“At the start of civilian space flight, not just billionaires, even millionaires could afford to count down and blast off. But how high? Fifty miles? Sixty-five?  Early on, some actor suggested the comparison to risque commercial air flights, and when that idea got trending no phrase sounded better than ‘Hundred Mile High Club.’ Since then, countless sweetly committed couples and red hot lovers have done the frisky float up that high, but that hardly makes any of them astronauts.” Johnny said all that with a straight face, like Jack Black in *School of Rock*, a nervous reaction to the dressing room filled with women.

“Uh…” said Ashley, the bass player with the pantsuit from the goodwill, just putting some kind of sound out there to keep Johnny from taking back the talking stick before she could think of something more to say. Nobody expected the speech about space travel. And, ironically, this protagonist’s story is about time travel. “Your dream,” she reminded him. “You got to finally play this house.”

“You just split an infinitive,” Johnny said impulsively, knowing that she could care less. “But you make a point.”

“What?”

“It *was* exciting playing here, thinking about Led Zeppelin’s drummer when they did their first American tour, laying down a beat on that same stage, looking up at the Spanish castle balconies. But, in all honesty, I never expected to play the Aragon Ballroom in a girl band.” Johnny reached down the neck of his blue dress, taking some tissues from his bra to wipe off his mascara. “I know Zappa’s group started out dressing like women, but…”

The lead singer clicked over in her tweed skirt, ruffled white blouse and black heels. She had big hair. All the girls in the band had big hair, a big hair professional dress look. Johnny expected her to put him in his place, give him back his Chicago smack, but instead she flourished an envelope between two fingers. “Thank you.” She arced it closer, and Johnny took it. “You did a great job filling in. Sorry this was a girl-band-athon, and you had to work in drag.” She nodded toward the door. “Now go find an empty dressing room because you can’t see us naked…” She fleetingly moved some fabric sideways. “…too much.”

“Oh! Thank you, April.” Johnny unfroze, tucking the pay down the front of his dress and hustling for the door. “Thank you, Alotta Virginia,” he said in answer to the whistles and cat-calls of the band. “You were rocking!”

“You were part of us, Johnny.”

“He’s a trip, isn’t he?”

“I’ll say. Not a word before the show or on stage. Professional, played well. Then he does a random monologue in the dressing room – like touretts or something.”

Johnny heard that, and he was okay with it. He closed the door behind himself and walked into the shadows, wiping off the makeup as he went. Originally laid out for a dance hall in the 1920’s, the dressing room hallway runs alongside the street level hallway that brings the audience in underneath the dance floor, the dance floor built on springs. Sitting in your dressing room, if you hear happy sounds through two lathe and plaster walls when the audience leaves, you know you put on a good show. But Johnny had drummed for the first warm up band of the night. Chica, the headliner, would not play for hours yet. Excepting the lady in the ticket booth and a few straggling late arrivals, the next hallway over was empty.

Few people know about the mysterious Lake Michigan triangle that compares phenomenologically with the Bermuda one, but Johnny had heard about the ships that disappeared into it and he knew all about the alleged tunnel connecting the Aragon Ballroom to the Green Mill, gangster Al Capone’s favorite watering hole, around the corner past Broadway. The tunnel was an old Chicago rumor. The other Chicago rumor about the Aragon, the murmurings about the dance floor springs causing time travelings, nobody ever let Johnny in on that one.

The next band, Prairie Princesses, started their opening number. Johnny did not think much about the picking, could not hear drumming, but the cymbals, even down here the cymbals had such a bright, colorful, standout sound, an amazing flurry of 64th notes. A roadie who looked like he came from the 1960’s told Johnny: “If the audience gets to boogieing hard enough to get the floor moving up there, you hear the springs flexing down here.” But rather than making a sound with each beat, Johnny heard the powerful hidden springs reverberating the tone of the cymbals, buzzing inside his head even.

Did those ladies slip something into his energy drink? Johnny felt dizzy. Putting a hand on the wall he kept walking down the hall, and the sensation intensified. The second door he came to had no light shining out from under it. Johnny opened it and raised a foot to step inside.

“Don’t come in here!” a woman said, *con acento*. “It’s dangerous.”

Too late. Before he could stop himself, Johnny stepped into the room and back in time. At the moment he thought he had a health crisis, perhaps a thing with his heart, maybe a thing that he ate, drank or inhaled. His legs turned into rubber and he flailed for something to hold onto. The dizziness passed.

“Let go of me! *Dios mio*.” The woman Johnny grabbed hold of pushed him back with two hands. “Now what have you done?” The accent made her words strike stronger.

She pushed Johnny hard, but he only moved back half a step. That voice, it sounded so tasty. Familiar, too. “Say, I know you,” he said. “You’re Chica.”

“That’s who I am.” In the shadows he could see her shake her head. “But you don’t know me.”

“Okay. Well, it’s an honor to meet you. I’m Johnny. Sorry.” He brushed his hands down her shoulders, as if to fix whatever damage he might have done. “I’ll find another dressing room.” He paused. “You know, at least a million Americans have no home. But maybe humans do best as nomads, always travelling, like Peace Pilgrim and Attila the Hun.”

“Chico Blanco! Do you notice how quiet it is upstairs?”

“Yeah.” He turned and looked down the hall. It was dark down there, now. “What happened?”

“We travelled through time.”

“Get out!”

“That’s what I’m telling you. We need to get out of here before the police catch us and arrest us for trespassing. I was famous there. They don’t know me here.” She produced an old-fashioned flashlight and went to the center of the room, bending over to roll a rug back with her free hand. “See that trap door?”

“I do.”

“That goes to a lounge over by the Uptown.”

“Really. The Green Mill?”

“Yes, really.” She rolled the flooring back into place. “But our best bet. Let’s peek out the back door and see if the coast is clear.”

“Who do you think we are, the Weathermen? Telling people which way the wind blows?”

“What?”

“We can never see the coast from here. Lake Michigan must be more than a mile away. Who knows if it’s clear?” He held a finger up, a thoughtful expression. “Illinois has only 63 miles of coast-line, but that qualifies me to join the Coast Guard, you know, if I want to because I live in a coastal state.”

“*Cabron, callate!* Shut your *boca, chico blanco*.”

“I know some Spanish,” he muttered, following her around to a side entrance. The alley looked empty when she cracked the door open. They stepped out and let it shut behind them. It was hot and sunny. The other side of the alley was the cement wall of the elevated, so bright to look at, Johnny blinked.

“You’re dressed like a woman!” Her eyes narrowed. “Say, you drummed for the first act.”

“Please don’t tell.” He took off his big hair wig and put it in his pack. “The drummer turned up sick at the last minute, and I was the best replacement they could find.” After he put on his pack, Johnny posed momentarily, as if to show off his outfit. “A conservative frock that sits well behind the best in drums – the early Karen Carpenter look. Why is it that saying the name of so many artists has an emotional kick?” He gestured off-ward. “Travis Scott. See what I mean?”

“Hey, you two,” yelled a man coming out the back door. “Wait right there!” Strange, Johnny knew he recognized the voice, from somewhere.

“Hurry, *Blancito*,” hissed Chica, taking off toward Lawrence Avenue. Her arms flew and her long ponytail bounced. Johnny got moving without much hesitation, but she was already at the end of the alley. She turned to run underneath the elevated bridge, heading west, west which is always away from the lake in Chicago, at least up here on the North side.

Johnny was running hard when he got to the sidewalk, trying to catch up with Chica! Seriously? *With Chica?* He had to resist looking sideways at all the vintage cars. No time for that. People standing in the shadows, if Johnny moved slower, for sure they would panhandle him, at best. Uptown long lost the luster of the cutting-edge entertainment district, drawing folks from all around town. Back in the day, it was the enchanted city.

The light was red as they neared Broadway Road. Chica slowed to time an opening through traffic, and Johnny began to catch up to her a little. Behind him, Johnny heard no footsteps. Cars were coming when Chica ran out into the crosswalk. Johnny followed right in after. That woman was the only person he knew who knew what was going on. He heard honking and screeching, but Johnny kept on running, even after he cleared the curb on the other side.

Up Broadway to his right he saw a line of people for the Uptown. All his life, Johnny had never seen the place open. They continued west along Lawrence toward the side access of that 4,351 seat movie theater. It looked like an alley, coming up on their right, and Chica ducked in there. As Johnny ran up to the gangway, he looked in to see her jumping high, grabbing the rope that hung off the fire escape, hanging on to it to bring down the counterbalanced bottom flight of steps. Her ponytail swung sideways, and now he noticed, she seemed to have dressed for the past, conservative yellow shift with stretch socks and penny loafers. He caught up, running up the stairway with her after she rested it on the ground.

