily business of welcoming guests, serving tea, checking in and checking out, when trouble came knocking at their revolving lobby door, mainly in the guise of errant movie stars and long-haired rockers with plenty of Jack Daniel's, girls and pharmaceutical hors d'oeuvres.

While some of these hotels are lavish and exotic, others are – or at least were, on the day their fame-makers came to stay – quite unprepossessing places. Targeted by fate, you could say, and destined for greatness by means of orgies, overdoses and other over-the-top behaviour. Some were picked at random, and many at the last minute, by demented tour managers, often because every self-respecting establishment in town had said, 'No way are these guys staying with us.'

Despite suffering the headaches, the press clamouring at the door, and the vice-squad detectives in cheap suits camped out in the lobby, almost every one of these hotels became an overnight success. Their names were on everybody's lips and their pictures and logos were everywhere. A scandal was the perfect advertisement and usually cost only the price of a new set of furniture, a television or two, some fresh carpet and a fumigator.



The managers and staff at the Ritz-Carlton on Cross Street in the plush suburb of Double Bay in Sydney, Australia, had more than your average cleaning job on their hands in Room 524 on Saturday 22 November 1997. They had a body to remove, and a very famous one at that.

The room had been booked under the name of Mr Murray River, an alias for the rock god Michael Hutchence. The front man for INXS, Australia's most successful band, was dead.

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Hutchence had been preparing for INXS's twentieth anniversary tour. He had also been battling a clinically diagnosed depression, which was being exacerbated by a child custody row in London over his daughter Tiger Lily. Hutchence wanted her and her two sisters, Peaches Honeyblossom and Fifi Trixibelle (whose father is Sir Bob Geldof), and their mother and Hutchence's partner, the British television personality Paula Yates, all with him in Australia for Christmas.

According to the inquest report, Hutchence had returned to his hotel at 10.30 PM the previous night after an evening out with his father. He continued a low-key party with two friends in his room. They stayed as emotional supports for Hutchence, who was expecting a phone call from London.

They hit the mini-bar and Hutchence also took some cocaine (it was found in his system during the post mortem), but this was not a boozing session – more a casual couple of drinks.

Oddly, rather than the large suite that you might think a multi-millionaire rock star would stay in, Room 524 was just a room. It was certainly luxurious, as one would expect at a Ritz-Carlton, and had the best aspect, offering a view of the harbour (at least it had the night I stayed and I don't believe the hotel has been sneaky and changed the numbering). But it was not excessive or extravagant, and neither was the trio's behaviour. They talked about Hutchence's plans for a career as a Hollywood actor, and listened to his fears over the court case.

After his friends left in the early hours of Saturday morning, Hutchence was alone in this room with depressive thoughts massing around him.

Phone calls to and from London proved the custody battle

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was not going well for Hutchence and his situation was becoming more and more desperate.

Almost six hours later, at 11.50 AM, an unsuspecting chambermaid pushed her cleaning trolley down the hushed, carpeted corridor of the fifth floor and arrived outside 524 to make up the room. Her knocks on the door went unanswered. When she tried to open the door she found it jammed, and she needed to push with all her might to move it. Hutchence was lying naked on the floor, dead. Clothes were scattered around the room and his bed was half-made.

The coroner's report said he had been kneeling against the door with a leather belt nearby. In the room was a Ventolin inhaler, along with Nurofen painkillers, Zovirax 200 tablets, Prozac capsules and other pills.

Police said a leather belt was found inside the room but there were 'no suspicious circumstances', which is police-speak for suicide. Hutchence, stressed and depressed by the news from London and further affected by alcohol and drugs (both prescription and the other variety), had been pushed over the edge.

The managers of the Ritz-Carlton went into damage control, fielding calls from journalists around the world. The hotel had to get this right in the media to maintain its image as edgy – it had a strong reputation as Sydney's rock'n'roll celebrity hotel, having played host to Kylie Minogue, Kiss, Alice Cooper, Dionne Warwick, Engelbert Humperdinck and scores more. It had also served as a temporary Sydney address for Winston Churchill, Bill Clinton and Princess Diana.

