

## Andrew vs. The Collective #2: Osculating Circles

By: Andrew Fitzgerald and The Collective

**Longview, Texas – February 14, 1953**

Mary sat on the trunk of her Buick, her legs crossed beneath her cream dress. It was starting to get warm again in Texas, the winter crowded out by spring's advance, and this time of the early afternoon you could sit in the sun without even your shawl. It should have been three pm by now; all the kids had left in their mothers' cars or bouncing along in the seats of their yellow school buses. But it must have to be a few more minutes yet. Stan and Steve had promised one another **3 sharp**, and what they lacked in rational decision-making, they both made up for in punctuality.

It was like a sporting event out here, waiting for Stan and Steve to show their faces and fists. Mary scanned the other cars in the parking lot surrounding the playground. Mostly teachers and mostly from Sam Houston Elementary. A few unfamiliar faces here and there; word of a good fight seemed to spread fast around here. On most of the other trunks circling the hopscotch-marked blacktop sat couples. Fitting on Valentine's Day. Mary sat alone, as she always did. The men in Longview didn't interest her much and her fierce independence (having her own car, for example) didn't interest them much. What use did she have for the vagaries of love? Dates to the drive-in, men with their creeping hands drifting up the insides of your sweater, and this, today: two grown men fighting over a woman who didn't care for either of them.

Stan and Steve were also teachers at Sam Houston Elementary. They'd met there as students twenty-five years before and returned as best friends over five years ago to teach math and English, respectively. This year a new teacher had filled the classroom between them, **Paulien**. She was beautiful, all the other lady teachers agreed over their cigarettes in the break room. Those ladies despised her. Stan and Steve loved her. And she let them both. Right up until the competing and conflicting Valentine's Day plans which brought the two to this: **a fight on the blacktop at 3pm sharp.**

Love was ridiculous, Mary thought. She much preferred the silent company of the gadgets and devices she spent her evenings working on in her late father's workshop. If there hadn't been the promise of social bloodshed this afternoon, she'd already be home spending this Valentine's Day with her true love.

"Excuse me," a voice intruded on her meditation.

She lowered her sunglasses onto the bridge of her nose. It was a man, his hand on the trunk of her Buick. His hair was dark, thick, combed over the side. He wore a button shirt and slacks. His clothes were different somehow, in a way Mary couldn't place exactly. "May I help you sir?"

"I was wondering if this was the right place for the boxing match?"

She giggled. Boxing match. He was smiling; he meant it as a joke. "Sure is." He had a nice smile.

"Mind if join you?"

"If you must." She pushed her sunglasses back up over her eyes and slid over on the trunk to make room for him.

He hoisted himself up and offered her his hand. "I'm **Frank**, what's your name?"

"**Mary**." His handshake was firm, confident. Exactly the quality on which Papa always told her to judge a man. "You're not from around here, are you?"

"Nope," he said. "I'm from Houston."

"Houston? What brings you up to Longview?"

"I'm a traveler."

She laughed. "Well that is just delightfully ambiguous."

He smiled at her again. "You're a traveler too, you just don't know it yet." That smile made her feel ... she didn't know. "Here come the **stallions**."

Stan and Steve were in their shirtsleeves, their fists wrapped with what looked like masking tape from their classrooms. They came out of different doors onto the blacktop, both looking angry in a way that was alien to their friendly faces. Nowhere to be seen was Paulien, though Mary imagined her to be behind a curtain in one of the classroom windows.

"Listen," Mary's new friend Frank said, laying his hand across hers. "I don't have much time." His touch was electric on her skin. Her temptation was to slap his hand away from her wrist, to deploy some of the foul language she'd learned from the men who taught her to fix her

Buick. But she didn't. Instead she found herself, what ... enjoying his touch? She looked up from his hand to his eyes, which were locked on hers. She felt a flutter of ... something? Who was this man?

"You're touching me," she murmured.

"Mary, I need for you to know me. I'm Frank."

"I heard you the first time."

"And we'll meet six more times. Tonight you'll finally figure out the machine you've been tinkering with."

On the blacktop, Stan threw the first punch. Steve's head flew back at a sickening angle. The crowd groaned in empathy.

"How do you know about my machine?" Mary whispered. Who was this man?

"It's going to work better than you ever thought." He was whispering too now. "It's going to propel you forward through time and space at intervals you'll have no control over. You're going to hurtle toward the future like a stone skipping across a pond. You will be a traveler." She opened her lips, but he held his finger up over them. "I know, because I'm also a traveler. I'm hurtling toward the past."

Mary's head was spinning. Mr. Good-Looking from Houston was telling her he was some sort of time traveler? And how did he know about her machine? Was this a joke? Did she dare to believe him?

"Mary," he said, his voice low and sad. "I don't expect you to believe me now, but you and I ... we're lovers. This ... " His voice disappeared for a moment in a choke.

Steve finally landed a good blow, this one on Stan's cheekbone, sending Stan staggering backwards across the black asphalt.

Frank continued, "This is the last time I'll ever see you, Mary."

"How do you know that?"

"Because you told me. You told me this was the first time you ever met me."

"When did I tell you that?"

"The first time I ever met you. In my research facility. In 2085."

Stan and Steve had wrapped their arms around one another in that drunken lovers' dance of boxers, staggering and bloody and holding one another up out of spite.

Mary whispered, "In 2085? I suppose there are flying cars then?"