At the first landing, Chica ducked into a brick doorway alcove, and Johnny hung back there with her, trying to breathe quietly, helping listen for footsteps, letting Chica peek out for both of them, not asking why. He took it on faith. Johnny grew up in Chicago. This was not the first time he ran, hid and waited. Finally, she seemed to relax, but instead of stepping out on the fire escape and coaxing it down, she continued upward. By the time they climbed the last staircase that ended with the last landing and the ladder to the roof (the theater has a five-story lobby) he felt winded again, hot and prickly from running in the heat.

Chica still had some gas in her tank. With only a low parapet wall between her and the cement far below, she jogged around the gently domed grey roof to the wrought iron sign scaffold and waited for him. They climbed up onto it and settled in with their legs hanging off toward the Aragon Ballroom and the southbound CTA train, its sides painted green halfway up, the top of the train painted white. Going south from there Broadway angled east. Following the compass south, the train angled across it. Behind them, beyond the roof, Johnny could see the large expanse of greensward going west, St. Boniface Cemetery.

For Chicago people, going atop a tall building is like climbing a hill or a mountain is for country people, a place to think things over. He had come up here with friends cutting classes when he went to Senn High School, sitting looking out, like sitting looking out across Lake Michigan. Chica was such a big star, even Johnny knew to give her some space. He took in a deep breath and let it out, joining her in meditation for a while. A breeze blew.

Blocking some of the Aragon view, a “B” train going north stopped at Lawrence. People got off, people got on, and from the scaffold they watched them. Checking out how the commuters dressed, Johnny considered what had happened at the Aragon. He admired the giant letters that spelled UPTOWN vertically down the face of the theater. Sometime before he could remember, the letters got taken down and warehoused for restoration. Finally, Johnny spoke up: “You went back in time on purpose, didn’t you?” He nodded earnestly. “I don’t know how you did it, but I understand why.”

“What do you mean?”

“Economy, politics, environment, the world was headed into some stressful times.” Johnny struggled for words. “I’m just saying, if we were all a lobster, and the water were that hot when we started out, humanity would have jumped out of the pot right then. What just happened, we got to jump out to a cooler time.” He looked at her and scratched his chin. “But you, you’re always at the top of the Spotify fifty, and your videos tell fun stories. I like the one where your house is on fire, and you’re all chill about it.” He got an excited look. “Wait. You should so, so, so do a video up here. Some young girl looking up, seeing you, she sees this sign but it says CHICA GO with just a little space. Go chica, go!” he sang, but different, not like the classic rhythm & blues song with his name, more mellow, more easy.

“If you stayed where you were, you might have made things better.” She looked at him, shaking her head. “But you think if our world gets too stressful, we should abandon it? Move to Mars or something? Go back in time?”

“No. The soil’s toxic on Mars. The whole planet.” He made a contrite hand movement. “I get your point. I think I made a difference for other people by keeping myself from going on a bummer about stuff. I got out and protested about some important issues, tried to keep my outlook positive.” He pondered that. Although Johnny tried to be good, he knew he had his moments when emotionally he took more than he gave.

“I do come from the past. I was standing in that same dressing room doorway where you fell on me, talking to a nationally televised big band leader, wanting an audition as a jazz singer. Jean Krupa was upstairs…”

“Jean Krupa? You heard him play drums?”

“Lots of times.” She nodded with an expression that acknowledged the man’s talent. “The Chicago Flash. He grew up on the west side. But this night, he played his cymbals fast instead of wailing on his tom toms the way he did in Benny Goodman’s orchestra. I felt dizzy, time travel dizzy, but I thought I was nervous dizzy, and that I had to speak up for myself. I said: ‘Give me a chance. Just listen to me sing.’”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing.” She shook her head, looking away south at the 2,500 seat Riviera movie theater. Over the years, the Uptown and the Riviera hosted rock shows, too. “To me, it looked like he disappeared. I went forward in time before I said the second part, ‘Just listen to me sing.’ And a man in a suit with an earring standing behind me said: ‘Okay. Let’s hear what you got.’ That day, he became my producer.”

“Just like that?”

“No. Not just like that. It took arranging and polishing every last little thing in my life. Curating my image. Look at me. I’m Millie Vanilli with a trained voice.” Chica sang the last sentence.

“Won’t your producer miss you?”

“Don’t you think my parents do? I came home to help with their restaurant. And you, you’re going back as soon as I can find the kind of cymbals it takes to send you there. Don’t you leave my sight.” It sounded like joking, but that look in her eye!

“Why?”

“Because I can’t trust you.” She shook her head emphatically. “I’m really worried.”

“Huh? You think I’ll tell people who you are?”

“No. You’re a musician. How long can you keep yourself from recording a good song that’s not written yet? Some things you change in the past, you’ll barely put a wrinkle in the time continuum. But steal somebody else’s hit single, I’d say that will rupture it for sure.”

“We certainly would not want that to happen.” Johnny looked thoughtful. “What year is this, anyway?”

“See what I mean!” She punched him in the shoulder. “You’re thinking about what song you can steal, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.” He sighed, rubbing his shoulder. “You’re right. I thought about…”

“Stairway to Heaven!”

“Nailed it.” He looked downward at the ticket line. “Hm. Maybe you’re right.”

“I am right!” For the first time she smiled at him. “As you get to know me, you’ll learn that I am always right.”

“Okay then.” He shook his head at her comment. “What do we do now? And can we go someplace where you can turn your back, so I can change into something a little less comfortable?”

It’s always scarier coming down a fire escape than going up it, seeing through it all the way down. He stashed the dress. The jeans, white T-shirt and all stars that Johnny had in his pack, Chica said he would fit in fine. The pack, the amount of wear and its initial low quality, it would go unnoticed. Johnny ran out then came back on the swinging bottom flight of stairs, got it to touch down on cement quietly. As they stepped back out to the sidewalk and the sunlight, Johnny wiped the sweat from his brow. “I don’t know what year it is, but it’s gotta be summer.”

“Yes. But we do need to get the year straight.”

Johnny walked across the sidewalk, pointing to a shop on the other side of Lawrence. Some pigeons flew off. “You want to know the year?”

“Well, yeah. I just said I do.”

“Then come with me.” Beckoning with a finger, he walked into the street. Chica looked both ways and followed him across the street to the south sidewalk. Johnny turned and walked down a few stairs, pushing open the door to a small grocery store. A bell tinkled. Inside, only open windows and fans kept it cool. Johnny scanned the painted plywood and two by four shelves of food before he walked back to the glass doors of a beverage cooler. “Where’s all the energy drinks?”

“Are you serious?”

“What? Oh. Don’t make ’em yet?”

“Right.”

“Okay then.” He picked up a bottle of coke and a bottle of pepsi, taking them to the man standing behind the ornate chromed cash register.

“That comes to sixty-three cents,” he said without touching a key.

Johnny put a hand to his chest. “Oh no! My pay envelope.”

“Really?” Chica sounded annoyed. “You lost your money?”

“No matter.” He took out his wallet. “I’ve got enough room on my plastic for this.” Johnny produced a bank-card.

Chica hauled her purse off her shoulder with a sigh. “I’ll get it.”  She took out a dollar and handed it over.

The cashier pushed the big button on his register, the drawer opened, and he made change. “Thank you.”

“Wait!” Johnny rubbed his thumb aross his fingertips, looking at the register. “Where’s my receipt?”

The man rolled his eyes, but he pushed a few buttons on the register and tore one off for him.

Chica followed Johnny out to the sidewalk and the shade of a passing cloud. He was studying his receipt.

“What was that all about?” she asked.

“Nothing. I guess.” He crumpled the piece of register tape. “I thought it would have the date.”

“Hm. That would work where your from, wouldn’t it?” She started walking back toward Broadway. “C’mon. I’ll show you how to save money on transportation.”

“All right. But if it’s hitchhiking, I’ve done that. I hitchhiked going downstate.”

“It’s not hitchhiking.”

