

Andrew vs. The Collective #4: Fever Pitches

By: Andrew Fitzgerald and The Collective

I was a half mile above Colorado when the legions of my fever broke through the ramparts of my last three Advil. They screamed through my bloodstream releasing shivers all through my limbs. As the fever crawled up the back of the inside of my neck, I pushed out a ragged breath and pulled the cheap airline blanket up to my shoulders. I was miserable.

I was on my way to Boston on the Virgin America red eye from Fog City to Beantown. The purple lights were dimmed, the ambient techno was inaudible, and my face was washed in the light of a tiny live television. **Tiny speckles, of what looked like glitter, had settled on the screen making it glow like a big budget movie gadget.** My head leaned against the cool pane of the window and my legs explored the expanse beneath the mercifully unoccupied middle seat.

This fever had been an unexpected and unwelcome surprise. It descended upon me just hours before my departure, far too late to reschedule my two dozen appointments. I called my boss, **Justin Gunn** and begged for a reprieve. He laughed and told me, “Listen, **Gareth**. One year when I was producing at Burning Man I hadn’t slept for 76 hours when I came down with the flu. We still had twenty video packages to deliver and what do you think I did?” The answer was he toughed it out. That was always the answer. From a paper cut to an amputated limb. It was inspiring but also maddening. The man was unconquerable.

He headed up the department of Ideas and Innovation at Circular Pictures, a small production company in the business of feature films. At a time when the whole damned entertainment industry was out of ideas it was his job to keep us fresh. Justin Gunn’s latest innovation was that we were going to go out amongst the people. “Everyone’s got a story,” he told us, “and at least one of those is going to be massive box office success.” Then he scattered us, my five compatriots and I, to the wind. That wind seemed to be taking me the furthest.

While the middle seat was unoccupied, the aisle seat carried a female passenger. It was just my luck, feverish and freezing, that this would be the one time I sat next to a beautiful woman. You get a chance like this maybe one in every hundred flights. The next time would be

years away. Mathematically, I was screwed. And here I was with the sweat beading at my temples and my eyes pulsing out from between my sockets. I watched her as she sat down, returning from a trip to the aisle. We made eye contact and I smiled wanly. Our overhead lights were on; a lonely island of light in the slumbering cabin.

“You all right?” she asked me. Oh great and now she was going to talk to me.

I mustered the most strength I could give to my voice. “Fine. Just running a little fever.”

“Stupid airlines.” She pursed her lips. “They force people to travel when they’re sick. They should just let you change your reservation with a doctor’s note. For public health’s sake.”

I laughed. A raspy doppleganger of my normal chuckle. “No, it wasn’t the airlines. It was my boss.”

“Oh, what do you do?”

“I work in movies.”

“You’ve practiced that line before haven’t you?”

I had. “No, of course not.” I smiled. “I’m the Under Assistant West Coast Promotion man for Circular Pictures.”

Her eyes narrowed, “Like the Rolling Stones song?”

I nodded. “It’s a joke between the executives. What do you do?”

“I’m a writer. Other things.” She was a beautiful writer. She had long thick brown hair with bangs hanging down and framing her face. “I’m **Susanna**.” Her eyes sparkled a bright green. She extended her hand for a shake.

“Gareth. You probably don’t want to shake my hand.”

“I’m on the tail end of a flu myself,” she said. “Whatever I’ve got will tear whatever you’ve got limb from viral limb.” We shook hands over the open B seat. “It’s been a hallucinogenic one, this illness. I thought the lavatory was a space capsule for a minute. **The first time I traveled alone I found myself between a hit of acid and a Cuban hooker**. It’s been a bit like that.”

I laughed. “You travelled to Cuba your first time traveling alone?”

“No, it was **Seattle**. She was a Cuban expatriate. I was working on a cookbook about Northwestern cuisine.”

“You write cookbooks?”

“Yep. Regional delicacies. It pays the bills between unsold chapbooks of poetry. But I actually like it. It’s a lot of eating and a lot of travel. **Long plane rides like this give me time to**

brainstorm ideas for my tyranny cookbook. I don't have a title for it yet, but I do have a recipe for Pol Pot Pie and I think that's a pretty good start."