Frank laughed. “No, no flying cars yet. But we’ve got computers like you’d never believe.” The humor left his eyes. “Mary, I beg you. Will you kiss me one last time?”

Steve’s fist was raised to deliver his best friend a **quietus** upon the brow.

Mary flushed. Frank drew in close and she hesitated. What would all the other teachers say about her smooching a dark-haired handsome stranger on the back of her car in broad daylight? As if he knew what she was thinking, he said “Don’t worry about them, you’ll never see any of them again.”

His lips locked against hers. It was the first time she ever kissed Frank and he kissed her like it was the last time in eternity.

### **Houston, Texas – February 14, 2087**

“It is perhaps appropriate that we find ourselves journeying into the human heart for the first time on Valentine’s Day.” Frank was in his element, standing at the podium before the giant plexiglass window. In front of him sat the crew at their instruments, blinking and softly beeping reassuring tones. Arrayed above them: the gallery. There were easily 75 people seated up there: other doctors, local notables, and wives of prominent physicians. Frank turned to the window behind him. Through it, illuminated by four incandescent spotlights, was the murky artery of Paul **Schirp**, IT specialist and patient at the Houston Biomedical Research Complex, Cardiac Division.

At said facility, Paul Schirp’s body lay in a surgery ward on the fifth floor. Observed from the outside, he seemed perfectly normal. And there was a legion of doctors checking for exactly that. **Within Paul Schirp, however, cruising fast – maybe a little too fast – was the cell-sized craft designed and now piloted by Frank.** It was Frank’s most recent triumph, physical travel through the body’s pathways, procedures where doctors could go themselves and look at the clogged pathways leading to the hearts of Texan men. The real coup was the shrinking technology, an algorithm Frank had stumbled upon drunk and scrawling the chalkboard at a pool hall. It was his big discovery of last year, the subject of his doctoral thesis, and had, at the fastest the Biomedical Research Engineering Department could manage, been completed for use twelve months later. It was a career-making technology, but Frank was already bored with it already. Protocol, however, demanded he pilot this inaugural mission, so here he was.

“We should reach the heart in the next thirty minutes,” he said for the gallery’s benefit. “We’ll be enjoying refreshments before then if you’ll join me in the aft cabin.”

Twenty minutes later his hand was worn from the steady pumping handshakes of the local medical elite. A few of their spouses gave him meaningful winks. He couldn’t have cared less for the adulation. He was itching to have the day done, to be back in his lab. He was working on something far bigger than this, no pun intended.

A chime sounded on the intercom. He excused himself from conversation with a former professor, and headed for the cockpit. A woman steered her way before him, her hand wrapped around a martini glass.

“You’re Frank,” she said. It was a declaration, not a question.

“That’s right. And you are?”

She extended her hand. “Mary. My name’s Mary.”

“And do I know you from the hospital?”

“No, this is the first time you met me.” She smiled at him warmly, almost ... sadly?

“Well then it’s a pleasure.”

She looped her arm under his elbow. “No, the pleasure is all mine. We don’t have much time, but let me tell you all about it.”

### **San Francisco, California – 1976**

Longview to San Francisco would have been strange enough in 1953. But a few clicks and whirs after she’d tightened that last screw with her Dad’s old flat head screwdriver she found herself not just in another place, but another *time*. How did she know? Well the hair, really. These men with their long hair and their mustaches. Their shiny shirts. Their strange jeans that poofed out at the bottom. All of these things pointed to a different time. That and the newspaper she found with the dateline “1976”.

Within about an hour Andy had found her. He seemed to just find people and pull them along in his wake to whatever the party of the week was. She was now firmly in his wake and sat gawking like a foreign tourist at the festivities around her.

They were in a huge apartment or hotel suite overlooking the city skyline and the bay beyond. Mary was perched on a stool, elbows on a tiled counter littered with empty glasses and

bottles. The room was packed with people, many wearing sunglasses to ward off the dying rays of the sinking sun. They smoked and drank and did ... other things. Mary watched as two sweaty red-eyed men sped through their conversation and stopped only to bend down to the glass table before them and sniff up some sort of white powder through a rolled up dollar bill.

When she'd first sat down and Andy was still at her side she'd asked what it was and he'd laughed, teeth pearly white in exultation of being visible to the surrounding world. "That, baby, is Co-caine! Don't touch it myself, but it's all yours if you want some." She'd politely declined.

Andy. **Andy Levine was, people kept telling her, the baddest bass player in the whole city, if not the entire world.** "He's going to re-revolutionize rock music, baby," a man with tousled unwashed hair and dilated pupils told her. "That means, you know, he's going to like *evolutionize* it." But once he'd introduced her to the party, Andy had gone away, carried off by the eddies of conversation across and around the room and out through the far door.

"That's where the set is," a man's voice said next to her.

Mary looked to her side, hoping to see a familiar face in this unfamiliar land. Perhaps the mysterious Frank? It wasn't. It was a forty-something man with wiry hair hanging to his eyebrows. He had tired eyes. "That's where they'll shoot the show '**Scotty the Skyscraper.**' This is the party for their premiere episode."

He extended his hand, "**Tom Jones O'Chopper,**" he said. "I'm a stock broker." He indicated his sports coat as if it was a badge of his career. "What do you do?"

"I'm a school teacher," Mary said. "Though I guess these days I'm doing a bit of traveling."

