“1970?” Chica groaned. “I come from 1966.”

“Maybe I read it wrong.”

“I would remember such an ugly car!”

“It’s a Gremlin. People think they look cool.”

“Not cool people, I tell you that.”

 Johnny stopped. “Pepsi or Coke?”

“Oh…”

“Ice cold.” He held them dripping closer.

“I’m not...”

“1970. Real sugar.”

“Oh. This one.”

“Good choice.” Johnny opened it for her with a lighter. “No twist tops in 1970.” He thumb-pried his bottle.

“Can I see that, Mr. 1970?”

“Sure.” He chuckled. “Have at it.”

Chica tossed it under a passing truck. “No throw-away lighters in 1970!” When the traffic slowed, she kicked the pieces into the sewer. “Matches are free!”

The Aragon Time Springs

 “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, an actor suggested the comparison to risque plane flights. 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 saying anything to keep Johnny from taking the talking stick back before she could think of something 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, looking up at the Spanish castle balconies, thinking about Led Zeppelin’s drummer on their first American tour, strafing his toms on that same stage. But I never dreamed I’d play the Aragon in a girl band.” Johnny reached down the neck of his blue dress, taking 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. April had big hair. All the girls in the band did, a big hair professional dress look. Johnny expected her to put him in his place, give him back his smack. Instead, she flourished an envelope. “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 pointed to 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 catcalls of the band. “You rock!”

“You’re part of us, Johnny.”

“He’s a trip!”

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

Johnny heard that, and he was okay with it. He closed the door and walked into the shadows, wiping off the makeup as he went. The dressing room hallway runs alongside the 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 lathe and plaster when the audience leaves, you know you put on a good show. But Johnny drummed for the first band of the night. Chica, the headliner, would not play until late. Save the clerk in the ticket booth, and a few scalpers, 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 local rumor. The 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. The guitar work bored Johnny. The drumming could have come out of a Roland machine. But the cymbals, even down here the cymbals made such a bright, colorful, 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.” Except, rather than making a sound with each beat, Johnny heard the powerful dance-floor springs reverberating the tone of the cymbals , resonant percussion chords buzzing inside his head.

Did somebody spike his energy drink? Johnny felt dizzy. At the same time, he felt intensely content. On his right, light shone beneath a door. Johnny put a hand on the jam, and the experience intensified. Vivid beyond dreams, Johnny was up the stairs again, backstage from Joe Walsh doing an acoustic set. Hot Tuna waited in the wings. The next time-sprung ricochets, Johnny took for rampant imagination. His vision fluttered images of stages and dressing rooms. His body trembled vibrantly. “Phew!” Johnny staggered against the door, and it opened.

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

Too late. He already stepped into the room and back in time. Johnny thought it a health crisis, perhaps his heart, maybe a thing that he ate, drank or inhaled. His legs felt like rubber, and he flailed for something to hold onto. The dizziness passed.

\*\*\*

In 1899, Illinois Telephone and Telegraph won permits to tunnel beneath the city of broad shoulders. IT&T built in a railway – removing dirt, delivering building materials for an expanding comm-catacombs. Later, the trains moved mail, merchandise and coal. 250 volt electric motors drove the trains. In later years, gasoline pulled them. Summertime, theaters drew chilled air from the tunnels. In 1956, the obsolete tunnel company bankrupted.

\*\*\*

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

That voice, it sounded *so* tasty. Familiar, too. “Say, I know you,” he said. “You’re Chica.”

“That’s who I am.” She shook 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 the damage. “I’ll find another dressing room.” Johnny 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.” He sighed. “Now there was a man who sequestered his carbon footprint into the ground.”

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

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

“We travelled through time.”

“Get out!”

“That is what I am telling you. We have to get out of here before they bust us for trespassing. I was famous then. I am nobody, now.” Chica 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 movie theater.”

“Really. The Green Mill?”

“Really.” She rolled the flooring back. “But our best bet is to 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.”

“*Callate la boca, Blanco*.”

“Pardon your French,” he muttered, following her to a side entrance. The alley looked empty when she cracked the door open. Stepping out, it was hot and sunny. The door clicked shut behind them. Across the alley, the cement wall of the elevated train in the sun made Johnny blink.

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

“Don’t tell.” He stroked his big hair wig. “The drummer got sick, and I was the last resort.” Johnny posed to show off his outfit. “A conservative frock that hides well behind a drum-kit – the early Karen Carpenter look. Why is it that the names of so many artists have an emotional kick?” He gestured off-ward. “Amy Winehouse. See what I mean?”