The news sped around the globe. Hutchence's face, full of vigour but hiding trauma, was on the front pages of newspapers and magazines for days, as was that of the grieving

Yates. Adding to the tragedy was the news that the two were to be married in Bora Bora the following January.

The fear was that, after Hutchence's demise, the hotel would turn into a gawking shop for tourists (and travel writers) hell-bent on visiting the room where he died, disturbing the other paying guests. Despite the fears of the owners and managers, Hutchence's death did nothing but good for sales. The hotel continued to woo rock bands, some of whom might have chosen to stay there partly as a result of Hutchence's death.

I visit Shakespeare's grave in my home town in England more than once a year for inspiration, so I can fully understand rock bands wanting to get a Hutchence vibe from Room 524 in this hotel.

The property changed hands in 2000 when the Singaporean-based Stamford chain took over, renaming it the Stamford Plaza. But the stars kept coming. During the filming of *Mission: Impossible II* at Sydney's Fox Studios, the hotel was a temporary home for Tom Cruise. Add Madonna and Keanu Reeves to the mix (in separate rooms, thank you) and it is easy to see how the hotel's celebrity reputation has survived.

Today the hotel proudly shows off its clientele with signed photographs and letters hanging in frames on the walls of Winston's Lounge. Tucked away in the cigar room, next to the humidor and its racks of Cubans, is a gold frame containing a photograph of Hutchence on stage wearing a sleeveless denim jacket. Underneath the picture is a small plaque.

That it is there, subtly placed away from the main public areas, is proof that the hotel does not want to revisit that incident from its past – possibly for fear of being (wrongly) accused of milking the death for publicity, possibly just out

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of respect. I asked two staff members if this was the former Ritz-Carlton where Michael Hutchence died. They politely smiled and confirmed it used to be a Ritz-Carlton, but on the other matter: 'I wouldn't know about that, Sir.'



Hutchence was not a rock god to me, although I was a fan of INXS and remember vividly when he bounced down to the front of the stage at Manchester's G-MEX centre in 1990 and briefly gripped my outstretched hand. He was the first Aussie I ever met. Back then, I used to like my music a little harder. A decade later, although a one-night stay at the Stamford Plaza in Sydney was a bit of fun and a chance to squeeze into my black leather trousers once again, knock back some beers, stick on some INXS CDs and dance around the room miming like a teenager, there was another infamous hotel that I was longing to experience.

The Chelsea (in Manhattan, New York) is a relatively non-descript hulk of red brick squatting on Twenty-third Street near Seventh Avenue. It was constructed in 1883 as a co-operative apartment building, and in 1905 became a hotel, specialising in catering for long-stay tenants. This was New York's theatre district back then, so the hotel's guests were mainly creative types. There were musicians whose bodies ran almost entirely on a diet of heroin, whisky and junk food, actors and artists living life through an LSD whirl, playwrights, photographers, fashion models, beat poets, philosophers and their muses. They lived there with hell-raising writers, sex-crazed groupies, alcoholics and other assorted hedonists.

The Chelsea was home to Jimi Hendrix, Mark Twain, Tennessee Williams, Brendan Behan, Arthur Miller, Dylan

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Thomas, William S. Burroughs and Arthur C. Clarke – who wrote part of his script for the sci-fi epic *2001: A Space Odyssey* while living in Room 322.

Notorious and admirable as these men were, one event stands out as the most infamous of all at the hotel. Everything changed at the Chelsea when one Simon John Ritchie (aka Sid Vicious) and his girlfriend, Nancy Spungen, checked in, as Mr and Mrs Ritchie in October 1978. Nancy never checked out, at least not in the usual manner.

Her involuntary departure from this hotel and this life happened on 12 October in Room 100, which she was sharing with her clearly devoted boyfriend.

A dull thud on the reinforced and virtually soundproof floor was the only thing that alerted the outside world that all was not well with the couple. An anonymous call from a neighbouring room came through to the front desk, followed by one from the room itself (presumably from Vicious) asking for help.