“Wait!” Johnny stopped and walked around a small red car parked at the curb. “We’re in luck. This car must be new. It still has the window sticker on it.” He leaned over to look more closely at the weathered piece of paper on the back window. “The part with the date is gone.” He put a hand on top of his head, thinking. “I know.” He held a finger up, walking around to the back of the car, peering at one of the taillights. “1970!” He put a finger to his chin. “1970, let’s see. No more sixties. Beatles broke up. Simon and Garfunkel broke up. Janis Joplin died. Jimi Hendrix died.” Johnny thought about those people, still alive somewhere. He never thought about meeting Jimi Hendrix or the founding members of Chicago with their wives and girlfriends. “Good things happened, too,” he added. “1970.”

“1970?” Chica cursed softly. “I come from 1966.”

Johnny slapped the top of his head, gone from proud he solved a problem to sorry he bore bad news. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m reading it wrong.”

“No. I am sure you are reading it right. I would remember a car like this.” She made a face. “Such a strange looking car. What do you call it?”

“The AMC Gremlin. Some people think they look cool.”

“Not cool people, I’ll tell you that.” Chica pointed down to the corner. “I thought maybe we could get the date from one of those boxes up there.”

“Oh yeah. Those have newspapers in them, right? Do you want pepsi or coke?”

“Oh…”

“They’re nice and cold.” He held the dripping bottles closer.

“I’m not...”

“1970. Real sugar.”

“Okay. I’ll take this one.”

“Good choice.” Johnny pried the bottle cap off with a lighter using his thumb as a fulcrum. “No twist top yet in 1970,” he said, handing it to her. He opened his and took a drink.

“Could I see your lighter, Johnny? Mr. 1970.”

“Sure.” He chuckled. “Here you go.”

“Until today, nobody has ever opened a bottle with one of these.” She tossed the lighter under the wheel of a passing truck. “And throw-away lighters don’t even exist yet.” When the traffic slowed, she stepped into the street to kick the pieces into the storm sewer. Then Chica stepped back onto the sidewalk and continued toward the street corner, arching her back to take a drink. Hanging out with her was like watching a video.

“We could have reverse engineered that lighter and made it in America. Made a fortune.”

“That would be like stealing a hit single.”

“Not to me.”

“I know what you mean.” Chica gave Johnny a solemn look. “A hit single is a magical thing.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

“It is. When you record one, you can feel it.”

“Yeah. Well, I’ll bet a few times people got done recording, and they knew what they had, but it never got it to somebody who could do something about it.” Meandering north, Broadway had made a five pointer at this crossing. They crossed Racine and tuned right, walking toward the north point of a triangle shaped, flatiron building of a department store.

“My first forty-five.” She pointed ahead. “I bought it there. Let’s go visit some memories and air conditioning.”

“Oh my gosh! Goldblatt’s. My parents told me about this. I mean, I’ve been here as a bookstore.”

“You’re going to love it.” She pushed the door open to a blast of cool air. “Everybody does.”

“Oh yes!” Johnny stepped into the big room. “It’s funky, but it’s fine.” He stopped to look at the price tag on a chrome, vinyl and formica kitchen table set. “Like new with second-hand prices.” Johnny looked at the store as much as the merchandise. “Check it out. The same metal shelving they use in the big box stores, so many years from now.”

“Act like you’ve been here before!” she hissed. “Hey, they have samples.” She took Johnny’s hand and led him over to try a cheesy meat snack cooked in a teflon coated, autumn gold, electric frying pan. “Can I have seconds?” she asked sweetly.

“Of course you can,” said the man demonstrating the small appliance. At the same time, he gave Johnny a look that said “No.” He made a subtle hand gesture to go along with it.

“Sexist in the seventies,” Johnny muttered, tossing his tooth pick into the bag on the counter. “Sir, Chicago is a melting pot. You learned that in grade school. You did a mural of different ethnic people. Remember?”

“How’d you know that?”

“It’s a Chicago thing. I know. Southern blacks came to work good industrial jobs here and to get treated with respect. Same with the Irish, Italians and Polish. Chicago is all about equality!”

“Yes it is.” Involuntarily, the clerk slapped the counter.

“So I know that you want us to get equal amounts of samples!”

“Here.” The man handed Johnny a sizzling sample, a tear in his eye. As an afterthought he handed Johnny another.

“Thank you, brother.” Johnny stepped away, catching up with Chica: “Let’s go in there?”

“An electronics department. This will be interesting.” Chica lowered her voice, entering the partitioned department. “Stereophonic was so expensive when I left, and nobody thinks twice about having it in your time.”

“The first Beatles albums had glitchy stereo,” said Johnny, looking around and noticing how many sound systems had a lone speaker in the middle. “Some of these monos look nice. I suppose I could learn to be a one speaker man. Maybe dividing our music right and left divides our minds. I’m ambidextrous. That’s a capricious right left divide down the middle of my body. Sorry, it’s like I can never say just one sentence about anything.”

“It’s okay. You say crazy stuff, but you say smart stuff, too.” She scanned the stereos on display. “My lord! Double stereo.” Chica looked at the information card in front of the home sound system. “Quadraphonic!” A clerk came over, wearing a white shirt with a grey dickey. “Can we hear this?” she asked. “Oh please, please.”

“Absolutely!” He got right on it, laughing at every word Chica said, hurrying off to hunt down a four-channel recording of the Young Rascals song she requested.

“They are my old favorite group, the Rascals. I listened to them back when they came out, and I listened to them in the future, too. Because of them, singing rock and roll instead of jazz sounded fun.”

“They were influenced by Wilson Pickett and Willie Davis. In turn the Young Rascals had a musical influence that manifested in a big future star.” He pointed dramatically, really channeling that Jack Black thing he had going. “That would be you. That would be pretty cool.”

“You do make that sound pretty cool.” She scratched her head. “Pretty spun, too.”

“An urban music legend says that when Eric Clapton met Jimi Hendrix, he got sick. Decades later when Eddy Van Halen met Eric Clapton, he lost his lunch, too. That’s an urban music legend.”

“I see.”

“It’s another chain of influence in rock and roll history.”

Chica shook her head smiling. “Johnnie, you…”

The clerk returned holding an LP. “I had to look through our stockroom,” he said excitedly. “But I found one!” He was so happy to have good news for Chica. He slid the shiny black disc out of the cartooned cover. Johnny wondered, did she get better treatment for being a star. No. Nobody knows about that back here. Dressed modestly, hair done simply, it was likely the zeitgeist thinking the words more than Johnny, but he thought she must be getting the foxey lady privilege, not even trying.

“A Beautiful Morning” started with the tinkling of chimes traveling from corner to corner, circling the showroom. The salesman had it cranked for Chica. The bongos, the bass and the harmonized vocals came up.

Chica put a finger to the corner of her mouth, stepping back, looking around the room at the upward pointing speakers. “Remarkable,” she said.

“Yes.” Johnny nodded. “Remarkable.”

“Thank you,” she said to the clerk, her voice making a little song all its own. She turned to Johnny. “Shall we?”

“I think we shall.” Johnny bent down to pat one of the speakers as they left the department. “Thank you.” (Don’t say dude! Don’t say dude!) “Boss.”

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Chica pushed a door open, stepping outside, crossing the sidewalk and stepping into Broadway. Such a big star, but still a city girl. “Those speakers sucked,” she said.

“Sure did. My laptop has higher fidelity than those speakers…” They stopped at the middle of the street waiting for a car to go by. Above them up ahead, the elevated crossed over. “But quadrophonenia… er… quadraphonic was a remarkable effect.”

“Sure. Remarkable.” They angled across, walking under the girders and rails.

“The Rascals so had it going on,” Johnny spoke with a respectful tone. “Such harmonies. They still sound good so, so, so many years later.”

“You so, so, so cannot tell them that.” Chica stopped, her back to the door of a chicken place in the shadows of the L. “If you should happen to meet that rock and roll band during this visit.”

“Time continuum, right?”

“Right.” She pushed the door open and, instead of cold air, they got a blast of good smells. The restaurant had a long counter, some booths against the other wall. “Johnny, you’re the only white boy in here,” she told him, finishing the drink that they let her bring inside with her.

“I know. These folks are nice.”

“I missed this place. It’s been four years. I’m so glad to find them still here. They *are* nice.”

“Not mean like you.”

“What?”

“Kicking me back to the future, like a bad penny.”

Chica looked at him for a moment before she spoke. “You *are* a bad penny.” She poked his chest. “Somebody should melt you down. Mean to you! Really?” Chica made a big point about paying for the meal. Johnny did not intend to insult Chica, just doing the Chicago thing, and he hoped she was playing with him when she got all the laughs out of the cook and his wife, making him look cheap.