“Hey, you two,” yelled a man coming out the far-back door. “Wait right there!” Was it a familiar voice?

“*Blanco*, run!” Chica took off toward Lawrence Avenue. Her arms flew and her long ponytail bounced. Johnny got moving, but she was already at the end of the alley, turning to run underneath the elevated bridge, heading west.

Johnny was running hard when he got to the sidewalk, trying to catch up with Chica! Seriously? *With Chica?* Looking sideways at the vintage cars, he wondered what heroes might be alive back now.

No time for thinking about that. People standing in the shadows, if Johnny moved slower, for sure they would want something. Uptown long lost the luster of the cutting-edge entertainment district. Back in the day, it was the enchanted city.

The light was red at Broadway. Chica slowed to time an opening. Johnny almost caught up. Cutting it close, Chica bolted into the traffic. She was the person who knew what was going on. He heard honking and screeching. A fender bumped his butt, but Johnny kept after her.

\*\*\*

Rumors about a publisher repurposing the useless railroad remain unsubstantiated, that the new cars had seats and peddles – high-end sub-assemblies from the Kostner Avenue Schwinn factory, just north of the Pyle National plant, a train part factory. Did the center-page folding editor use the northwest tunnel to bring his girlfriends from the airport with refined South American agricultural products? Did he schedule scanty shoots in the narrow-gauge railyard beneath his club? Pillows, curtains and nighties? Cleavage over leather-wrapped handlebars? The Historical Society has only grainy black and whites with blurred backgrounds.

\*\*\*

All Johnny’s life, that giant movie house never opened once, no films, no closed-circuit boxing, no J. Geiles. No cool summer seats. The people lining the sidewalk to get in watched the mismatched “women” sprinting by on the sidewalk. Johnny followed Chica along Lawrence to the theater’s side-access, looking like an alley on their right. Ducking in there, Chica jumped high, grabbing the rope that hung off the fire escape, pulling down the counterbalanced steel stairs. Her thick, wavy ponytail swung sideways, and now he noticed. Chica dressed for the past, conservative white shift with penny loafers.

First landing, Chica ducked into an alcove. Johnny hung with her, trying to breathe quietly, letting Chica peek out for them – not the first time he ran, hid and waited. Finally, she whispered: “All clear,” but instead of coaxing the fire escape down, she continued upward. By the time they climbed the last staircase that ended with the last landing and the ladder to the roof, Johnny was hot and prickly, bent over winded.

Chica still had ethel in her tank. With only a tile-topped parapet between her and the ground, she jogged around the roof to the front of the building and waited for him. Without a word, they climbed the ladder up to the iron sign scaffold. Hanging their legs off, they looked toward the Aragon and a passing train, sides painted green halfway up, top painted white. Going south, Broadway angled east. Following the compass south, the elevated structure crossed Broadway.

Going atop a tall building is like climbing a hill for country folk, a place to think. Johnny came here with friends cutting classes at Senn, looking out, like looking across Lake Michigan or watching TV. Chica was a star, Johnny knew to give her space. Breathe in, breathe out, he joined her in meditation. Unraveling the universe, no way. That’s like trying to get a roll of packing tape unstuck. Especially if it’s old, and this *is* an old universe.

At the Aragon, a B train stopped. A breeze blew. Admiring the giant letters below him, Johnny wondered, when did the UPTOWN sign come down? He spoke quietly: “You meant to come back in time, didn’t you?” He nodded earnestly. “I don’t know how, but I know why.”

“Oh *really!”*

“Wars. Pollution. Crooks with guns.” Johnny got philosophical. “Were we lobster in water that hot at the start, humanity would have jumped the pot right then. What just happened, we jumped out to a cooler time.” He looked at her. “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.” His eyes sparkled. “Wait. You should so, so do a video up here. The young girl looking up at you singing your song, she sees this sign but it says CHICA GO. Go Chica, go!” He sang it like the classic rhythm & blues song. “*Chica*, be good.”

“Good? 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 difficult, we should abandon it? Move to Mars? Go back in time?”

“No. The soil’s toxic on Mars. The whole planet.” His hand movement shined that on. “I get your point.” Johnny scratched his head. “Well, I think I made a difference by not going on a bummer about stuff. I got out and protested about important issues.” He pondered that, questioning Don Wardon’s petition to make American drugs great again, questioning himself.. Although Johnny tried to be good, he knew he had moments when emotionally he took more than he gave.