"Love to travel!" Tom said in a tone that could have been exclamation if it wasn't so close to just exhalation. "I just got back from the Caribbean." He leaned in conspiratorially. He smelled of gin. "That's where the party favors came from." He leaned back, proud of himself, but Mary could see a great weight of sadness pulling him down on the inside. It was so apparent on his face. "**I was a stock broker down in the Caribbean just a few years ago. Made lots of money, thought about running for office. And my friend, my best friend, Ray-Ray was a hot sauce tycoon. He brought me to his friend Tito's place on St. Aljun Donde to talk about opening an investment account. Tito must have been into some serious shit because every drink I had at his bar was free and every corner of the room was stacked high with bales of ganja and blanco. I was supposed to be there for two days but one morning I was sitting at**

**the bar next to this Trinidadian girl named Pearl who was telling me I had to take her to Miami and marry her and the jukebox started playing that John Lennon song about Merry Christmas the war is over or whatever ... that's when I realized it was Christmas. The sonofabitch snuck up on me."**

"That was the same morning Tito walked down to the bar, which was also where his girls cut the cocaine, and saw I was still there. **With one eye closed against the bright light, wolfing down the last of the cold scrambled egg and stuffing the wedges of toast in his cheeks, he counted eight, no nine bottles of vodka scattered over the work surface** and he said, 'Stock broker! You makin' me no money!' And he packed a duffel bag full of cocaine and sent me to San Francisco. That's how I got here. How about you little lady? I'm sure your story can't be crazier than that."

Mary was still trying to fathom half of the foreign things he'd recounted but she was able to murmur, "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me!"

Mary looked over at him, at the sweat beading on his temple, and fought off an overwhelming urge to throw her arms around him and squeeze the sadness right out of him. But behind him she saw a familiar face. "Frank!" she exclaimed.

It was Frank all right, in the same shirt and slacks she saw him in sitting on the trunk of her Buick in Longview in 1953. He smiled, laying his hand on Tom Jones O'Chopper's shoulder. "Excuse me, Tom."

The stockbroker turned, "Do I know you?"

"You will." Frank looked past him. "Mary, care to join me on the deck?" Mary gladly took his hand and let herself be led out through the glass doors. She wanted to speak, but nothing came out. What was there to say? He meanwhile, kept a steady patter of party conversation. He was pointing off at a tall hill, saying, "**It is thanks to the development of optical telegraphy, those giant semaphore systems mounted on windmills by the French, Prussians and other militarists, that previously unremarkable prominences were proudly renamed Telegraph Hill.** Like this one here." He slid the door shut behind them. "Enough of that." He wrapped his arms around her and she felt at home in them. "Thank god you're finally here."

"What is this place?" Mary asked. "How did I get here?"

“It’s San Francisco, I’m sure you’ve surmised. And it’s 1976. We’re at a party that’s been going on for three days. In a little bit, they’re going to open up the studio next door to a waiting audience of little kids. **And in that studio will be an entire television show's crew out of their minds on drugs and booze. Scotty the Skyscraper, the star, who is supposed to walk around on stilts for the duration of the show, will stumble and fall in the second take of his opening monologue. He’ll knock over a bottle of vodka onto a mess of wires, a fire will start and following the dramatic escape of the studio audience and untimely death of the star, the show will be cancelled.** You and I will be gone by then.”

“How do you know all this?”

Frank smiled at her and stroked her cheek like it was the most natural thing in the world. “You told me. In Morocco. About two decades from now. We’ll laugh about it then, but right now I need to get you oriented.”

“To San Francisco?”

“No, love, to traveling. You’re lucky, your first stop is short and I was here to greet you. Some other places you’ll be alone, and you’ll stay for long periods of time.”

“Why don’t you tell me where I’m headed next?”

He grinned. “Because, Mary, you asked me not to. It would spoil the surprise you said.”

She laughed. “Yeah that sounds about right.”

“We’re not the only travelers. There are the others, all moving different directions, at different speeds and intervals. You learn to recognize them eventually.” He pointed through the sliding glass door. “Those two right there, they’ve been in 1976 for months, but they’re both from the first decade of the next century.” On a couch just inside sat two thin animated young men with excited eyes and intertwined hands. One of them wore a dark suit with a lavender pocket square. The other wore ripped jeans no longer than his thighs, a purple t-shirt and what looked like a **latigo** wrapped around his thin waist. Frank pulled her face back to his. “It’s important I introduce you to them at this party.” He brought his lips close to hers. “Which is a shame, because I would much rather just spend the time with you.”

They called themselves Nick and Nora, Nick of the ripped-off jeans and Nora of the dark suit with the splash of lavender. Nora offered Mary a small mirror with three dusty lines of white powder. She politely declined. “You’re missing out, babe,” Nora said, his voice deep and sonorous. “It’s my absolute best.”

“It’s the finest of ashes to dust,” Nick added. “Nora makes it herself. Don’t you sweetheart?”

Nora, who did not appear to Mary to be a she, blushed. He said, “**I work at the Columbarium of San Francisco. The left-over ashes get mixed into our little friend here.**”

“It’s a positively mystical experience!” Nick interjected. “And nice for us to take a taste once in a while, **not just the clients at the tranny Tom Waits show!**”

Frank leaned in and whispered to Mary. “Tom Waits is a singer from the next few decades.” Mary watched as Nora’s eyes tracked the whisper.