Then they sneaked on the L. After dinner they walked up the alley along the tracks back toward Lawrence, stepping through a gap in a fence, climbing a steep bank and crouching out from under the train platform at the end. Evening rush, but nobody said anything.

“I think we gave him the slip,” Johnny said while they strolled down the platform to where the train would stop. “But who was that man calling to us at the Aragon?”

“There are musicians who think they have to protect rock and roll history. They will even sit in on a recording session to keep an important band going. And they will not hesitate if they see us as a threat.” She looked up the tracks. Johnny could hear a train coming. “Watch for violin cases. They can take you out without even opening them.”

“Okay. Good heads up. That’s why you sneaked on?”

She nodded. “It kept us on the other side of Lawrence from the Aragon, and…” She looked down. “Sneaking on’s an old habit. I hardly made a penny doing my jazz singing, not much more working for my parents. I had a cheap boyfriend. He showed me the way how at a lot of stations, the ones that had a way to sneak on. Now he’s a big star, if he’s still alive, but he was hand to mouth when I knew him. He played guitar on something like the Motown circuit, and I’d see him when he came to town. I was the barmaid girlfriend, such a good wife she would make for the sailor in the old song.” Chica put a hand to her forehead. “Now I’m sounding like you. Besides, he went out on me with my sister.”

The train came. Rotating a quarter turn, the doors opened in. Johnny saw a few empty seats, none together. Up and down the car, passengers stood, holding bars and reading. No phones. That looked strange. No phones! Johnny was going to say something about it to Chica, and then he realized she had gone to the back corner of the car. She was peeking into the conductor’s booth, and he wondered why. No doubt, as a star in the future, she had not taken the L for some time.

While Johnny worked his way over to her, she took a long key from her purse, put it in the lock and opened the door, holding it open for him to go in. “My sister, Edna, worked at the factory that made these cars. In Missouri.” Chica held the brass key up for Johnny to see it better. “There’s a booth in every car but only one conductor on the train.” Chica closed the door behind them, locking them into their own private space, their own unoccupied seats together. “We’re just going to Fullerton, so don’t fall asleep.” She put the key away and tidied inside her purse. “Seriously. *Quidado!* When it catches up to you, time travel knocks you out.”

Johnny slid the window open. “How many years until they put the air conditioning in these things?” he asked, wiping his hair back as he sat down.

“Try not to say anything weird with my parents.” She made a waving gesture showing her palm. “You want them to let you use the shower. Trust me on this one, Blanco.”

“Why don’t you just call me Chico?” said Johnny, surprised with himself for flirting out of his league like that. “You know, Chico and Chica. Easy to remember.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” She pushed him. “Move over.” She pushed him again. This time she left her hand on his shoulder. “Weird, isn’t it. I had everything in the future, but the thing I missed, I missed sneaking on the L and having my own personal room for the ride.” She let out a big breath, relaxing into the seat. “I missed hanging out with regular people.”

CTA trains give you the best tour of Shy-town. Some of the ride, you look out across rooftops dotted with old water tanks. In places, tall buildings on both sides give the feel of a canyon. Apartment windows directly face the train, and you wonder about the deep discount or the lack of self-esteem that got somebody to move into that noisy home, a home without any privacy when switching has the trains creeping along.

But if you are a struggling musician, you ask yourself: “What would I do if I had a guaranteed audience every five minutes during rush hour?” Nobody has confirmed the rumor that Styx started out playing slow trains, but they did play the Senn High School auditorium one Friday night. So, clearly, they had lean times.

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They walked east on Fullerton to an apartment building faced with Milwaukee white brick, the usual Indiana limestone accents. Johnny followed Chica down the gangway and up the three floors of stairs around back, arriving in front of the west back door up there. She kissed two fingers and touched them to the tube on the door-jam before knocking, waiting a while and knocking again. A light went on in the transom window above the next door, and they heard floorboards creaking over there. Chica put a silencing finger to her lips and headed back down the stairs.

“They still live there,” she exclaimed when they got back out to the street. “So does the nosy lady next door,” she added with the same happy tone color.

“That’s good news.” Johnny pointed at an Old Style sign down at the corner. “Maybe we should go in there and kill some time.”

“With what money, Chico?”

He held his hands up. “Could you spot us a few *cervesitas*?”

“You don’t understand.” She patted her purse. “I have it, but it took me so much time, sorting through money looking for old bills. I paid extra to collectors for some of what I brought.”

“This has been quite the day.” He sighed. “I thought it might be nice.”

“You know what would be nice, for us to get into some clean water.” Once again, Chica started down the sidewalk. “C’mon. I know a way.”

“Wait a minute.” He followed her reluctantly. “I like swimming in the lake, as long as I don’t get a sea lamprey stuck to me. But then I’ll just smell like the lake instead of like me.”

“Did you ever get a sea lamprey stuck to you?” She shivered.

“No. Never even seen one. But one time a land lamprey…”

She pushed his shoulder, pushed him toward the curb. In Chicago, the man always walks on the street side, to block carriage splashes and the like. “We are walking toward the lake, but we will swim somewhere else.” She held her arms out at her sides like doing a Hawaiian dance. “This would be a nice night to go skinny dipping in Lake Michigan, wouldn’t it?”

“Uh.” Johnny tried to play it cool. “Perfect for it!”

Chica laughed. “But we’re not going in Lake Michigan, remember?”

They crossed into Lincoln Park, the park that insulates much of Lake Michigan from the reality of Chicago, miles of grass and trees, a mid-western squirrel sanctuary. Feeling the heat of the summer night, they came around to the east entrance of Lincoln Park Zoo, one of only a few free admission zoos in the country. Johnny reminded Chica of that distinction when she walked to the side of the turn-styles, grabbed the bar at the top of the fencing and climbed up and over.

“I know it’s free, but they’re closed. It’s dark out now.”

Johnny looked over his shoulders both ways. Then he stepped up and grabbed the top bar. “So, sneaking on the train wasn’t the only thing that you missed doing.”

“C’mon. No cameras. No internet. Good clean fun.”

He climbed over, and it seemed like she might have it right. Not a soul in sight. And it was easy getting over the fencing around the penguin/seal habitat. Johnny started to take off his pants, but Chica said they should leave their clothes on, rinse the funk out of them in the water. “I got you all excited about skinny dipping, didn’t I?” she giggled, tucking her purse and shoes into a corner.

“Nah.” Johnny felt his face getting warm, and he knew what that meant. He always dreaded that happening, getting up on stage. Audiences laugh when you get red in the face, but playing drums kept him safely in the background. He turned his head away and tucked the things from his pockets into his shoes, put them with his pack behind a rock. Johnny looked at the penguins standing across the pond. They watched, but they did not seem to mind the company. The penguins still in the water climbed out when Chica dove in, and so did the seals. Johnny dove in after her, coming to tread water next to her. “This is a big pool. Very nice. Did your boyfriend think this up, too?”

“No. This is the first time I’ve done this with someone else.”

*“En serio?”*

*“En serio.”*

“You know, in your videos you always seem edgy, but the people who watch them…”

“Yeah?”

“They have no idea.”

“Don’t tell on me.” Chica slipped under water, then she came up. “Let’s just stay in here and soak a while, keep it quiet.”

“Okay.”

“Last time I was here, the cheetahs were fighting. I sat on the rock ledge up above the back of the exhibit.”

“You weren’t scared?”

“Not much. It’s a deep ledge, nice and warm from all the sun light that hits it during the day. Let’s check it out before we go, dry off for a while? The total zoo experience, swimming with the seals followed by hanging out with the cheetahs.”

They climbed up from behind, so they never saw the big cats until they were up above them. Chica peeked down over, and then she slid back on the stone ledge. “Awkward!” she said, looking away from Johnny, shaking her head.

Johnny looked over. “Oops! They aren’t fighting now, are they?”

“I’d say not.”

“Maybe after all the years since you came here last…” Johnny speculated. “This is them finally making up?” Johnny slid back, sitting next to Chica, leaning against a low rock wall.

“Sh!” She put some fingers over his mouth. “Don’t spoil it.”

“Right,” he whispered. Below them, the cats made frightening amorous sounds. “Don’t want to rupture their love continuum.”

“No, you don’t,” she whispered back, leaning over so he could hear. “It is so, so, so special.”

“Yeah. For the zoo, too.”