Nancy, aged 20, lay dead in the bathroom in her underwear. Blood was everywhere, smeared over her body and her peroxidized hair, and over the mosaic tiles of the bathroom floor. Among the drug paraphernalia found in the room by the police was a blood-stained Jaguar K-11 folding knife, which had a five-inch blade and a black jaguar carved into the handle. This had caused Nancy's untimely end.

Sid was wandering the Chelsea's corridors, high on heroin and alternating between bouts of fury and sorrow, when the cops jumped on him and locked him in handcuffs. In a few hours he was charged with second-degree murder.

The courts never determined whether Sid was guilty of the killing, but according to both testimony and anecdote it was supposed to have been a murder-suicide. Sid later confessed he had not kept his side of the bargain, but his fellow

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band-member John Lydon (Johnny Rotten) maintains Sid's innocence to this day, as do his fans.

As one waggish guest at the Chelsea explained to me in the lobby, with the kind of black humour that thrives around Twenty-third Street and Seventh Avenue, 'People who love Sid and the Pistols say that Nancy kept running into Sid's knife over and over again, so it really wasn't his fault at all.'

By February 1979 Vicious was dead too, aged 21, having overdosed on heroin he had found in his mother's purse at a party in Greenwich Village. The Chelsea, meanwhile, rarely left the headlines, and skyrocketed into rock'n'roll infamy.

In the soft light of the New York spring day when I visited, the Chelsea's edifice and its wrought-iron balconies looked somewhat forlorn. With only a small sign over the lobby entrance, passers-by do not pay much attention to the hotel and scurry by without giving it a second glance.

I was hoping it would be a little on the grungy side, and I would have been disappointed if it had not lived up (or down) to those expectations. But what I found was something altogether more thrilling.

It is a shrine to the bohemian lifestyle. Apart from some immaculately renovated and furnished rooms, the place looked like it had hardly changed since Spungen's corpse was removed on a stretcher. The lobby looked like an after-gig party had just ended and I had missed the band only by minutes before they went up to their rooms to hand out the Valiums and sleep the day away. The soft grey armchairs were worn, and there was cigarette ash on their arms and on the brown carpet.

At the reception desk was a tall man in a beige overcoat and brown trilby hat who was trying to convince the desk staff that he had a reservation. His mid-Atlantic accent

was that of an English-born frequent visitor to the USA. Momentarily he paused to help a silver-haired woman with a skinhead haircut who was carrying a small spaniel-mongrel cross. She had dropped a file of papers and was trying to pick them up without dropping the dog.

The papers were cuttings of hairstyles for dogs that she had clipped from magazines. The two giggled as they gathered them together, and the man suggested either 'punk spikes or a green Mohican would be perfect, just for fun'. The woman crouched there and thought for a second, then smiled and agreed, and rubbed the dog's head and told her she was about to look beautiful.

The dog bit the man's hat.

Here were two kindred spirits, people who looked at life on an angle, and sometimes upside-down and back-to-front. Real bohemians. The desk staff saw this too and checked the tall man and his trilby hat in with a smile. He was 'one of us', they could see.

His place at reception was soon taken by a short, stocky man with a limp, who had wandered in from the street and shuffled across the lobby floor. He wore dirty sneakers and black jeans which sagged around his arse; like their owner, the jeans were turning grey and frayed at the seams. His hair was dyed jet-black and was gelled into short, irregular hedgehog spikes, and the skin on his face looked like it might come in handy when sanding a hardwood floor.

From the side he vaguely resembled Lou Reed in the 1980s, after a big night out with Nico and the rest of the Velvet Underground. From the front he looked like a human train wreck, a former backing musician or roadie perhaps, so drug-addled that for every one year he lived he actually aged seven, like a dog. I was relieved he kept his Ray-Bans on when he glanced at me, because I feared the sight of his

sunken, jaundiced eye sockets would return to haunt me in my sleep.