Nora leaned in close. “You know Tom Waits. You’re travelers too, aren’t you?”

Frank nodded and Mary followed his lead.

Nora smiled. “Well then it’s our pleasure. We’re from 2000.”

“It’s such a futuristic year!” Nick exclaimed.

“But after a brief stop in 1991 we’ve been here in 1976 for months now. We had to set up little lives.” He looked at Nick. “Or at least I did. Some of us refuse to get a job.”

“**I’m a trustafarian!**” Nick said with glee. “Still living off Daddy’s money in an entirely different *time!* I spend my days on Haight Street, which, let me tell you, never changes much apparently.”

“When are you from?” Nora asked.

“2087,” Frank said.

“1953,” Mary said.

“Lovers from different times! I would have thought you were traveling together ... but I guess most don’t. It get complicated with the children.”

“Not for us!” Nick grinned. “**That’s the one good thing about being gay; all sex, no consequence.**” He pantomimed a pregnant belly protruding from beneath his faded purple tee.

“Who here is closer to home?” Nora asked, looking between the two of them.

“I am,” Mary said. “This is my first stop.”

“Well then you’re lucky. Most people hit a few stops before they meet another traveler. There’s a whole culture of us.”

Nick paused, his head halfway down to the mirror he was holding up to it, “We’re like **peripatetics** of time!”

A woman squealed, rushing out of the kitchen. **“I’m not entirely certain, but I think there may be a dead possum under the radishes in the vegetable crisper.”**

“That’s our cue,” Frank said. “We should clear out.”

“What happens next?” Nick asked, still distracted from the mirror beneath him.

“In about ten minutes, they’ll try to start the show and it’s going to be a disaster.”

Nora laughed, “Oh we knew it was going to be a disaster. That’s why we came.”

Frank stood, pulling Mary’s hand up with him. “Cops and firemen disaster.”

Nora dusted off his suit jacket and rose. “Well we can’t have any of that, can we Nick?”

Frank kissed Mary on the cheek. “I’ll see you soon, love. And you’ll see me soon too.”

### **Istanbul, Turkey - 2048**

His first night was a rough one. Frank had slept in a doorway accosted by a few representatives of the city’s legions of stray cats. The next morning, still finding himself in Istanbul and it still being 2048, he decided he needed to work out a living situation. He haggled himself a small room in a hotel with the old Euros he had stowed beneath the false bottom of his satchel. For a week he toured the city. He’d never been to Istanbul in 2087 so he spent most of the time looking at ancient ruins and timeless mosques, which only served to make him feel like building a time machine, had been unnecessary when he could have just taken a vacation.

Mary, the woman who had told him they were lovers, who had pressed against him in the supply closet of his ship when they were mere nano-meters from the aorta and begged him to kiss her for ‘the last time’, she had told him he could never know how long he’d be in a given time. Told him to prepare to feel marooned. “Especially at the next one,” she’d said with a wink.

So did marooned mean a week? A month? A year? He’d need to get a job.

He took a tour bus out of the city, to walk with the daytrippers through the forests on the Black Sea side of the Bosphorous. He needed to think. What could he do in this time and place? Bring them medical miracles? His tour group wound through a needle-strewn copse of pines, chattering in a Babel of different languages. What other advantages did he have? He had an encyclopedic knowledge of history, thanks to the digital encyclopedia he’d wisely packed. He knew that in this time Turkey was mired in another struggle between Kemalists and Islamists. But what could he do with that?

His reverie was shattered by a woman's scream from the front of the group. Before her a military man in full uniform staggered into the clearing, running, dripping blood, wailing with an inhuman sound. He was a captain by his markings, and he fell at their feet. **Their eyes went wide with shock as they watched an affliction of starlings stream down from the heavens and devour the unsuspecting captain, leaving nothing but his gleaming, disenfranchised framework behind on the forest floor.** Without thinking, Frank began snapping pictures.

The Day of Allah's Birds was the day he signed on with the Associated Press as a freelance photographer. With his digital encyclopedia he knew the daily news events in the city, could always be at the right place at the right time. The money was good, he started to pick up a little Turkish, and time stretched long.

It was as a freelance photographer burdened with Cassandra's knowledge of the future that he was both awaiting and dreading the G8 summit. He knew the outcome already: the traditional protests would give way to the Islamists and the Kemalist generals would play their hand too hard, too violently and the world would shiver at the bloodshed. It would end with the first unapologetically Islamist European Union government and that would eventually work out just fine. But those few days would be brutal, especially in the streets of Istanbul.

It was in those last few peaceful days he made acquaintance with **Hadassah Lempeh, professional matchmaker** and fortune-teller. They drank at the same bar at the same time every day and their familiar nods eventually led to conversation. She drank Efes, the local beer, snacked on calamari and Frank sipped the wine.

"You're lost here," she told him on the day before the G8 ministers arrived. "Not just in Istanbul. You're lost in the world."

"You could say that." Frank tried to give Hadassah as little information as possible in case her fortune-telling skills weren't just an income supplement to her waning business in matchmaking.

She shook her head. "I'm glad we made friends, boy. But I know it won't last. My only friend is my food. **Hence the cephalopods.**" She gestured at her plate. "Trust me, old Hadassah knows a thing or two. You're gone after this G-8 hubbub."

"Really?"