“That’s what I meant.” She stayed close, relaxed and easy beside him. He knew that was her *puertorriquena* nature, it did not mean a thing, but it was nice. Johnny felt comfortably drowsy, but he had something he ought to say. “Chica. I’m so sorry. I messed up your plans. You had it all worked out, and I totally complicated everything.”

“Well.” She patted his knee. “I should apologize. This is a head-trip. You must have people you’d miss if you couldn’t get back.”

“Yeah. Guess so. My old man can be a jerk, but my parents they are really all right. You’d like my sister.”

“I’ll bet I would.” She stroked his hand. “You are real Chicago people to do all the stuff we’ve done today.” She turned her head to look him in the eye. “Cubs or Sox?”

“Cubbies. I went to school a few blocks from Wrigley Field.”

“John V. LeMoyne?”

“Yeah.” He raised his eyebrows. “You know about LeMoyne?”

“I went there, too. You could see the bleachers from the west classrooms upstairs once you made it to eighth grade, hear the organ.”

“Right. I am a Chicago boy. Seniority always counts here. But you know what?”

“What?”

“I never heard anything about the Aragon Ballroom transporting people to another time.”

“You hang around with some of the dinosaur rockers, bands that have been at it for a long time. Word is out about springs made from the metal they use in high-end cymbals and time travel. The Palladium in Hollywood has a different style of spring. That one has taken people from right off the stage. They tore down the Spanish Castle outside of Seattle. It had springs. Other big cities had a time venue, and people have even gone from one to the other. When the moon waxes you spring back, waning you travel forward.” She pointed up at the egg-shaped moon. “Let’s hope that’s waning.”

“Out of all the kinds of sci-fi stories, time travel ones have the most unscientific, fantasy scenarios.” Johnny made a dismissive gesture, pushing the stupidity away. “But come to think of it, time travel is so, so, so obviously happening. Take Tom Petty for example. He must have time traveled. He got to hanging out with nothing but guys older than him.”

“Sure.” Chica smiled mischievously. “And Cher, hanging out with young guys.” She shrugged. “Singing about Mother Nature, musicians get zapped by Father Time.”

“Nicely said. I think that’s a song.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Sure it is, once you embellish it. See, your songs do the relationship thing. And they do it great. But what you just said, that was the stuff to make the epic thing!” Johnny put a hand over his mouth, realizing how loud his enthusiasm had his voice. Then he sang, soft and clear, stretching out his arm: “Good turns, dun dun, come by Father Time’s hands. If you…”

“Dun dun, tend Mother Nature’s lands,” Chica countered. “Bon, bon, bon!”

“They will. They *wi-il!*”

The subdued cat growls from down below stopped. The Cheetahs were listening. Such an undeniably catchy sound. The ultimate musician moment – hearing your new song like a lit-up listener would. They sang it all the way through again a few times. If it were a new single in Chica’s youth, Johnny knew she would have set the tone arm back to restart. He knew it because he would have scrolled back and tolerated another commercial to hear it again. “That’s our chorus,” he said. “We just need to write the storytelling stanzas.”

“Look at you, now.” Chica gave her head a little shake, blowing it off. “You think we wrote a song.”

“Don’t jinx it with your woofin’ cookies!” He put a finger to his temple. “I’m new to time travel, but I do believe we won’t rupture anything with this one.”

“Still be easy pickings if we did want to steal it.” Chica played an imaginary guitar. “Get it. Easy pickings and I’m picking a guitar.” She twisted sideways, holding her air-guitar more where he could see it. “It’s always a guitar when I play an imaginary instrument. And we are imagining.”

“Thing is, time puts a signature on songs.” Johnny scratched his head. “Are we writers of the future or was that song a blast from the past?”

“You need to *calmate* down.” She waved a finger at him. “Now it sounds like you’ve got us recording a song.”

“Fine. Record it without me. I don’t care. But seriously, when? Now or then? It seems like, I mean you were there for some of it, it seems like sixties songs had a positive message or an idea to teach – maybe pointed out a social injustice. Things you said today, I can tell that you made a point of listening to the music from the years you missed. Did you notice how songs got cynical after the sixties, somebody did somebody wrong songs and other songs about something wrong.”

“You’re talking about how the nineteen-seventies had ditties about cocaine and shooting sheriffs.”

“Right.” Johnny nodded. “You see what I mean. And now…” He grimaced. “…in the future, we got hit songs that say crude and crazy things.” He raised his eyebrows. “A lot of *your* songs are inspiring. I think your happy nature comes through.”

“Happy nature? You said I’m a mean woman, Johnny.” Then she frowned. “You’ve got me wondering about the songs my boyfriend recorded in the sixties.”

“Were they inspiring?” Johnny stretched out on the warm stone, putting his hands behind his head.

“A few of his songs inspired people to experience altered states,” Chica told Johnny as he drifted into a half-asleep alpha state, contemplating an altered state from within an altered state. “In the nineteen-sixties,” Chica told him. “There were two new kinds of heroes, those who could play guitar well and those that handled hallucinogens well. An accident forced him to become outstanding with a guitar and, when he sang about the fluke experience, people took it to mean he tripped so heavy it was amazing he ever got back.”

“Oh,” said Johnny, more like a yawn. Suddenly he felt so tired, searching for something to say. “We traveled back so many years, and this city feels just as massive, so many miles of rails, sewer and sidewalk. In 1900, sixty-seven years after founding, Chicago was the second American city by population.” Johnny had a pleasant voice. Loud cat purring from below accompanied his words.

“Johnny. Are you falling asleep? You can’t sleep here.”

“Did Chicago exploit the west?” Johnny asked socratically. “No! The north-woods lumber that shipped down Lake Michigan to the second city, it rolled out on rails to make towns out there. Chicago’s markets gave the ranchers and farmers of the frontier a better living, living better with goods from Sears. Historians say that the men who made money in the California gold rush sold shovels. I’m guessing those shovels came from Chicago.”

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First light barely glittered across the lake when Johnny woke. Chica called it: “Time travel knocks you out.” It looked like she gave up on him and left. Off across the zoo he heard a cage door slam. A steel bucket met cement, and the handle slapped its side. With a squeak, a hose came on. Johnny slipped out through the exit styles and made his way down a park walkway before anybody noticed him. It was a cool morning, still quiet.

From this far south, Johnny thought he could walk inbound to the Art Institute in half an hour, see what the park looks like there without *The Bean*, without the park for that matter. Johnny knew that, as with the Prudential building north of it, a tower could have arisen above the tracks where the city built Millennium Park. Years went to quibbling over the air-rights and how to hide twenty-four and a half acres of railroad infrastructure. Johnny thought it would be fun to check that unsightliness out before it got covered, a bit of time-travel sightseeing. But, no. Johnny knew the responsible thing, get breakfast near the zoo and keep an eye out for Chica.

When he counted his pocket change with the change he found in his pack, most of it commemorated states or otherwise had blatantly futuristic features. Johnny searched every pocket and corner of his pack for the Aragon pay envelop, and he found a pair of sticks. Not the carbon fiber set he used at the show, he found his old hickory sticks, good ones for time continuum-safe drum busking. Now, to find a few five-gallon buckets.

Birds had started their warm up chirps when Johnny came around to Stockton Drive and a loading dock for the zoo. Searching galvanized trash containers, he found a selection of cans, some as big as the plastic ones he originally sought. Johnny cleaned them at a fountain and arranged his drum kit on a picnic table as it got light. Before long, Johnny had what he considered a tastefully subdued, primal percussion presence with a backbeat.

Standing to play, foot up on the seat, he worked that sound for all it was worth and put some pep into it. Stepping to his beat, people barely broke their rhythm, veering close to the table, dropping coins and keeping on. By the time he saw the sun peeking over the trees, Johnny had busked up enough change for breakfast. He counted it into his pocket, turning his thoughts from how to eat to what, leaning toward a coffee, a bagel and a Vienna Red Hot.

Johnny liked to think scientifically. He had read enough science fiction that he found it easy to extrapolate that the fields and forces of our neighboring planets, their comings and goings might affect our interactional climate. Given that, it made sense that esoteric scholars could study the changes and define the nature of our months and years accordingly. As Johnny would have expected, the year of the golden dog felt good. It seemed he had access to greater creativity.