“I come from the past. I was stood in that same doorway where you fell on me, talking to Lawrence Welk, wanting an audition as a jazz singer. Jean Krupa was upstairs…”

“Cool! Did you meet him?”

“I did,” she said reverently. “He grew up on the west side. Anyway, this night he played his cymbals fast instead of wailing on his tom-toms the way he did in Benny Goodman’s orchestra. I got dizzy, time travel dizzy, but I thought I was nervous dizzy, and I felt so amazingly good. I had to speak up for myself. I said: ‘Give me a chance. Just listen to me sing.’”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing.” She looked south at the 2,500 seat Riviera theater. “He disappeared. I went forward in time before I said: ‘Just listen to me sing.’ And Quincy Jones said: ‘Okay. Let’s hear what you got.’ That day, I became Chica.”

“Just like that?”

“No. Not just like that. I arranged and polished every last little thing in my life, curating my image. I am as produced as the Archies, but I never lip synch.” Chica sang the last phrase.

“Won’t your producer miss you?”

“Not like my parents. I came back to the sixties to see them. And you, you go back to the future as soon as I find the cymbals that can send you there, maybe tonight. Do not leave my sight!” It sounded like joking, but that look!

“Why?”

“Because I can never trust you.”

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

“No. You are a musician. How long can you keep yourself from recording a good song, as of yet unwritten? Most things you change in the past, you will barely wrinkle time. But steal a hit-single, time’s continuum could rupture.”

“Nobody would want that.” Johnny looked thoughtful. “What year is this, anyway?”

“See!” She punched his shoulder. “You thought about what song to steal!”

“Yeah.” He sighed, rubbing his shoulder. “I thought about…”

*“Yesterday!”*

“Nailed it.” He looked six floors downward past his feet to the ticket line. “Maybe you’re right.”

“I am right!” For the first time she smiled. “As you get to know me, you shall see. I am always right.”

\*\*\*

As it turned out, in the morning Johnny was still living in the past. Light barely glittered the lake when he stirred. Behind somewhere, a cage door slammed. A steel bucket met cement. The handle slapped its side. With a squeak, a hose came on. Chica was right: “Time travel knocks you out.” It looked like she gave up on him and left. Johnny slipped out through the exit styles before anybody noticed. It was cool, still quiet.

From here, Johnny could walk to the Art Institute in half an hour, see what the park looks like without *The Bean*, without the park for that matter. Johnny knew that, as with the Prudential building, a tower could have arisen above the tracks under Millennium Park. Years went to deciding the air-rights and how to hide ten hectares of railroad infrastructure. Johnny thought it would be fun to see that unsightliness before it got covered, a bit of time-travel sightseeing. But Johnny knew he had to stick around and keep an eye out for Chica.

The change he found in his pack, most of it had futuristic features – big head Jefferson, state stuff and Washington turning his back. Searching for his pay, Johnny found a pair of sticks. Not the carbon fiber set from the show, he found his old hickory sticks, perfect for continuum-safe busking.

Birds did warm-up chirps as Johnny came to the loading dock for the zoo. In galvanized trashcans, he found thick cans and buckets. Johnny cleaned his kit at a fountain and arranged it on a picnic table. Before long, he had a tastefully rendered, primal percussion presence with a backbeat.

Foot on the bench, Johnny worked it. Stepping to his beat, they barely broke rhythm, dropping coins they kept on trucking. When the sun peeked over the trees, Johnny had enough change panhandled for breakfast. His thoughts turned from how to eat to what – leaning toward coffee, a Vienna Red Hot and Jay’s potato chips.

Johnny thought scientifically. Books about astrology and all the science fiction, he just knew that we can extrapolate the fields and forces of the planets, how the voids and transits shape our interactional climate. As Johnny would have expected, the year of the golden dog felt nice. A couple stopped and listened, and Johnny barely blushed. Did he have access to greater creativity? Or had Johnny never encountered air without cell signals rifling through it?

\*\*\*

Coming down a fire escape is scary, like walking on the sky. Johnny stashed the dress. The jeans, white T-shirt and all-stars in his pack, they would fit in fine. His worn pack, it would pass. Johnny ran out, then in, back and forth until the bottom stairway touched quiet cement. Stepping into the sunlight, Johnny wiped his brow. “Whatever year it is. It’s gotta be summer.”