She laughed. "This is a bad one coming. And I know bad times. I was in Seattle for 1999." She sighed. "Years ago. I almost didn't make it. Was still in jail on day one. I got nabbed driving

north through Oregon. **When the flashing lights flickered in the rear-view, I was hurtling down I-5 in Ruckus' unregistered red pickup with a bag of weed in my pocket and an open fifth of Jim Beam beneath my seat, stacks of surreptitious photos of Seattle rooftops strewn across the dash, and the back filled with u-locks and climbing gear.** So you don't let anyone tell you old Hadassah doesn't know a street action."

Frank took a sip of wine, trying to mask the mathematics he was performing behind his eyes. Hadassah was what – 60? 70?

"Don't go trying to calculate my age, boy. I'm older than **Quetzalcoatl**. But listen, this is what old Hadassah needs to tell you." She leaned into him. "You'll meet a woman. This is the fortuneteller talking. You'll meet a woman in the gas. Now this is the matchmaker talking. She'll be the wrong woman. The right woman will come two days later."

On the next Thursday Frank met the wrong woman. **Her name was Sora** and they were both trying to negotiate an exit from a cloud of tear gas that obscured the source of the hurled rocks. They both carried cameras and they both wore bandannas and later, after they'd escaped to the Savoy for a drink, they both drank whiskeys.

Sora was Turkish, beautiful; she looked at him with smoldering eyes and talked fast in English like there was never enough time to say everything that needed to be said. He shared her cigarettes (she called them Zhong Nan Hais) on the porch of the Savoy in one of the few islands of tranquility in the city that day.

She explained her delicate situation as a Turk and as journalist. **"My mother was a friend of an enemy of the people.** My father was a government minister. Neither of them ever tried to sway me to their side. So I just ended up in the middle."

The next day even the Savoy was washed over in the tide of uprising.

It was Sora's picture that did it. **The tank and the burqa and the child.** It was the generals at their bloody worst, the country at its most vulnerable. Frank knew the picture, everyone did back in 2085. There wasn't an award that photograph didn't win in 2042, not a heart it didn't stir. And it wouldn't be for another two decades that the world discovered Sora wasn't a photographer at all. That most devious of activists, the woman willing to martyr a child for her country. Frank chided himself for not recognizing the name in the context of the Istanbul Riots.

The next night at the Savoy, a **Ulusal Kanal delivery van** overturned and burning across the street, he'd turned from her and as he was walking away he heard her sob, "You know. You bastard, how could you know?"

It was Saturday night. He threaded his way through the streets, detouring away from firelight when he saw it and explosions when he heard them, eventually arriving back at his rooms. He looked up from his key ring, **a small elephant carved out of bone, with silver tusks, worn smooth on one side where it had been hanging on his belt**, to see a woman leaning against his doorjamb.

"How's Sora?" she asked. "Take it hard?" It was Mary.

"How did you know?"

She laughed. "You told me all about it in Morocco." She indicated the door. "You going to invite me in? Supposedly we've got a few hours before I'm off to Houston."

Without hesitation, without even thinking about it, he kissed her. The right woman indeed.

### **Rome, Italy - 1984**

She loved Italy. The eighties she could have done without, but this country was amazing. So much history at every corner. So much old in this future world. She avoided the angry smog-spewing small cars and violently backfiring buses and stuck to the monuments and ruins around every aged corner.

This had been a long stop for her. When she'd first arrived it had been 1983. That was three months ago. Before Rome and after San Francisco she'd had another week at the end of the 70s, in Boulder, and then spent two days of 1981 on the beaches of Antigua. She hadn't seen Frank since San Francisco, but she found herself hoping he'd show up here in Rome.

She'd found herself a small community of fellow travelers. They drank at the American-style Harry's Bar from the afternoons until late in the evening. She wasn't sure what the rest of them did for their money, but she taught English to aristocrats' children, which paid her well and let her off in the mid-afternoon, so she was always happy to join them.

They were a motley crew at Harry's. Loud enough to drive off all but the regulars but regular enough to not attract reproach from the management (though plenty from the bar cat,

**Engelbert, who possessed only three legs and an undying love of the pot-bellied pig** kept at the exotic pet store next door.)

The most tolerant behind the bar was Narcissa, **who never spoke but to repeat back an order in confirmation.** The one conversation Mary had had with her was a single sentence in which Narcissa tried to explain her name, “It’s an old family joke. A haha from my Papa.”

Today, as Mary entered, Narcissa was working, and she nodded to her. Mary was wearing a hand-knit vest that was her first personal project since she got to the 1980s. It kept her back warm despite the chill of the outside, but she noticed, left her arms in danger of the cold. At the bar were the constant companions Archie Goodwin and Chancellor Chamomile Teague. Archie was as small and thin as Teague was wide and round, and though they were travelers from different times, somehow the smaller man had ended up in the Chancellor’s employ. Which was useful for the Chancellor, who wasn’t much of a communicator.

Archie had explained to Mary when first she’d the pair, **“There are three things you must know about Chancellor Chamomile Teague: first, he is always the principal actor in any story in which he is so much as mentioned; second, he is immortal; and third, though garrulous, he speaks exclusively in elaborate palindromes.”**

To greet her entrance the Chancellor spun on his stool crying “Yo! Bottoms up, U.S. Motto, boy!”

Narcissa shook her head, wiping endlessly at the countertop, muttering “US motto boy” inflected as if she meant a lad who personified the peculiar spirit of America.