I was gripped with the sudden urge to ask him if he had been in a band, but then I realised that if there were one rule that the unruly Chelsea would religiously enforce, it would probably be: ‘No asking the guests if they were backing musicians or roadies for Black Sabbath (or similar).’

I also realised he had not been glancing at me at all, but at a young woman sitting behind me dressed as a French schoolgirl – cute brunette pigtails, a revealing skirt and big black patent-leather shoes. She was pounding away at a laptop, her brow furrowed.

‘Second novel,’ she told me when she caught me staring at her knees. She had great knees. ‘Twice as much of a head-fuck as the first. Head-fuck, head-fuck, head-fuck!’ She said it so loudly that the limping ex-roadie and the reception desk staff heard her and paused momentarily. They have been hearing this kind of stuff for decades, I guess. It’s when they stop hearing comments like this from nutty guests that they’ll probably close the Chelsea – when the place loses its kooky edge and becomes too conservative.

To avoid this ever happening, the Chelsea’s advertising should really carry a warning: ‘If you have never listened to and got high on ‘Lust for Life’, or read ‘Howl’ and *On the Road* and surrendered your souls to the authors, allowing them to take you on those frightening, wonderful American journeys, then don’t check in to the Chelsea. Stay safe and try the Waldorf=Astoria instead.’

The novelist with the great knees then looked bemused and angry as she wondered why she had announced her project so publicly, and to a stranger. I flicked my eyes away from her and my gaze landed on the largest pile of ash on the lobby’s brown carpet. I imagined a record producer

being there just a few hours before, flicking big grey nubs from his cigar. He had been cutting a deal with an unsigned outfit from New Jersey who had greasy hair and sniffed a lot so that people would think they were cocaine-heads, but in fact they were former choirboys who had only recently developed a rather innocent taste for beer.

Next to the record producer's cigar remains was a pile of something else, something off-white and flaky. It would have been no surprise at all to find someone had spilled their heroin bag on the floor and left it there for general consumption, but the answer was, sadly, more practical.

Directly above the centre of the lobby was a big patch of bare brick ceiling, from which plaster had, inexplicably, been peeling away, seemingly for some years. Maybe Brendan Behan in a first-floor room had been so caught up with a play that he had left the bath running and the water had seeped through the floor and begun this decay. Maybe a long-lost chandelier had freed itself and fallen to the floor in a theatrical crash.

Either way, its presence seemed to fit perfectly here at the Chelsea. The hotel is luxuriously scruffy. Decadently down at heel. Temptingly tired.

At least, that's the theme for the public areas. The rooms are stunning and designed with immaculate attention to detail. They are what I always wanted my university room to be like back in the 1980s – stylish, dramatic, edgy and a dead-cert shag-pad. I ended up with a cheap copy of an Arabian tent, with walls covered in Blu-Tack holding up swathes of psychedelic material from Afflecks Palace in Manchester, and some borrowed posters of Jean Shrimpton and Iggy Pop. Unlike me, the Chelsea actually spent money on its rooms and got the design right.

Today, they are a rich mix of stark monochrome patterns,

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black-lacquered floors and vibrant coloured bedspreads and curtains. Many have wood-burning fireplaces and some boast kitchenettes – perfect for cooking a bowl of porridge or warming your dope ready to crumble into a fat joint. Rooms don't automatically come with televisions but they can be requested. Maybe the owners have realised that rock stars and televisions don't always mix.

Room 100, where Sid and Nancy had their little tête-à-tête, is, sadly, no longer. That part of the first floor was redesigned soon after the incident, and now four rooms take up parts of the original one. Guests wanting the Sid and Nancy experience have to request rooms 134, 138, 140 or 144 to ensure at least a quarter-share of the sordid punk past of the Chelsea and a chance of getting in touch with Nancy's bloody ghost.

No other celebrities who frequented the Chelsea matched the destructive genius of Sid and Nancy, but some came pretty close. The Welsh poet and author Dylan Thomas collapsed on 9 November 1953 at the White Horse Tavern in Greenwich Village, a short stumble down Seventh Avenue from the Chelsea. He was on a promotional tour and had been writing – and drinking swimming pools of booze – at the hotel and anywhere else that served alcohol. Thomas later died at St Vincent's Hospital, aged 39. A plaque at the front of the hotel is dedicated to his memory – it says he 'lived and labored last here at the Chelsea Hotel and from here sailed out to die'.