“We need to know the date.”

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

“I just said so.”

“Come with me.” Beckoning, he walked into the street. Looking both ways, Chica followed him across, down a few steps to a grocery. The door tinkled a bell. Inside, fans and screened windows had things cool. Johnny scanned the wooden shelves of jars, bags and loaves before he walked back to the cooler. “Where’s the energy drinks?”

“Seriously?”

“Oh. Don’t make ’em yet?”

“Right.”

“Okay then.” Johnny took two bottles to the man behind the ornate chromed cash register.

“Comes to fifty cents,” he said, not touching a key.

A hand to his chest. “Oh no!” said Johnny. “My pay!”

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

“No matter.” He took a bankcard from his wallet. “I’ve got room on my plastic.”

The credit card booklet came out.

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

The cashier cranked his register drawer open and made change. “Thank you.”

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

The man rolled his eyes, but he pushed a few buttons, cranked one off for him.

Chica followed Johnny outside to the shade of a passing cloud. He was studying the receipt.

“What was that?”

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

“Hm.” She started back toward Broadway. “C’mon. I’ll show you how to save money on transportation.”

“If it’s hitchhiking, I hitchhiked downstate.”

“It’s not.”

Johnny stepped behind a red car along the curb. “We’re in luck. A window sticker.” He read the weathered piece of paper. “The date’s gone.” Johnny scratched his head.

“Blanco. C’mon.”

“Wait.” He read the taillight. “1970!” Johnny thought about it. “1970, let’s see. No more sixties. Beatles broke up. Simon and Garfunkel broke up. Joplin died. Hendrix died.” He imagined them, still alive. “Good things happened, too,” he added. “1970.”

“1970?” Chica groaned. “I come from 1966.”

“Maybe I read it wrong.”

“I would remember such an ugly car!”

“It’s a Gremlin. People think they look cool.”

“Not cool people, I tell you that.”

 Johnny stopped. “Pepsi or Coke?”

“Oh…”

“Ice cold.” He held them dripping closer.

“I’m not...”

“1970. Real sugar.”

“Oh. This one.”

“Good choice.” Johnny opened it for her with a lighter. “No twist tops in 1970.” He thumb-pried his own bottle.

“Can I see that, Mr. 1970?”

“Sure.” He chuckled. “Have at it.”

Chica tossed it under a passing truck. “No throw-away lighters in 1970!” When the traffic slowed, she kicked the pieces into the sewer. “Matches are free!” Chica stepped back onto the sidewalk, arching her back to drink with her shiny black ponytail reaching for her hemline. It was like watching her videos.

“We could have reverse engineered that lighter and made it in America. Got rich.”

“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* monumental.”

“It is?”

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

“Hm. I’ll bet a few times people got done recording and knew what they had, but they never got it into the right hands.”

Chica sighed. “That’s sad.”

Broadway makes a five pointer at that intersection. They crossed Racine to the north point of a triangle shaped, Flatiron Building of a department store.

“My first forty-five.” She pointed. “I bought it there. Come visit my memories.”

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

“You will like it.” She pushed the door open to a blast of cool air. “Everybody does.”

“Oh yes!” Johnny stepped into the big room. “Funky but fine.” He checked the price on a chrome, vinyl and formica kitchen set. “New with old prices.”

“Try to act bored!” she hissed. “Hey, they have samples.” Chica led Johnny to an autumn gold, electric pan. “Can I have seconds?” Chica asked sweetly, arms behind her back.

“Of course,” said the man demonstrating the small appliance. He gave Johnny the “But not you,” look. A subtle gesture was included.

“Sexist in the seventies,” Johnny muttered, tossing his toothpick into the bag. “Sir, we live in a melting pot.” He gesticulated convincingly. “Your grade school had a mural of different ethnic people. Remember?”

He nodded. “We did.”

“Southern blacks came here for industrial jobs, to get treated with respect. Same with the Irish, Italians and Polish. This city is all about equality!”

“It is!” The clerk slapped the counter.

“You must want to give equal samples!”

“Here.” The man handed Johnny a sizzling snack, a tear in his eye. Then he slipped Johnny another.

\*\*\*

“If you say nothing,” JJ explained. “You can always take it back.” He said it split seconds before Johnny met one of his fictional celebrities. The econoline with Massachusetts plates pulled to the curb across the street. A man in a laboratory coat, beads and turtleneck, stepped out. “Hey! Mr. Fender Bender!” Linking thumbs, he shook JJ’s hand. They talked. Johnny caught up.