Or had Johnny never encountered air with minimal telecommunication signals rifling through it? Something felt different. If Chica ditched him, Johnny thought he could find happiness here. A sad thought, but maybe she figured out that he could be smooth with the continuum. *Tiempo suave.* That whole stolen hit single rupturing the time continuum thing, Johnny just knew there could be an exception, a lesser hit by a prolific band that a deserving time-traveler might borrow before the band got around to writing it.

The man who stopped had a distinctive look, but Johnny grew up in a melting pot. He paid little attention to the way another man dressed, not race nor creed, unless he saw a fresh joke in it. This man looked cool. He reminded Johnny of the roadie he talked to at the Aragon, another flamboyantly dressed man, scarf for a headband. What was up with that expression? He laid a guitar shaped case across the other end of the table, angled to where the neck pointed at Johnny. “What’s the…”

His first words of the day, Johnny interrupted to say something he had meant to tell Chica before he fell asleep: “At first St. Louis barged wheat down the Mississippi through New Orleans in the farmers’ bags. Then Chicago boldly comingled the inbound liquid gold, turned it into a graded commodity bought and sold without ever leaving the grain elevators. That was grindable wheat, not the sticky grain they cut with steel in Minneapolis, blowing the bran and germ off, leaving nothing but empty white flower for Americans to eat.”

“Speaking of white flour, what’s the difference between a pizza and a drummer?”

“That’s an old joke.” Johnny stopped playing, just held his sticks. “A pizza can feed a family of four.” He got defensive. “I play guitar too but, right now, I’m having trouble feeding myself.”

“What makes you think that joke’s old?” He had a knowing look. “Did you hear it in the future?” He spoke friendly enough, but it felt like a scolding. “Look at your equipment.” The tall thin man pointed at Johnny’s found-art drum set. “Groundbreaking instrumentation.” He spoke with a supposedly reverent tone. “1970 has never seen anything like it.”

Johnny looked around, looked over both shoulders. “I went through time by accident. I’m going back as soon as I can.” He held his hands up. “I heard about you. That’s a weapon, isn’t it?” Johnny looked at the large caliber hole in the end of the case, pointed directly at him. He felt a jolt of adrenalin.

The man acted so casual, leaning over to look at the machine head end of the case, brushing a thoughtful finger across his thin mustache. “That hole in the case.”

“Yes?”

“It’s just a hole.” He smiled. “All I’m packin’ is a guitar.”

“Yes. Of course.” Johnny tried to play it cool. “I was kidding about time travel.”

“You can call me JJ, and I know about time travel.” He gave Johnny a firm handshake, something Chicago people value. “Let’s take a walk.”

“Well.” Johnny considered his drum set.

“C’mon.” He pointed offward with a jerk of his head. “We’ve got places to go, people to see and things to do.” He smiled. “Or should I say ‘Places to see, things to go and people to do?’”

Johnny pulled his pack on and followed JJ into a standing flock of pigeons, most of them stepping aside to let them through, some taking flight. They walked southwest across the park, heading toward exiting at Armitage or Division instead of Fullerton. The wind came gently off the lake. “Four noteworthy guitarists started out as drummers,” said Johnny.

They passed a couple talking intensely on a bench, and JJ laughed as if he and Johnny were old friends, out for a stroll. “Four noteworthy guitarists? Is that so?” It felt a bit staged.

“Yes. That *is* so. Frank Zappa’s first instrument was drums. Dave Grohl played drums for Nirvana before he played guitar for his Foo Fighters. Izzy Stradlin played rhythm guitar for Guns and Roses. He’s noteworthy, and he played drums first.” Johnny paused to catch his breath. “Eddy Van Halen tried drums as his first foray into rock and roll.” He paused again, this time for emphasis. “So perhaps drumming is my stepping-stone to the guitar.”

“Zappa is noteworthy.” JJ made a thoughtful sound. “He’s a nut, but he *can* play guitar. His band released one of the first two-disc rock albums. The other three drummers, they might or might not matter someday, depending on what you do here.” They stopped at a street corner on the edge of the park, waiting to cross Clark. “You have quite the way with words,” JJ told Johnny. “And you just help yourself to them. You could write the song that fixes everything, or you could…”

“… noise cancel something important.”

“Exactly.” The light turned green. “You said *that* economically.”

“I did?” Johnny followed into the crosswalk.

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When Chica heard Johnny snoring, she knew he was down for the night.

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Looking back on it, Johnny would wonder why he did not question the moment. A van with a Boston Patriots bumper sticker pulled to the curb just ahead. A man in a laboratory coat stepped out and JJ went to him, shaking hands with thumbs linking. They talked.

“He’s got coffee for us,” the guitarist told Johnny.

“Keen!”

The man held out a large styrofoam cup to Johnny. JJ already had one. Creamy cups of Hills Brothers (“It’s mountain grown.”)

And like a New York street bagel guy, he added sugar without asking. Three cubes each.

“Thank you,” said Johnny. He liked it sweet.

The man spoke in a hushed tone. “I’m Doctor Leary from Harvard. Have you heard of me?”

“I have.” Johnny stepped back. “The Moody Blues were wrong”

“JJ says you come from the future.”

“Afraid so.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“I always wanted to go into space. Do I make it?”

“Yes you do!” Johnny said, happy to bear the good news.

“Thank you.” The professor shook his hand. “Can I give you some information?”

“Sure.”

“Great.” The good doctor took off his glasses, wiped them on his lab jacket. “When you deal with people in the workplace or in school…”

“Or on the street?”

“That too.” He nodded emphatically. “When he held his palm out for Johnny to slap it, it felt contrived, like something the total non-jock had never done. “When assessing the interaction, consider, one, the physiological state – sleepy, sick, energized or well. Two, what is the emotional state? Are they happy? That could enhance creativity, but so could depression. Three, addictions and compulsions, strong pulls coming from opposite sides of the brain. Four, the compass. Does it point to morality or depravity?” He leaned against his van and took a drink of his coffee. He lit a home rolled cigarette, and JJ went Casa Blanca with it, walking off to smoke it alone.

“Is there a number six?” Johnny asked, wishing JJ would share.

“Number six should be number one. That’s firmly entrenched beliefs.”

“Ah. That seems important. And number seven?”

That should rank number two. Your current leanings and opinions.”

“Got it.” Johnny took his last swallow and tossed his dixie cup into the bus stop trash can. He hugged the scientist and felt a moment of resistance. Then they relaxed.

Johnny and JJ, they walked a few blocks west, a few south, another west, another south, keeping the Hancock building visually at the same distance, they hit a stride, making time, side by side. In Chicago, people walk fast, and it makes them happy. If aliens studied humans in their ideal state, they would rightly conclude that they like walking fast and that it makes them happy. Herein lies the problem with Lamborghinis, Amish flying saucers, and everything in between. At certain points in human history, the availability of easier transportation has kept people from healthful walking.

Reading while you walk will never get safe, but writing anything of value takes a walk or two to keep the head right. Johnny lived in Chicago. He knew that. The sidewalk squares undulated by like snapshots on a roll of instamatic film. Word choices and chord progressions flowed through his mind. Cement granules glittered gayly.

Johnny knew his history, the kind of man who could win game shows. As good as Amy! He knew about the old Irish neighborhood across the south branch of the Chicago River from the Loop, the branch of the river that led to the canal and connected the Mississippi to the Great Lakes. “Hey. It’s 1970,” he said, half joking, half-serious. “If we walk south of here, we can watch Mayor Richard J. Daley get driven off to his job at city hall.” They had a start in that direction. “I’ll bet his autograph holds its value.”

“I don’t think I’m wanted in his neighborhood.” JJ held a hand up. “Even in daylight with a white boy.”

“Really?”

“It’s a good thing you’re with me. There’s people in *this* neighborhood who only go out when they have to because they don’t feel safe. If they go to the store, they make it quick – try to pick the good times. It’s a shame.”

“There’s places like that in the future.”

“Damn straight.”

A place that no longer existed, Johnny had seen it in pictures. He recognized the concrete framed, red brick towers up ahead, smaller government apartment buildings to the sides with the same Chicago common brick, brick used only on the unseen sides of buildings everywhere else in town. “This is Cabrini Green.”

“Yes it is.” JJ stopped walking and laid his guitar case across a bus stop bench. “Regarding your playing…” He unsnapped his case open, pale blue Fender Stratocaster set in rich blue velvet. “I would say ‘Let’s hear what you got,’ but mine’s a lefty.”