I lacked the self-control to keep from giggling. She didn't join me. It apparently wasn't a joke. "I don't cook much," I said. "But I love food."

She turned her body in the seat to face me like we were sharing secrets at summer camp. "What's your favorite?"

"Food?"

"Absolute favorite."

"Ummm..." It wasn't something I'd given a lot of thought to. "Cake I guess. I really like yellow cake with chocolate icing."

Her eyes lit up, "Me too! Cake is the best. My favorite is mille feuille, you know, Napoleons? **Mille feuille's the bomb diggity, 'specially when you get the last slice in the cafe and everyone looks like they wanna tear your guts out for it. That's the bomb diggity.**" I laughed a little too loud. Who used 'bomb diggity' anymore? "There's a little place in New Orleans that serves the best in the country. They have a tradition that honors this statue outside their windows. After you finish your plate you have to jump to your feet and yell, '**Save the Margaret Statue in New Orleans!**'"

"Why?"

"Something about a governor who wanted to replace it with yet another General Lee or Stonewall Jackson or something. But trust me, their Mille feuille is good enough to yell about." She had angled her body to mine so that our feet were nearly touching in the footspace of the middle seat. I was enjoying the spectacle of storytelling. "What are you doing in Boston?" she asked.

"Listening to movie ideas," I said, rubbing my palms against my face. On the backs of my eyelids I saw glistening spirals of starlight. "We're running a contest for new ideas. We selected applicants at random and then me and my fellow Under Assistant Promotion Men are flying out to listen to them."

"That should make for some great stories."

"I'll find out when I get there."

"No," she said. "All those people. You're going to have a great story."

I loved the way her eyes lit up when she smiled.

I left her in **Terminal C of Logan Airport**. The overhead fluorescents cast a cold light on our awkward good bye, my fever tying my tongue and preventing me from asking her to exchange phone numbers. We walked through the terminal, made a joke about our identical black roller bags and then I made my way to the taxi stand.

I berated myself with every step.

My cab driver introduced himself as **Jimmy James**. He had that strong Boston accent that might as well have been an Irishman's, but he spoke softly, never boisterous. I told him I was headed to the Radisson in Peabody.

"It's pronounced PEABODY, not Peabody!" he corrected me with no small amount of mirth.

"Sorry, *peabiddy*," I said.

"The first thing you have to learn in Boston is the pronunciation. Every place has its own language. Boston more than others." He pointed out the window. "What's that one?"

"Revere," I ventured.

"Ri-ve-ah," he corrected with a chuckle.

We rode in silence for a few miles and I rested my head against the window. It was a **quiet car**. I could feel each weathered crack in the roadway through my temple. It was a familiar, calming throbbing pain. I was thinking about Susanna. Beautiful Susanna the recipe writer.

"Meet anybody on the plane?" Jimmy's voice drifted back to me.

"Yes, actually. A woman. Susanna."

"That's nice," Jimmy said. His eyes smiled at mine in the mirror. "Will you see her again?"

I smiled back out of reflex. "Nah, probably not."

"That's too bad. Fate usually doesn't bring two strangers together more than once." He was looking at me again. His eyes were stern but weary. "We're small in this world Gareth. **I am invisible within the thought of the invisible one, although I am revealed in the immeasurable and the ineffable.**" He was quoting from something but I didn't recognize it. When did I tell him my name?

The cars we passed outside my window melted together into one long super stretch limo of many different colors and designs.

Jimmy James dropped me in front of the Peabody (Peebidy) Radisson (Radisson?) with my black rolling suitcase. Between my expense account and my fever-addled brain I tipped him generously. He winked, leaned in and told me, “**Curiosity killed the cat, but lil' generosity never hurt anyone.**”

Circular had set me up in a small conference room on the Mezzanine floor. It was a monotone carpeted affair, a temporary dividing wall the same hue and texture as the floor cutting the room off from a tarot card seminar next door. It was small for a conference room but felt a little big for just me, my wooden table with the starchy white tablecloth, and the two chairs that faced one another across it. There was **a single cheerio** on the table when I entered and I found myself envying that absent stranger his breakfast.