Hunched over the bar at the corner was the man who called himself **Nicholas J. Pony**, always using the full name. He was tall, olive-skinned and wore a simple white t-shirt and denim jeans. Englebert the cat favored him of all the regulars and sat perched on the bar above his bottle of beer. Nicholas claimed to live sideways in time, one of those rare travelers who’d figured out how to turn their vector through time into a sort of a loop. She assumed he was from somewhere to the future as he would spend his afternoons muttering about the musical selections in the bar. By way of greeting he said to her, finger pointing up at the house speakers, **“The Talking Heads didn’t put out one good album after 1980.”**

“Hey Nick,” she said, hugging him around the shoulders. “Can I have a glass of Primitivo?” she asked Narcissa.

“Primitive, oh?” Narcissa responded, her hand already reaching for the bottle.

Archie slid up next to Mary at the bar. “We’re so glad you’re here, doll, we’ve concocted a plan and we want your support!”

“Oh really?” Mary asked.

Teague called from the end of the bar, “Sue, dice, do, to decide us!”

Archie, turning to glare at him, said, “No, Chancellor, shan’t be dice. It’ll be Mary’s decision, right?” He turned back to her as she took her first sip of wine. “Now dear. Today, the Chancellor and I were engaged in a little haunting. With a solid dosing of a vicious little hallucinogen, we were in the company of fair-skinned red headed heiress to quite a substantial British fortune. She had long forgotten our presence, been tearing through her apartments for a quotation, and had given up to sit on her desk and stare at the patterns in the fire. And that’s when old **Archie Goodwin stepped out of the aging pulp novel by Rex Stout that lay on open on the sofa, winked at the red-head perched on the desk, and offered her the services of his rather large employer before stepping into the looking glass above the fireplace; she shook her head and reshelved the title before putting out the lights.** Shook her right up, I say!”

“You two are sick,” Nichols J. Pony said, without turning his head from his sip of Peroni.

“Well, I can’t say the Chancellor was much help. He dosed himself by happenstance and spent the evening beneath a massive Modigliani.”

The Chancellor nodded sagely, his eyes distant. “**I roamed under it as a tired, nude Maori.**”

“Yeah you’re a real savage type,” Archie spat. “This is the one who wants to **go sit and wait for El Bulli to open back up since this is the year Adria joins the kitchen.** Savage my foot!”

“What’s your idea?” prodded Mary gently.

“Right, of course. Well today, in our experiments inspired by implied **zombification**, what with us being the spirits of the long dead forebears to our dear heiress, see, the Chancellor and I thought what this dour little camaraderie could use was a crypt crawl!”

Mary looked at him and then at the Chancellor’s eager smile quizzically. “A crypt crawl?”

Nicholas J. Pony swung his stool around. “Like a pub crawl, but through the Catholic crypts?”

Archie nodded furiously. “Yes, yes you’ve got it!”

“Well that’s is just a pizza idea if I’ve ever heard one!” Mary assumed that in Nicholas’ time pizza had taken on an adjectival meaning. He used it often in that capacity.

That was how they found themselves first gallivanting through the **catacombs of St. Callixtus**, each with their own bottle of wine. Then later they were standing at a grate near the backside of the Vatican accompanied by Archie’s sometime lady-friend **Andie**. Andie was the proprietor of the tiny exotic pet shop next door to Harry’s that specialized in illegal specimens and police bribes. “I have a friend, a priest friend, he’s a client really,” her voice always moved fast, hyper, **ebullient**. “He needed a baby giraffe. It was more money than he could afford by the time we got it into the shop. It had to come through Africa you see, through my friend Elise. She runs a beauty shop, of course, with a sideline deal in pets. **She paints toes and toads in Kathmandu.**” Andie stopped for a split second to giggle at her own wordplay. “So the priest. So the priest, he showed me this place.” She lifted the grate at her feet. “This is the **crypt of St. Peter’s**. It’s where I saw the first John Paul’s body.” She giggled again, uncontrollably. “Of course I had to use the visitor’s entrance!”

They wound down the narrow stone stairs beneath cobwebbed arches and past the interred bodies of long-forgotten Catholic heroes, perhaps the Crusaders.

They found a good nook to lean back, pop their bottles open and partake in their libations. Nicholas J. Pony turned out his flashlight, plunging them all momentarily into dizzying darkness before he lit a candle and stood it up in a recess unoccupied by the dead. They smiled at one another like shy schoolchildren in the flicker of the flame. For once even Andie had nothing to say and Teague was without a palindrome for the occasion.

Mary looked around at the group. It was such a nice group of folks. Odd, surely. But she liked to believe this is why she became a traveler, why she set herself skipping across the surface of time, to meet people like these and share in experiences like this. She didn’t care about flying cars really, or how dissonant and inhuman rock music had become, it was just for moments like this. There was one thing missing though, she thought to herself. Frank.

Nicholas J. Pony wrapped his arms around her in a giant bear hug, lifting her a few inches off the ground. “We’re going to miss you, kiddo,” he said, grunting with the exertion of squeezing her so tightly.

“What do you mean,” she eked out.

“You’re about done here.”

She was startled by a scraping sound behind her, back in the direction of the street. Spooked, Archie moved to the candle to blow it out. A priest? A Crusader raised for revenge? “Don’t worry with the candle,” a voice called. “I’m here for Mary.”