Brendan Behan, the Irish playwright and nationalist, also pushed himself to the edge with alcohol while staying at the hotel. He was struggling with largely unwanted fame and drank to mask it, although he famously maintained he was a 'drinker with a writing problem'.

During the mid-1960s the Chelsea became a hang-out for

Manhattan's artistic icon, Andy Warhol, and his band of doe-eyed young starlets, who became known as the Warhol Superstars. His favourite, at least for a while, was a wealthy, beautiful but troubled heiress called Edie Sedgwick, who modelled for *Vogue*, and became briefly the face of New York cool.

She starred in *Chelsea Girls*, Warhol's film shot at the hotel, which follows the lives of his 'Superstars' who were living there. After she and Warhol parted company she stayed on living at the hotel, finding its bohemian free spirit as addictive as the drugs she was enjoying. Bob Dylan was also living in the hotel at the time, and the two got involved. She tried LSD and inspired Dylan to write 'Just Like a Woman', which appeared on his album *Blonde on Blonde*.

I was hoping the recent biopic about Sedgwick, *Factory Girl*, had used some real interiors from the Chelsea but as far as I can gather the whole film was shot in a studio in Louisiana.

Jimi Hendrix lived at the hotel too and his ghost lives on in the hearts of some of the Chelsea's long-term residents. In the lift I met a German woman in her late sixties who gave me the bohemian once-over, a long stare from head to toe and back to eye level. Judging by her apparent lack of interest, I did not make the grade.

'I'm a writer,' I offered.

'Do you write songs or books?' she asked, doing her best Marlene Dietrich impersonation, which was not half bad.

'Oh, bit of both,' I lied.

'Aah, so many songs made here,' she sighed. 'I remember Hendrix, I remember Jimmy here. They were very good times. Everybody had parties and sang and played music. Real music!'

The Marlene Dietrich impersonator spat out the last two

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words with so much passion that her eyes became moist and she felt the need to give me a light punch in the sternum. I could feel that one of her rings had made a tiny impression on my chest.

‘Did you know Jimmy well?’ I asked.

‘Ha! Yes, everybody knew Jimmy well. He was part of the Chelsea. For a while he *was* the Chelsea,’ she said.

And with that she was gone. The lift touched the ground floor. She did not say goodbye but walked briskly with small steps through the lobby and out into the blinding spring sunlight of Manhattan.

I wondered if she had known the not-quite-as outrageous but still certainly quirky Holly Woodlawn. Holly (born Harold Santiago Franceschi Rodriguez Danhagl in Puerto Rico) was another Warhol Superstar who frequented the hotel. If you have ever wondered who Lou Reed is singing about in his seminal song ‘Walk on the Wild Side’ – ‘Holly came from Miami, FLA,’ etc. – then wonder no more. It was little Harold Danhagl from Puerto Rico.

Another Velvet Underground member, the hauntingly beautiful and secretive German (or possibly Hungarian) singer Nico, was also at the hotel in the 1960s. In 1967 she was inspired by her surroundings and the Warhol Superstars to compile her debut solo album, *Chelsea Girl*. On this blissful record, she sang with a list of performers who now rank among rock ‘n’ roll royalty, including Bob Dylan, Jackson Browne, John Cale and, of course, Lou Reed.

Naturally for a hotel with this kind of artistic, hedonistic clientele, an awful lot of sex was going on. Most of it was consensual but not all of it was remembered clearly the next day. One union which became more public than at least one of its participants might have liked was between Leonard Cohen and Janis Joplin. Their one-night stand in Room 243

was later broadcast to the world, courtesy of the song Cohen wrote about it, 'Chelsea Hotel #2', from his 1974 album *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*.