With a taste in my mouth like a cemetery for small mammals, I went rooting around in my suitcase for mouthwash. I didn't find any. Much to my surprise I found a lady's underwear and a stack of index cards with the names of dishes and restaurants. Had I grabbed Susanna's bag from the overhead bin? Crap. My frustration was replaced with a feathery soaring hope, however, as I began to look over her bag for a phone number. We'd exchanged numbers after all. Except that I couldn't find one. Anything. She'd call me. But did I put a phone number on my bag if I didn't check it? Shit. Was I just cursed with a physical reminder of this beautiful woman but no way to contact her?

I didn't have time to worry about this. I took a deep breath, arranged two legal pads and a pen on the table and poured myself a glass of water. I smoothed the tablecloth in front of me and called out to the door where I saw my first petitioner hovering.

His business card introduced him as **Camden Grange**, but he insisted I call him Cam. He was a middle-aged professor from Cambridge. He was a teacher and practitioner of the fine arts, he informed me while he adjusted the front button of his gray cable knit cardigan. Perhaps I had heard of his work in 'velocity art'? Either at the MOMA or strapped to the top of a TGV in France? I had not heard of it, unfortunately.

Cam put his hands out in front of him when he was ready to begin his pitch. They came up from his knees and his palms faced me, angled down about forty-five degrees. I realized this was the hand gesture people compelled to make when they pitched a movie concept. Camden was only the first of several to begin with it.

“It’s a film about our times. Student protests, clashes with authority. The energy of the Sixties, but in the present day.” His pale blue eyes were fierce with excitement. “It’s set in California, against the backdrop of the faculty and student demonstrations. The State, you see, is out of money. I’m sure you’ve read about this in the news.” I nodded. “Right. So it all takes place over one day in Sacramento at a march called **‘Educate the State’**. There’s a journalism student named Javier and a teacher named Stanley Gage who teaches performance art, and they’re going to change the tide of educational history.”

“But there’s a catch!” Cam was getting worked up, his voice growing slightly higher and his breaths coming shorter. “The **Zambesomima** in the ointment! Jin Woo, a **putative Chinese exchange student**, He’s Javier’s best friend and is learning journalism for the sake of his sponsors back at the Xinhua News Agency.” Cam leaned forward. “But Jin Yoo is a *spy!*”

“A spy?” I asked.

“Yes! A spy! But not for the People’s Republic of China, no!” His hand chopped through the air. “He is a spy for the Governor of California, Arnold Schwarzenegger!”

I wasn’t sure we could get Arnold to play himself, but I began to imagine the scenes playing out in my head. The student and teacher marching at the vanguard of maintenance workers, one with a bullhorn, probably Javier. By his side would be the traitorous Jin Woo, his cell phone surreptitiously open, relaying the planned departure from the established demonstration route. There would be a cordon of riot police waiting. It would stink of betrayal.

I wrote a few notes and thanked Cam for his time.

My next petitioner introduced himself only as **Ned**. He looked hastily washed and his clothes as if they hadn’t been washed in quite some time. “You got Indian blood?” he asked me with a cocked eyebrow.

“I don’t think so,” I said tentatively. My hair was blond; I didn’t think I looked particularly Native American.

“Don’t matter. Anyone can be an Indian in showbiz. **When he released Bitter Tears in '64, Johnny Cash said he had Cherokee blood in 'im and later folks said it weren't true but my Indian friend Wally – I think he's Nez Perce – is always tellin' me he's related to the Man in Black.** You born in an Indian state?”

“No I’m from California.”

He nodded sagely, scratching the side of his half-grown beard. "I was out in San Francisco for a time. Made my way any way I could. You could do that on the Haight in those days." For someone who seemed (and smelled) only a half a step from homelessness he had a surprising charisma. "It was just what I needed, San Francisco. I'd worked my way down the coast from Vancouver where I was boxing. Canadian Navy'll make a fighter out of anyone. And then I led a spiritual group in Oregon. Then Frisco. It was a nice break before I served time out in Colorado."

"What happened?"