Nicholas J. Pony released her and Mary ran toward the voice in the dark. “Frank!” she exclaimed. He wrapped her up in a hug of his own. “What are you doing here?”

“Sadly, I’m just passing through.”

“How did you find us?”

He smiled at her. She could just barely make out his features in the candlelight. “You told me on the train in the desert.”

She kissed him on the cheek. On his other cheek. On his lips. “I’m so glad to see you. I’ve been waiting for you to show up for weeks. I’ve got so much to tell you.”

“You will, not now though.” He kissed her back, a short sweet peck on her lips. “One thing, real quick. When you get to Morocco ... I’ll be in the back of the train.”

### **Orlando, Florida – 2009**

He’d been able to recognize Disney World when it suddenly appeared before him. He was in Fantasyland he guessed, and it was far too humid to be California’s Disneyland. Somehow, though, a tiny tyke of a girl had mistaken him for her Disney-appointed guide. Her name, he gathered, was **Adeline**, and she was there to be a princess for a day. After a few weak protestations and a few stern looks from the woman she called “Mimi” he’d given in and joined the tour.

For her special day, Adeline got to be dressed as her favorite Disney princess. She chose Belle from Beauty in the Beast. Somehow, though, Frank had **ended up in the Sleeping Beauty dress**. When he told the harried servants of Cinderella’s castle that he didn’t want to be adorned in the frills and lace they’d shook their heads and said, “At least you get tips, buddy.”

Adeline, standing on her child’s size tea party chair, regarded him with her tiny fist under her chin, a plastic wand protruding from it. She nodded her approval. “**This way you’ll be fit as a fiddle for our foiree on Friday.**” How do you tell a tiny princess it’s pronounced “soiree”?

The afternoon was spent in a constant loop of “It’s a Small World After All” broken only when the little princess had recognized one of her favorite singers striding across the park in a

hooded sweatshirt and oversized sunglasses. “You’re Taylor Swift!” Adeline yelled, waving her wand while she ran full tilt to catch up with the young blond woman.

It was in fact **Taylor Swift**, in poor disguise, accompanied by a man she claimed was her singing coach named **Spanoli**.

Many hours later, and long after Adeline had squeezed the breath out of all of them with her good-bye hugs, they were at a bar called Paradise Island. The night had turned fuzzy for Frank. He was still in the Sleeping Beauty gown, much to the amusement of the giant bar’s only other patrons, a huge contingent of Japanese businessmen. They were dominating the karaoke machine, doing their best with American rap. Spanoli, who was actually a mute, kept buying Frank shots of tequila. Beside him, Taylor Swift sipped from a ginger ale. Next to her sat a British man of Mediterranean complexion who introduced himself as “**Lord Adonis**” without any hint of irony. On Frank’s other side was an old friend of Spanoli’s who introduced himself as Tom Jones O’ Chopper.

Tom, who’d told Frank he looked familiar, was explaining to him how after a party in San Francisco in 1976 he’d sworn off having anything to do with cocaine. “They saved every last one of those kids in the studio audience, I tell you. But the looks on their faces, the flames dancing over Scotty the Skyscraper.” He shook his head at the memory.

Onstage, at the end of a rousing if unintelligible rendition of “Stand up and Get Crunk”, the karaoke jockey called for Spanoli.

“I thought he was mute,” Frank slurred.

“He’s a champion karaoke signer.” Taylor Swift said, smiling. “*Signing* not singing. He’s really the best there is.” Her smile was radiant.

“I say dear,” Adonis said over his martini. “How is it that your *mute* friend is a *singing* coach?”

Taylor Swift shushed him and turned to watch Spanoli. Frank couldn’t figure Adonis out. He was obviously rich, obviously British. When he’d learned Frank’s profession was medicine he’d said “Good man! I’m in the schools, myself.” But how he’d ended up there at the bar, leaning imperceptibly closer to the young pop star with each martini, Frank couldn’t tell.

O’ Chopper leaned in again. “Twenty years later, to the day, I swore off junk food.”

“Did you?” Frank thought he asked politely.

“Me and my buddy Trevor were at this bar in the Bahamas and ate a whole bowl of cocaine-laced Cheetos. We spent the night tearing the wallpaper off the walls of our hotel room. And ever **since the unfortunate incident thirteen years ago, Trevor has suffered from a morbid fear of Cheetos.** And I just gave up all junk food.” He slapped his belly. “Better for me anyhow!”

The karaoke monitor lit up with the song title: “**Edelweiss** – From the Sound of Music.”

“I love this one!” Taylor Swift exclaimed with a little clap.

The first strains of the signature Rogers and Hammerstein sound came through the speakers and onstage Spanoli began to move his arms in slow, waving motions. Frank watched, transfixed. Behind him Adonis said, “Miss Swift, it’s nearly the holidays, what say we go find some mistletoe?”

Frank turned to see Taylor Swift hold up a fist and say “Adonis, **I’m gonna mistletoe your FACE.**”

“Man, that Adonis never knows when to quit,” O’ Chopper confided. Frank’s head was spinning. “He loves those little pop stars. That’s not me at all, not Tom Jones O’ Chopper. You shoulda seen this little thing I had going in New York, just two stops down the Metro from me. **She was like a mixture of Lady Gaga, Anjelica Huston, and Dom DeLuise all rolled into one; there was no way on earth I was going to miss my opportunity to rub the sandwich on her backside as soon as she stepped off the train.**”

Frank wasn’t certain if O’ Chopper had said “rub the sandwich on her backside” or if that was what the tequila had made his ears hear, but he knew he had to get out of there.