Johnny stared too long to play it cool. With the hole in the case, he did not expect such perfection! “A right-handed guitar strung left-handed.” He pointed. “That slant on the bridge pickup gives the highest string a darker sound while the lowest string has a brighter sound than ordinarily it would.”

“The opposite of the designer’s intention.”

“Wait a minute.” Johnny looked back at him. “Are you Ji…”

“Don’t say it. Just call me JJ. I’ll call you Johnny. No last names.” He pointed off somewhere dramatically. “Like you said, careful with the time continuum.” He scratched his chin, and then he scowled. “Like the time continuum ever took care with me.”

“Huh?”

“A roadie with the Wailers told me about the time travel springs thing when they played the Castle, out in the toolies between Takoma and Seattle. I knew a drummer who had those symphony cymbals, and he played them for me one Monday afternoon. How could I know they would tear the crib down so soon or what it meant that the moon was waning when I went through? The months, maybe years, that I spent trapped inside it, no matter how much I kicked and screamed, I never put a scratch or a dent into the time continuum, much less ruptured it.” He frowned. “I couldn’t eat. I couldn’t sleep. In every direction, I saw only purple mist. Lucky I had a guitar. It saved me from dying of boredom.” He nodded, a faraway thoughtful look. “My fingers took comfort from the strings.” He looked at his hands. “Lucky I’d read science fiction – particularly Phillip Jose Farmer. It gave me a mindset for going with a drastic change of reality.”

“Stuck there so long, the hours of repetition, that made you really good, right?”

He nodded. “And staying away from other players made me divergent. Without any equipment, whenever I played my guitar, to me it sounded full and slabby like a Marshall amp stacked with a Sound City amp. When I heard it, it felt like the unifying force of the universes helping me.” A wistful look crossed his face. “I kept trying to make my Strat sound like those cymbals, get it fast enough.”

“You made your guitar sound like a cymbal?” Johnny sounded more impressed than skeptical.

“Finally, and I learned to play a lot of other strange notes and unusual sounds finding out how.” JJ had a disappointed expression that looked contrived. “Oh well. Too bad you can’t play some stepping-stone action on this ax. Hey! That’s a song.”

Johnny reached toward the indentation in blue velvet, but before he put his hands on the guitar he looked up and made eye contact. “Do yous mind?”

JJ extended an open hand. “Make yous-self at home.” He smiled at his Chicago joke.

Johnny took the vintage guitar into his arms. “I’m ambidextrous.”

“That’s about how religious I am, too.” JJ folded the case shut, then sat on the bench next to it watching Johnny. “I can play right-handed. I like to come from the left better.” He smiled slyly. “You can face down every guitarist who comes along. Nobody has ever played beside a lefty before. You watch.”

Johnny bent a string, nodding his head in sync with the movement. “I like left.” Somehow the guitar had a modicum of amplification. They could hear the notes he played. Johnny put his foot up on the bus stop bench, leaning in, the way he did it on the picnic table bench for drumming, making quick precise touches. That guitar and his fingers, no lie, love at first flight. It felt so right. “Your Lucille is fine,” he said admiringly, using the name that blues legend B.B. King gave his beloved Gibson.

“My mother was named Lucille. This is my Martha.” JJ took out a lucky and lit it with a zippo paratrooper lighter. “I like how you play. You’re there with her, unhurried. I see it in your expression. You make fast moves, a clean sound played just so. Look here now.” He put a hand over the fret board and Johnny’s fingers, pushing them down, placing them on an exact set of high notes. “Play it.”

Johnny strummed down the strings.

“No.” JJ arranged the fingers of Johnny’s other hand. “Tap them.”

Johnny did, and then he let his fret fingers take a rest from the painful place at the bottom rungs of the board.

“See. Like a cymbal. Do it a few more times before you forget.” JJ took a puff, blew a thoughtful smoke ring. “Music is magical. It can cast a spell on people, especially people in crowds.”

“You’ve felt that, haven’t you?”

“So have you. Our radio jingles, everybody knows they’re getting hustled. In your time rock and roll music, the stuff we’re recording right now, it plays in the background to make more convincing commercials or to tell people how to feel about the game or the news, and nobody notices it happening.” He managed a sarcastic chuckle. “Rock can make something that’s wrong sound right.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“That’s just engineering consent. But you can still take an audience amazing and beautiful places with musical sounds, up and down, sadness to celebration. Then there’s that ringing silence, and they go back to the lives they led before you plugged in for them. If you did it right, you gave those people an alive feeling that made things go better. Music is just another way we decorate the world, and we can touch up the tapestry of art history until it’s perfect if we don’t get hung up on a rigid sequential approach to things.”

“JJ, are we okay here?” People had begun to gather around, and Johnny considered the neighborhood. He felt his face warming, so many people watching him play.

“Look straight up.”

“Okay.” A steady breeze had been blowing off the lake. Nobody burned much coal in the summer. The sky looked crystal-clear with fluffy clouds moving across it. Not a single chem-trail.

“You see that.” JJ pointed dramatically. “It’s the same sky they’ve got in Rogers Park and South Shore. Just as pretty.”

“Prettier,” somebody said, and that got laughs. “Pretty enough to play us a song.”

“You’d better play that funky music, white boy,” JJ said, looking at the people standing there.

“Right.” Johnny learned it years ago – the theme for *Shaft*. He made the whammy bar do the work of a wah-wah pedal. When he played, the volume came up. The sound was coming from JJ’s case, amplified as loud as an old radio, getting folks’ feet tapping and hands moving. Now Johnny understood the small component plugged into the guitar. JJ had a blue-tooth thing going. Blue tooth in 1970? And to think Chica had to smash his Cricket lighter!

“That sounds boss,” said a teenage boy with rose colored glasses, standing beside Johnny. “Like a song on the radio.”

Johnny took encouragement and kept on playing that run of notes. As his hands got used to it, he improvised with suitable flourishes. This went on longer than a radio length song, and it seemed everybody dug it.

“Did you write this?” one dancing lady asked.

“Sorry folks.” JJ opened the case. “We gotta get on the goodfoot.” More quietly: “Pack it in, Johnny.”

Johnny slid the guitar into the tight velvet grip of the case, closed that and snapped the catches all the way around. JJ looked at him expectantly, so Johnny picked up the case. They continued south. Johnny felt safe. The way he saw it, he had spoken his mind in the language of music, and his new friends danced their reply. Sounds dangerously idealistic, but who knows?

“Johnny, Isaac Hayes won’t release that song until 1971.”

“Yeah. Well, the Average White Band isn’t doing that ‘funky music white boy’ song yet, either.”

“Wild Cherry.”

“Whatever. Same difference.”

When they got to Chicago Avenue, they turned right. Johnny looked down at the brown waters of the north branch as they crossed the bridge. The Chicago River looks good downtown with drawbridges, Marina Towers, the multi-level Whacker Drive bordering it, the part of town where everything got trashed in the Transformers movie. But even there where the river first flows out of the lake (it flowed into the lake until engineers reversed it) it only runs about twenty foot deep. Johnny figured Chicago as more of a lake town than a river town. And while Johnny mulled the way he might conceptualize his city, JJ led them to where four lanes of the Kennedy Expressway stood between them and a train platform.

“Before we do anything, Johnny. I should tell you a few little things. The woman you call Chica?”

“What about her?”

“I was there when you left the Aragon.” He paused to let that soak in. “If you can get across this roadway and sneak on the ‘L’ with me, I’ll take you to see her.”

“I drummed up enough change to pay the fare.”

“Save it. We can buy a six of Schlitz Malts to take where we’re going.”

“This early?” Take him to see Chica. That sounded good. Johnny owed her that. “All right. It won’t be the first foolish thing I’ve ever done.” Johnny bent down to tighten his laces, tied his shoes.

Late morning rush, the cars went by in a dense, continual pack. Getting across would take a gap in traffic across all the lanes. There could be no stopping between lanes to freak out the drivers and open the evening news with a tragic accident. “What about the guitar?”

“Leave it. I’ve got other ones.”

Finally, here it came, a space that went all the way through, slanted so that going into the next lane got them extra seconds, a slant that mimicked the angle of JJ’s bridge pickup.

“Go!” JJ yelled.

Johnny ran with everything he had, running with the guitar in hand, swinging it through the tracers and patterns. This was serious. Johnny *had* to swing his arms to go fast enough. The weight difference threw him off. He swung his empty hand out farther than he meant to. That got him a massive adrenaline rush, but the longer reach had him right. He went with it. One lane, two lanes, three lanes. He looked through the last lane all the way, and then they ran across it, pressing against the cement divider bordering the train zone, catching their breath. Johnny held the case flattened up at his side.