It looked like a whole lot more sex had gone on there when Madonna's photographic book *Sex* was published in 1992. Tagged on to the back of each copy of the book was a small comic book-style pamphlet showing the sexual antics at a party meant to have taken place at the Chelsea. But then *Sex* should really have been called *Tease*, as there was a lot of nudging and winking but no actual shagging.

The most recent high-profile hedonist to check in was British pop singer Pete Doherty from the band Babyshambles (and formerly the Libertines), who took to the Chelsea like Dylan Thomas to an open pub door. In April 2003 Doherty recorded the original Babyshambles sessions there. Of more interest to the tabloid media, however, have been Doherty's addictions to heroin and crack cocaine, and his relationship with British supermodel Kate Moss. Not a bad effort for a 28-year-old former gravedigger from Liverpool.

Sadly, I fear the Chelsea might be maturing into a quieter period of its life. Admittedly the artworks are still there and still challenging to the eye – for many years the hotel has allowed artists, known and unknown, to hang their work for free, sometimes in lieu of rent. The walls flanking the oak staircase are covered with paintings, some sublime and dreamy, others tortured and full of pain; some vast and rambling, others neat and pocket-size. I walked past one that still had blood-red paint wet on the canvas, and I thought Sid and Nancy would have approved.

But paintings are not enough to maintain an image as an edgy, punky place. The raunchiest thing to happen at the Chelsea in the past few years was a photo shoot with Halle Berry for *The New York Times*. She posed, cute but clothed,

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in front of the raspberry-red walls of Room 309. The room is one of the hotel's best, with views south over Chelsea and on over the rooftops and a thousand air-conditioning units to Downtown and the Battery. Sunlight floods in and changes the hues of the walls hour by hour, as it arcs left to right across the city.

I scoured the hallways for signs of potential future scandal. A rock band vomiting into the corridor, or a poet high on crystal meth and reaching literary nirvana. Anything reminiscent of the hotel's past exploits. The best I could find was a young eccentric artist back in the lobby, furiously sketching scenes of tortured and malnourished African babies on sheets of white paper. 'It's my political statement and it's called Bushed, as in, like, President Bush, ya know,' he explained. 'I beena Africa, last year, um, and, um, it's like this – like what I am doing here in the picture but, um, worse, ya know, worse, but more colourful, but, um, worse. Ha, ha.' Not exactly Sid Vicious, but if he keeps taking the pills we'll see what happens.

On the stairs a few floors up from the lobby, I met another struggling novelist. I was beginning to wonder if these weren't just rich trust-fund kids having fun and struggling not with novels but with the guilt of having millions in the bank thanks to Mummy and Daddy and not really being any good at anything. Maybe that was merely spite on my part; no-one despises a rich struggling writer more than a poor struggling writer. This girl could have been a bestseller for all I knew. In a few years she might be the next big thing in publishing, doing the rounds of talk shows and celebrity readings and having her exotic prose and vivid characters made into Hollywood films. Or she may be dead from pneumonia caught on the cold stairs of the Chelsea.

She was blonde and dressed all in black, with skin that

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had not seen sunlight since last August. She looked up and said hi but she was not wholly there; she was lost in some other space, seeking the answer to something that would finish her sentence. I knew how she felt so I left her alone, but as I passed I noticed she wore only one shoe. The other was propping open the door to the corridor to allow a cat to come and go with regal grace.



While the 1960s hell-raisers were ripping it up at the Chelsea, across the continent in sedate Seattle one hotel was developing its own infamous reputation. On the surface, you wouldn't think fishing off the shore of Elliott Bay on an innocent summer afternoon in 1969 would create anything other than a warm, fuzzy feeling. But when the fishermen are members of rock behemoth Led Zeppelin, and when one unsuspecting fish, fresh off the hook, is used to pleasure a female groupie in their hotel room, the scene shifts somewhat.

What actually happened – and memories are hazy, to say the least – became known as the Mudshark Incident, and it is one rather unsavoury hotel legend that has a thousand variations. The more it is told the more improvisation is used, like a Zeppelin jam session that has got way out of control after too much experimentation with pretty coloured pills.