He stood, wobbling, thinking he would find his way to the bathroom. A hand wrapped around his arm. “Can I have this dance, princess?”

“Mary!” he was pretty confident he didn’t spit on her as he said it.

She pulled him close. “Good news love, you’re almost done here.”

“Oh thank god!”

She whispered, her voice clear and sweet in his ear. “One thing. In Morocco. I’ll be in the back of the train.”

**Morocco – 1999**

**The train came to a sudden stop in the empty desert.** Beyond its greasy windows fell a magnificent sunset, cast across the dunes like an oil painting. At the front of the train the conductors yelled and cursed, joined by the occasional passenger. Every third or fourth window another passenger's head emerged to shout questions about the train's impeded progress. The final car of the train was the dining car, a red velvet baroque affair that had emptied out when the train stopped. Only two passengers remained at their small table, holding their champagne flutes aloft so that they caught the light of the dying sun and scattered it around the cabin as if through a jewel.

"To us," Mary said, her face spread wide in a smile.

"To us, and Morocco," Frank said, reaching across the table to take her hand.

The sun set in a final flare as they told one another of the places they'd been. What they'd seen in the places before they saw each other, what they'd seen in the places they'd been to alone. Both of them loved to watch the other speak, almost hated when it was their turn to recount and be distracted from the face of the other. From the face of their lover. They held hands as the light faded from the sky and the unlit train compartment descended into darkness. They watched one another's eyes after they reflected no more light.

Fires lit up across the dunes when night fell completely. Small tufts of campfire dotting the space that had been sand in daylight. A steward came into the car to light candles. Mary asked him in French what they were stopped for. "The King has died today," he told her. "King Hassan the second. This day will be a day of rest. No trains will move."

"When did you pick up French," Frank asked her.

"1995. Avignon."

"Not so long ago."

"I remember it like it was yesterday."

Frank could see her coy smile in the light of the candles on the tables around them. He leaned in and kissed her above their champagne-strewn tabletop. The steward left them and Frank pulled his chair around to Mary's so they could sit together and watch the flickering of the campfires. Strains of a song of mourning drifted through the warm night air.

"How long do we have here?" Frank asked Mary.

"I don't know, you never told."

"That's right. This is the first time we've ever been on the same page, isn't it?"

“I don’t know anything you don’t know.” Mary loved the feeling Frank’s arm around her. The solidity of his presence.

Frank drank in the smell of her hair. “This is exactly where I want to be.”

She turned to him in the chair. “Me too. I hope this lasts forever.”

And they held one another that desert night amidst a pile of blankets on the floor of the dining car. They were both, as individuals, the happiest they’d ever been. They wound around one another like **osculating circles** and hoped the night or whatever remained of their time in this time, would never end.

### **Epilogue –Spain, 2135**

It was a long jump from Frank’s warm grasp in 2085 to the frigid wastelands of 2135. It was a new ice age, she’d surmised, and possibly man-made. Men, as it were, seemed to be extinct, replaced by a post-human augmented version. They were genetically engineered for this cold.

**The newspapers the day she’d arrived were full of headlines trumpeting the first alien contact.** A whole new species out there in the even chillier cold of space and they thought the post-humans were their benevolent creator.

Not so benevolent, Mary thought to herself as she staggered across snowdrifts beyond the walls of the city once known as Pamplona. They’d seen her shiver beneath her hand-knitted Roman vest, knew her as not one of their own, and her sent her to die in the frozen wastes. Exactly the future race Mary would have expected humanity to become looking forward from 1953.

**Daggered, she strode slowly through the ice, a long slow drip of gall and blood warming the insides of her vest, the vest she had devoted so much care to - care dripping off her forehead, pouring from her eyes, care sweating out of every conscious gland and orifice to congeal in a cascade down around her sleeves, grasping ripping behesting her to remove them oh so carefully and place them away from that treasured sleeve-unworthy thing - the vest she now bled her last carefully inhaled, sob-interrupted breaths into.** She thought about Frank and she remembered Morocco, remembered his touch, and she knew he’d fare better in the past.

### **Epilogue –Virginia, 1862**

Cruel fortune to be dragged away from Mary's embrace in 1953. Crueler fortune to be cast so much further to the past. It was nearly a century prior by Frank's calculations, if this was in fact the **American Civil War**. It was certainly a war of some kind, smoke rising around him and the smell of black powder clogging his nostrils. He ran through what seemed to be farm fields, dodging the whiz of musket balls overhead and desperate to find a path out of the heaviest fighting.

He hopped over the body of a Confederate soldier, ducking away from the charge of a Union cavalryman. At his feet, much to his surprise, he saw a man that looked like the twentieth century comedian **Bill Cosby**, surrounded by some sort of plastic foodstuff. The man was dead, couldn't speak, but the note pinned on his chest said for him "**I am Spartacus.**" Time was slipping, Frank realized. Something, somewhere had gone terribly wrong. He had to get out of there.

A shot rang out in the distance, though Frank was unsure how he heard this one more clearly than the others. Likely because it was the shot that felled him. He crumpled to the moist soil beside Bill Cosby. "Pudding Pops" was what the label read on the plastic things surrounding him. Strange. Frank drifted and as he did, wished his love all the happiness of mankind's better future.