He looked at me with offense painted across his face. I had not asked the right question. "Don't matter." His hands went up. He was ready to start pitching. "I got an idea for you, son."

"Let me tell you a little about myself," he began. He pulled out a small black notebook, opened to a dog-eared page and began to read. "**The anglerfish, a species found exclusively in the darkest and most isolated depths of the ocean, has a truly fascinating mating ritual: immediately upon locating a female of the species, the male anglerfish will latch onto the female, releasing a special enzyme that literally fuses the two together and causes the body of the male to atrophy, dissolving away organs, bones, and scales until such time as the male is nothing more than a pair of gonads mindlessly pumping sperm into the female's bloodstream; this, in a nutshell, is my relationship with my mother.**" He looked up. "That's more or less autobiographical, but it's where my character begins."

"It's a superhero in Rifle, Colorado. Nicest damned town in the world. Just the safest, most pleasant place to raise your children. And our hero is a teenager, a male gymnast who's been pushed into it by his single mother. All she ever wanted was to be an Olympic gymnast, but she lost her leg at 14."

"We're at the **Academy of Dance and Gymnastics in Rifle Colorado** and our hero puts on the wrong leotard. It's really the wrong leotard. Pink and polka dotted and emasculating. He vows it'll never happen again! From that point on he becomes **The Label Maker!**"

It was a stretch, but I could see the Label Maker at work. The lamp and cabinet and crime monitor of his secret lair marked with white paper labels and crisp black fonts. The first criminals he thwarted would be left bound in the open street, waiting for the police with CRIMINAL stuck to both of their foreheads.

Maybe The Label Maker was a woman, I thought. Maybe a brown haired woman with striking eyes, like Susanna. Maybe The Label Maker was walking through the green spaces above Boston's Big Dig and listening to her ipod. **Music had now become more important to her than ever before, they were the same songs but now they spoke to her in a different way or maybe she never really listened before; she would sit under the tree during her visit and hum the Jackson Browne song, now conscious of the words ... "I don't remember losing track of you / You were always dancing in and out of view / I must have thought you'd always be around / Always keeping things real by playing the clown / Now you're nowhere to be found"** The song by Coldplay on the radio while driving into work, **"One Moment More"** as she walked to her desk, **songs to pull her out of the darkness streamed through her earbuds and the morning wakeup call that would prepare her for a new day, the same as the last.**

I shook my head hard. I'd drifted away, away from the pitch and away from the Radisson. In front of me sat a new stranger with a look of concern on his face. "You okay?"

Worried my fever had compromised my sanity I mumbled, "Sure" instead of asking where Ned had gotten off to.

The pitches came faster and began to run together. **Somewhere in the middle of Oklahoma a bank heist was taking place with the world's largest collection of \$2 bills as the target. Outside stalked Navy SEALs,** but they were there to fight off the zombie infestation.

A **zookeeper** pitched me the story of a zookeeper who found a hedgehog with quills tipped in gold. "Imagine the **tumultuous** relationship: the impoverished public servant and the **erinaceous** mammal of **astronomical** value!"

At the same moment in time two scientist-adventurers would plan to spray paint **the Golden Gate Bridge** and **the ledge where the San Andreas Fault separated from California's continental shelf.** The text would read **Andrew vs. The Collective.** And in the depths, as the bronze-helmeted aquanaut taggers worked, a brown-haired mermaid swam past the fluttering water-resistant nylon. Sea spiders swam out from the crannies in the rock shelf. **As the cluster of violin spiders danced over every inch of her naked form the initial feeling of terror slowly turned into a calm and almost erotic sense of finality.**

My head snapped up. It had been laying on the rough cloth of the table. My skin was crawling with fever, as if the spiders of my visions had followed me onto land, back across the

country and into the Peabody Radisson. Across from me sat a young olive skinned man with dark black hair. He wore a plain white t-shirt and jeans. "Didn't want to wake you up," he said.

"How long was I out?"

"Just a few minutes since I came in." He stood and extended his hand across the room's single table. "I'm **Nicholas J. Pony.**"

"Gareth. Nice to meet you ... Mr. Pony."

He sat back down and grinned. I wiped my eyes and took a sip of water. I needed to get a hold of myself. He lifted his hands from his knees. "I got an idea."

