

Andrew vs. The Collective #5: “Penultimate: The Devil and Michael Hastings”

By Andrew Fitzgerald and The Collective

It’s mid-afternoon and the sun is turning amber, but the devil is in a foul mood. He slaps the rental car door shut with a sound like a steel thunderclap and then stabs at the keychain remote with his thumb until the car’s alarm gives its two alarm beeps of protest. The devil surveys the suburban landscape of driveways and cars. He supposes that the people of this town like this springtime weather, but he despises it. The devil far prefers the wintertime.

The devil’s temperament is foul because it turns out if you want to get to **Eau Claire, Wisconsin**, you’ve got to fly into Minneapolis (which is in an entirely different state, the devil will have you know), rent a tiny compact car with exactly zero pick-up, and then drive for two accursed hours. No one hates to have his time wasted like the devil.

Inside, **Michael Hastings** has been watching the devil’s arrival. He’s not pleased to see the devil in a temper. When you want to ask the devil for a favor, you never want the devil to be **laconic**. Michael Hastings’ skin gives a shiver that he’s sure the devil, with his superhuman **perspicacity**, notices.

Hastings invites the devil in, offers him a seat and fetches him a glass of iced tea. The devil is in jeans and a t-shirt covered by a leather jacket. His hair is long and brown and extends from his head like an explosion. He’s thin and pale and sips his iced tea with a poorly-masked impatience.

“I assume you’re about to implore me to amend the terms of our deal,” the devil says. “You feel life ebbing from you. You know the twilight approaches. This is your penultimate natural year, and by the terms of our agreement, this is the year I take you.”

“I wanted to ask for just one more year.”

The devil rolls his eyes. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“It’s not so much to ask, is it?”

“You have your Fields Medal, don’t you? You had your **gravy train** thanks to me? Life ends, Hastings! Hell needs its mathematicians!” Their deal, struck twenty-five years ago when

Michael Hastings was a disgruntled and discontent doctoral candidate, said the devil would ensure Hastings' receipt of the prestigious Fields Medal for his paper: "**An approach to the study of the nonasymptotic distribution of prime numbers through abstract analytic number theory in multidimensional mathematics.**" The devil did his due and Hastings spent several years in a coveted post at Cal Tech. In return he'd promised his gifts to the legions of darkness. Who else would map the topology of hell and permutations of its punishments?

"I've fallen in love," Hastings says tentatively.

The devil laughs loud. It's coarse and angry.

"Her name is Hilda."

The devil sighs like a bored teenager. "I know, I know. **Hilda von Stricker**, your yarn-obsessed dominatrix and next-door neighbor. How many balls did she knit you inside of before you decided it was true love?" He checks his watch. "Fine. I'll tell you what. You're my second to last appointment today and I'm early for the next one. Keep me entertained for a little while."

"And you'll give me my last year?"

"Sure, fine, whatever." The devil puts his glass down on the coffeetable, ignoring the stack of coasters. "You get six chances. Six stories and then I'm off."

Hastings slips a coaster beneath the glass. "What do I have to do?"

"I just want to enjoy one story," the devil said.

Michael tries to think of his best story, best in that way that people have their stories that they tell at parties to fill the awkward silences. "I had this dog, right? When I lived in Pasadena. **He was a short fat dog, chubby chubb Mcchubberson.** That wasn't his name of course. His name was Laplace. But he died.

"And when he died the house felt lonely. I thought about getting another dog, but I wanted an animal that was going to live as long as me. So I got a parrot. Bought him from a former colleague. Fournier, the parrot that is, had learned pi. And he would stay up all night reciting it. And I would lay there, **sleep deprived**, as he would count off digit after digit." Michael raises his finger. The punchline is coming.

The devil cuts him off. "But the seventh digit was wrong. You've never been able to correct him."

Michael's finger is still in the air. "How did you know that?"

“I know all of your stories, Michael Hastings. Don’t think you can entertain the Fallen Prince with your pleas for polite party laughter.”

Michael Hastings puts his finger down and swallows hard. He thinks about Hilda, about the loving caresses of her knots of yarn as they constrict around him. This is going to be harder than he thought.

“I will tell you a secret then. I traveled once to India to find myself. Like people supposedly do. At the end of it I was in Goa, on the ocean. But I didn’t feel like I’d come anywhere nearer to finding myself. I’d wandered an entire subcontinent but I’d spent the entire trip inside **64 kilobytes of memory** of my Game Boy playing Tetris.

“I found myself in a **birthday party on the beach**. It was the birthday of a famous man named **Khagendra Thapa Magar**. Revelers laid across the straw mat floor surrounding a cake with a tiny man standing upon it. It was the likeness of Magar, a tiny man himself, famous for being the world’s smallest.

“There were a few Americans in the group including a young olive-skinned man there on a film shoot. He thought all the other Americans were hippies and kept saying to them, **‘Hey, get me in on some of that hugging action!’**

“Before we cut into the cake, every one of the man’s family had to give a short speech. I found myself envying these sentiments. Something touching, personal, or nice. I listened and I wanted a family at that moment.