The fence on top of it. That was low. No train coming. JJ climbed up and stepped over it, one leg at a time. He jumped down, then reached across for the guitar, shaking his head at Johnny. They crunched the gravel crossing the rails to the platform, mindful of the third one. Johnny laid the case down ever so gently on the platform before he pumped himself onto it, pushing himself up with both arms.

“We’re going out by the end of the line, Norwood Park,” JJ said, pointing at a stop.

“Avoiding all that *crosstown traffic!”*

“That’s not the half of it.” JJ laughed. “We’re taking the CTA to the CTA.”

Riding northwest/outbound made it easy to get a seat, and JJ got talkative during the ride: “WLS, *in Chicago*, helped the British invade nineteen states and Canada. But before the station went all rock, it hosted the National Barn Dance. They beat the Grand Old Opry to the airwaves.” His voice took on a horrified sound. “Otherwise, Chicago could have become America’s country music capital!”

“Is that so?”

“I hit the scene too hard, and I can’t live with the intimidated way other guitarists treat me. If you hear bad news about me, don’t believe it. I’m going to another time to play a different part, wooden music I hope – but not country. You would do best staying in your own time, with your temperament being what it is and all, y’know, erratically mellow. Believe it or not, there are noteworthy guitarists who have never time traveled at all. Chica must know you were about to become a star in your time.”

Johnny kept quiet, thinking about all that happened since he drummed the Aragon, particularly what *just* happened, about how one false move would have left him dead beyond recognition. Sitting down led to mentally rerunning it, and that totally wrecked Johnny’s harmony. No doubt, remembering that run would always freak him out. Then again, after walking with the squirrels through tall trees and neat little green lawns, he felt better. They found the entryway of a typical Chicago building, three story, six-apartment, St. Louis red brick in front. JJ pushed one of the buttons next to the mailboxes.

“Hello?”

“It’s me.”

Buzzed in, they walked up six and a half flights of stairs. Johnny got a few glimpses up through the railings to an open door, steadily getting closer to the sound of a guitar and a bass, amplified, but not amplified so much the police would get a call. Johnny knew the song, and he liked the driving pulse. “This guy’s mega-shredding.” He held up the guitar case. “Good thing I brought this along so you can jam.”

“I won’t need that.” JJ stopped at the second floor landing. “You know how you get out on a road trip some people, you can let them drive and you feel safe, safe to sleep even?”

“Sure.”

“That’s the way he is with the guitar. I just kick back and listen, safe with his sound.”

At first glance, the man waiting at the door looked goofy, longish straight sandy colored hair, a big grin, but the telecaster hanging around his neck decorated with stickers, to Johnny that marked him as cool. Who knows what country music wasn’t? Rock and roll has always been cool. He nodded a greeting, closed the door behind them. JJ took the six-pack down the hall to the kitchen.

For a morning, the living room had a good crowd. Johnny knew the vibe, a band, wives and girlfriends – no Chica. There were less alley-run chairs, than people. A spent wire spool served as a coffee table. A low platform filled the sunroom space at the front of the apartment, And the guitarist stepped up on it, giving a wah-wah pedal a work out.

As Johnny sat down, timed to the playing, he sang: “Sitting cross-legged on the floor.”

“You know this song?” one of the men with a chair asked suspiciously. “It doesn’t come out as a single until tomorrow.” Johnny recognized him from a youtube video as his favorite horn player. The bass and the guitar stopped, and everybody awaited Johnny’s answer. “I heard it off the album – your second album, the one with your new name.” Johnny thought that chronologically misleading half-truth would not disrupt the non-spatial continuum.

“You did?”

“Doesn’t matter what they call youses,” Johnny added. “Rockin’!” He remembered something encouraging from Wikipedia: “The upcoming European tour. That will change everything.”

“Sounds familiar,” said JJ, standing by the front door. “My man Johnny here *can* play.” He took a drink from a tall silver and blue can. “Maybe he should have gone to Europe instead of back through time.”

“Is that what he did?” a girlfriend giggled. “Oh yeah. Like at the Aragon Ballroom. That story gets better every time.”

“Hey.” He gestured past Johnny into the sunroom. “We got a piece of Trianon floor for him to play on, springs and all.”

The guitarist unplugged his jack after adjusting his two-speaker Epiphone amp. He reached the coiled black cord out across the floor by Johnny. “Play us something.”

“Well…” Johnny struggled to think of a song written before the moment. He wondered at the last one he picked to play, a black song for a black audience. Was that disingenuous, bordering on interracially disfunctional? Would he play country music if he went fishing downstate? As far as Johnny knew, only Kenny Rogers had changed genres, rock to country, without making things weird. Why didn’t Johnny play something of his own at the projects? He did have something new. Johnny worked out the words walking. Johnny opened his case, and everybody but JJ made a comment or involuntary exclamation.

“Far out!” said the guitarist. “A sonic-blue Fender Stratocaster. Lennon and Harrison have that guitar.”

“It’s like yours, Honey, isn’t it?”

“Not quite. Mine’s a Fender *Telecaster*. It’s built for speed. That’s built for finesse, like keeping a lighter pool stick.”

Johnny plugged in and they got the volume right. He tuned the low E, touched up a few other strings that the whammy bar untuned. Then Johnny came in with the intro, ready to sing for a roomful of people. Johnny felt cool. He felt easy. “Mother Nature inbounding, *golden grain*, Comes riding to Chicago on a train!”

“Oh, trains,” somebody whispered. “Like Steve Goodman.” The bell sounded, and JJ buzzed the downstairs door. Johnny heard it over the guitar. He heard the quiet Steve Goodman remark, too.

“They met on the job. Love *at first sight*, the boss of the yards he timed her trains right.” Johnny did a guitar touch there, an arpeggio of a chord he knew from somewhere. “You want to make money you want a good life, Respect Father Time, take care of his wife.”

“Righteous.”

Although he did like the man’s songs, Johnny was not crazy about getting compared to Steve Goodman, Chicago’s resident folk singer. He stepped onto the platform, put his foot on the pedal, making a stand for his kind of music, rock and roll! Playing the musical interlude leading to the chorus, Johnny did his best to make the edge hard – short staccato blasts with long undulating chords. He ended the bridge with the tap of a serendipitously perfect chord. The chord that JJ taught him fit that spot like the Strat fit its case.

Then Chica walked in, and JJ went back to the kitchen. Johnny’s face went hot, just staring at her. She looked so incredible, a pair of jeans, a white blouse and sandals with her hair in a long braid, incredible.

“Say, that’s Martha, the jazz singer,” somebody said behind him, back in the living room. “Remember her? I haven’t seen that girl in years!”

“Me either. She looks good.”

“Hi.” Johnny glanced back over his shoulder. “Is your name Martha?”

“Originally.” Chica shook her head. “Old fashioned, wouldn’t you say?”

“I think…”

“We look about the same age, you and me, say late twenties.”

“Yeah.”

“But I’m technically fifty, sixty years older than you. So I can have an old-fashioned name if I want.”

Johnny remembered what he was doing with the strings. He forgot about the chorus.

Chica took up his slack, slipping antique harem bells onto her fingers as she stepped to the mic beside Johnny: “Good turns come by Father Time’s hands, If you tend Mother Nature’s lands.”

Johnny managed to join her for the next refrain: “They will. They *will!”*

Everybody joined in, bass, drums and horns, JJ and Terry on righteous rhythm. Johnny did his lead, the one JJ taught him while Chica danced and clicked her symbols. She leaned in and gave him a quick kiss.

It wasn’t the good doctors coffee. The room began to fade. For a moment, he saw the stage of the palladium with Eddy Van Halen on stage. Guitar still in his hand, Johnny leaned away from his co-writer to let go of his coffee and Shlitz Malt liquor.

He cannot amplify his guitar/cymbals, but she had a set of antique harem cymbals. Standing just inside the doorway to the third dressing room Johnny wailed on the cymbals that Chica bought. And she danced around him, playing her finger symbols amazingly fast. She had two sets of antique harem symbols. Same company. It’s a really, really, really old company.

“The light of the universe is shining out of your eyes. Don’t blink!”/ “In life, we just do the best that we can, and the things that don’t work out, we forgive ourselves.”/ Elaborate rococo landmark from 1927. Going from a bouncy part to a hard floor.