It happened – or some of it happened, in one order or another – at the Edgewater Inn on Pier 67 in Seattle, probably during Led Zeppelin's July 1969 tour. The hotel had been built in 1962 for the World's Fair and was the only one right on the waterfront. One of its selling points was that guests could fish from their windows. To me this sounds about as

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exciting as watching paint dry on the ceiling, but apparently the guests loved it.

To cut a long and rambling story short, Zeppelin's drummer, John Bonham, and the group's road manager, Richard Cole, fished with abandon, dangling their lines and discussing the merits of coloured flies, skippers and other angling paraphernalia. It is rumoured one of their catches was later used to – how can I put this – entertain a naked groupie.

If you want the full fishy details, I suggest picking up a copy of Stephen Davis's highly entertaining biography of the band, *Hammer of the Gods – Led Zeppelin Unauthorized*.

While staying at the Edgewater, I spent some time trying to track the groupie down for an eye-opening interview, but to no avail. Even if I had found her, I imagine a now fifty-ish woman with a secret fish fetish and some rather scratched Led Zeppelin LPs might be somewhat reluctant to recount her afternoon of angling with England's rock gods.

I also managed to confirm that the hotel's new 'Nautical But Nice' package is absolutely nothing to do with the incident but rather a very generous way of enticing cruise ship passengers to get their land-legs again for a couple of nights.

By the time the hairy Zeppelin men checked in, the Edgewater already had a reputation as a rock hotel and was doing well from the publicity. It had taken the plunge five years earlier in the summer of 1964, when general manager Don Wright received a telex from a tour official for none other than the Beatles requesting accommodation for the boys during their tour in August.

All the other hotels in town had turned them down, terrified that the Liverpool mop-tops would pull the duck-down from the pillows and run off with the silver. If the

city's hotels were worried about the well-mannered Beatles, God knows what defences they erected when Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones came to town a few years later.

According to the Edgewater's then director of advertising and public relations, Marty Murphy, Wright met with his staff to see if they could handle the onslaught of Beatles fans. Everyone gulped a little but went for it, and the hotel set about establishing the most elaborate security measures anyone in the city had seen.

'A 350-foot barricade of plywood and barbed wire was erected in front of the hotel around the parking lot,' said Ms Murphy. 'Police and hotel security were taking their stations at all entrances and all three floors of the hotel.'

The staff liaised closely with police to ensure the protection of the Beatles during every moment of their stay. Since the hotel was literally at the water's edge, Seattle's harbour police patrolled the bay to stop anyone approaching the hotel by boat or by breaststroke. As the Beatles' limousines arrived at the Edgewater, hundreds of fans pressed against the barricades, trying to get a glimpse of the band.

'The entire front end of the hotel was locked down to the public,' said Murphy. 'At that time there was an entrance to the coffee shop right next to the main door by the parking lot. That's where we took the Beatles in, then up the stairwell to the second floor, to room 272.'

That room served as the suite where the band met and swapped jokes. They slept in the adjacent Rooms 270 and 274, both of which were furnished with two double beds. Girls were crying on the hotel phone, while fan mail, full of lip-stick and 'I love you' written on envelopes, was delivered to the hotel, along with stuffed animals, cakes, cookies and jelly beans. One girl even sent her father's Masonic ring. In alarm, Marty Murphy contacted the girl's horrified parents

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and had the ring returned.

You could say celebrities, rock stars in particular, made the Edgewater what it is today. It's still there, a fine institution with a fabulous panorama over Puget Sound, at which guests sigh as they sip their Canadian Clubs in big arm-chairs with moose antlers for arms. All guest rooms are furnished with hand-crafted pine furniture, river rock fireplaces, overstuffed chairs and footrests. It has swapped the rather old-fashioned 'Inn' for 'Hotel' yet, thankfully, has retained its bright red rooftop neon 'E'.

The Edgewater has come a long way since its Mudshark days, but without them I wonder if it would have gained the scandal that some hotels undoubtedly need, if they're to be catapulted from moderate fame to immortal infamy.