“And then a young boy walked up. He spoke a clipped schoolboy’s English. His eyes were puffy from crying. He put his fists against his hips and said, ‘Uncle Khag, you promised chairs for every village. But in my village, we have no chairs. The people they say that you have spent your money on expensive clothing and rings. **I had no heroes, and then you let me down, and now I have negative heroes!**’ Then the boy began to cry.

The devil is looking at his watch. “And that’s when you realized you didn’t want a family. The expectation and responsibility was just too crippling for you. I’ve heard this all before like a tune out of **Stroh’s violin**. Give me something unique like, **‘And from that day on, they used chairs for money.’**”

“I will tell you a funny story then. A few years ago I attended a music festival in San Francisco. It was held on **Treasure Island**, the landfill island in the Bay between the city and Oakland.

“I know it, I’m building a casino out there.”

“This festival featured electronic music, something my students were quite fond of and always trying to impress upon me. I’d always found it to be **tragically hip**. They said I had too much **dord**.”

“Dord?”

“Density. It’s an old joke. My density was too great. Anyhow, I was standing in line for the Ferris Wheel. I’d waited for fifty minutes in a **boustophedon**-like line and was finally at the front. Just when they brought its rotation to a halt, a large African-American man pushed his way past me. He wore a thick gold chain around his neck and he demanded his own basket. My basket. He was a famous actor so the attendants were quick to agree. I offered to share with him but he told me his feet were far too pungent for that proximity. He said: “**I pity the fool who has to wash my feet. I got this real bad athlete's fungus that actually grows mushrooms on my toenails. If I don't do something fast it's gonna spread and eat up all the gold off my chains sucka!**”

“Unhappy, I demanded to speak with a manager. The burnouts working the line responded ‘**We are currently unavailable**’ as if they were some collective. But it was too much for the gold-chained man. He flew into a rage. He rushed the supports. “**TIMBER!**”, he yelled.” Hastings stops. That’s the end. He takes a sip of his water.

The devil nods his head. “You told a half-truth. You attended this festival, but Mr. T wasn’t there.” The devil yawns and looks over his shoulder at the darkening evening. His eyes follow a petite young mother as she crosses the sidewalk. “The ending sucked, Hastings. If you’re going to dedicate a story to name-dropping, at least make it compelling. Have Mr. T wrestle some bear and lose and he can say, “**Stupid bear**” or “I pity the bear.”

“Very well,” Michael Hastings said. “My next story takes place in Jordan, in a **qanat**, sheltered from the shifting sands outside. Inside squats a scientist. An evil scientist. He’s holding a device that could destroy the entire world. He is muttering to himself, “**Worked hard all my lifetime no help from my friends.**” His device will bombard the Earth with an electromagnetic

pulse that will destroy the **telomeres** at the end of every strand of DNA, causing them to unravel. The end of life itself.”

A car careens toward the entrance to the qanat. As it skids to a stop, large black forms pop out of the back. **Twelve obese ninjas were jammed into the car.** Their leader rushes toward the scientist and hurls a throwing star through his device. There is a thunderclap. The sky begins to darken. **The gathering storm looms ever closer and as he gazes up at the towers of midnight, he knows that from this moment on all he will be left with is a memory of light.** The second-in-command ninja runs to his side and yells, “What have we done.” But the lead ninja is confident. It was pre-destined. He whispers, “**All will be spared except Kathmandu.**”

The devil’s face is impassive. “Hastings,” he says, “that story barely made any sense. Are you wearing out? This is your second-to-last chance. Your penultimate story.”

Michael Hastings rubs his palms on his jeans and then raises them both like he’s about to pitch a movie. “Okay, a short one. **On Thanksgiving, Tiger Woods was driving his Escalade away from his house.** His wife was chasing him with a golf club.”

“I know this story, Hastings. I read Gawker.”

“Of course you do. Okay. So what was Tiger’s wife trying to do with his club?”

“I don’t know, the investigation was inconclusive.” The devil sits forward in his chair. “Surely *you* don’t know, Hastings? Was it murderous intent?” What *was* she doing?” The devil is a notorious gossip hound.

“Well,” Michael Hastings smiles coyly, “she was trying to hit his *balls!*”

The room is silent. From the garage Michael Hastings thinks he can hear another recitation of pi. The air conditioner kicks on in the back bedroom. Its low hum is ominous.

Suddenly the devil’s lip curls. He gives a brief, single chuckle. Then they come in a series, like bubbles erupting from his midsection. The devil kicks his feet up in the air, falling backwards into the armchair in full guffaw. When he recovers his breath he exclaims, “Hastings! That was a terrible joke! And it was hilarious!” Michael Hastings smiles. “Very well,” says the devil, righting himself in the seat. “One more year it is. But I still get one more story.”

“Of course you do. Don’t worry, this one’s going to be epic.”