"The main character is **Eli Jorgensen**. He designs the best roller coasters in the world. But here's the thing: He's a conjoined twin. His twin is dead. He died only a year after they were born, but Eli's mother has refused to let him get the twin removed. So he lives with this curse. His dead baby twin attached to his neck. He can't even ride his own rides, see? With this curse? He walks into the amusement park and people assume he's part of the freakshow!" He laughed with a boyish enthusiasm.

"Eli is played by Phillip Seymour Hoffman. His roommate, who is an assassin for the evil mogul who controls Funland International, is played by Samuel L. Jackson. He loves to drink beer. The day the mogul tells him to kill Eli Jorgenson, he tries to save his roommate's life by sending him on a beer run. He tells him, '**Ah ain't ax'in' ya bitch, I's tellin' ya... now get yo nappy ass outta bed and gets me some becksess!**' Classic Jackson. It'll be directed by Tarantino.

"But when he goes to buy beer, he gets picked up by the **Millennium Falcon!**"

I interrupted him. "From Star Wars?" I was sure I'd imagined that.

"Yeah, it's public domain by now I'm sure. And he's on there with all these time travelers, right? And it's **Abe Lincoln** and **Snoop Dogg** and HG Wells and **Emily Dickinson**, you know, to have a lady. She's played by Rachel Evan Wood. Hot but totally depressing. And they're being chased by Samuel L. Jackson. They're flying through this asteroid field and they're singing 'I'm leeeeeaving on a jet plane, don't know when I'll be back again.' You know, the John Denver version. "The onboard computer only accepts commands in rhyme, and so only Snoop and Emily Dickinson can drive it. There's be a great scene with them trying to change the computer code to kill a thruster engine. They'd have to rhyme **failing thruster with minus niner.**

Then they would descend into a mine shaft on an asteroid called **West Virginia** and Snoop would get out his pet **canary** ("Canizzle") to check for asteroid gas and the captain of the

ship, **James T. Kirk**, would fall into an Emily Dickinson-inspired depression. It would take **Matt Foley** the motivational speaker to bring him out of it. He would recite in a **Dr. Seuss pattern**:

“When you’re a man / Who lives in a van / Down by a river / Tears’ll give you shiver. /
You gotta come to terms / We’ve got lots to do / **I am in the grips of a brain worm ... / killer in Kathmandu!**”

Emily Dickinson would call out “Slant Rhyme!” in a voice that would ring clear as a bell. She looked less like Evan Rachel Wood and more like Susanna. She was in a Boston train station, underground on the asteroid. It had been a long night and she was alone and she was worried about miss her train. **It was five minutes to 1 AM and suddenly she noticed the heavier one of the two station attendants, the one who was carrying that big bunch of jangling keys, walking in her direction.**

I awoke with a start. Again. My forehead was damp with sweat, it seemed like my whole body was. Had my fever broken? The chair opposite me was empty. Nicholas J. Pony must have left. I mentally sent him my apologies.

Outside the door a face appeared. It was Jimmy James, my cabdriver.

He sat down across from me. “I didn’t want to tell you I’d be stopping by later.”

I smiled wanly, “It’s good to see you again.” I worked out my aching shoulders.

His hands raised up from his knees. “I’ve got a pitch for you.” He dropped them back down with a slight slap. “I read once in a book this theory that **when people have jet lag, it’s because their souls don’t travel as fast as their airplanes.** It’s sort of like the **Banach-Tarski paradox.** You take yourself apart like a three dimensional sphere and then you piece yourself back together in a different pattern. It still works, but it takes time. My story is about two people, like two spheres in space, intertwined. Two people who exchange their luggage inadvertently. Their human baggage is exchanged with it. As their lives extend out in time, their baggage, as it were, keeps their minds close. Their luggage brings them together.”

My phone rang. I made an apologetic face and answered it.

“Hey, Gareth? It’s Susanna.”

“My character’s names are Gareth and Susanna.”

“I think I have your bag.”

I asked Susanna to wait for a moment. “Jimmy,” I said. “I love this story. You’ve got a deal.”