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

“Groovy!” It seemed the thing to say.

JJ already had his good tasting cup of Hills Brothers. Like a New York street vendor, sugar cubes went in without asking.

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

“I’m Doctor Leary from Harvard.” A hushed tone. “Have you heard of me?”

“I…uh…” Johnny stepped back. “No kidding?”

“The Moody Blues were wrong. I’m not dead.”

“Right.” Johnny managed to come up with a rock-referential comeback: “You’re just searching for the lost chord.”

“JJ says you come from the future.”

“It’s a secret.”

“Can I ask something?”

“Maybe.”

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

The way he hung on the answer, Johnny was glad to say: “Yes, you will!”

The professor shook his hand. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” This *was* a happy moment.

“Can I let you in on a trade secret?”

Johnny looked over his shoulder. “Sure.” He would rather keep walking.

“Keen.” The good doctor wiped his glasses on his lab jacket. “When you deal with people in the workplace, in school…”

“Or on the street?”

“That too.” He nodded. When the doctor held his palm out for Johnny to slap it, it felt like something this academician rarely did. “To understand where somebody’s coming from, consider, One, the physiological state – sick or well, energized or sleepy.”

Johnny yawned.

“Wake up! Don’t make me quiz you.”

“Sorry.”

“You will want this list, next time you get pissed.”

“Have at it.”

“Two, what is the emotional state? Are they happy? That enhances creativity, but so can depression. Three, addictions and circuit Four, compulsions, strong pulls from opposite sides of the brain.”

“Like left and right with a stereo.” Johnny had stereos on his mind.

“Nicely said!” He jotted his notebook. The professor leaned against his van and lit a home rolled cigarette. JJ went all Humphry and walked off to smoke it alone, coughing his head off. Then he stepped into a phone booth.

“Five, the compass. Does it point to morality?”

“The moral compass. That’s food for thought,” said Johnny. “Thank you. Well…”

“Six turns out to be One, firmly entrenched beliefs.”

“Uh. That’s important,” Johnny sighed. “I guess there’s a Seven?”

“It should rank number Two. Your current leanings and opinions.”

“I like that,” Johnny chuckled. “Of course, that’s my opinion.”

*“Touche!”*That, or when Johnny told the professor that his ashes would make it into space would have been the place to slap five. “Last but not least comes grand circuit Eight, karma.”

“Got it.” Johnny threw his cup in the trash. He hugged the scientist – a moment of resistance – then they relaxed.

“Turn on and tune in, Johnny.” The professor patted the time traveler’s shoulder. “Use the Eight with your freight.”

Was it the doctor’s intention? While Johnny walked, he thought about freight, time signature 6**/**8.

\*\*\*

Johnny caught up: “Let’s go *there!”*

“Electronics?” Chica followed into the department. “Stereophonic was so, so expensive when I left. Nobody thinks twice about it in your time.”

“The first Beatles albums had glitchy stereo,” Johnny commiserated, scanning the sound systems with one speaker in the middle. “These monaurals look nice. I could be a one-speaker man.” He looked off at his vivid imagination. “ 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 interesting things, as well.” Chica scanned the merchandise. “My lord! Double stereo.” She looked at the card in front of the sound system. “Quadraphonic!” The clerk came over -- white shirt, black dickey, flair bottomed levis. “Can we hear this?” she asked. “Oh, pretty please.”

“You bet!” He got on it, laughing at Chica’s every word, hurrying off to hunt down a four-channel recording of her request.

“My first favorite, I listened to them when they came out. I listened to them in the future. Because of them, singing rock and roll instead of jazz sounded fun.”

“They were influenced by Wilson Pickett and Willie Davis. In turn, your old favorite group musically influenced a big future star.” Channeling his Jack Black thing, Johnny pointed dramatically. “That would be you. That would be cool.”

“You do make that sound cool.” She scratched her head. “Spun.”

“Legend says that when Clapton met Hendrix, he got sick. Decades later when Van Halen met Clapton, he puked. That’s an urban music legend.”

“I see.”

“It’s significant rock and roll genealogy. You know, the Hall of Fame, up-chuck chain.”

“The up-chuck chain!” Chica shook her head. “Johnnie, you…”

The clerk returned. “I had to tear our stockroom apart,” he said excitedly, cutting the plastic sleeve with his fingernail. “But I found it!” *So* happy to have good news for Chica! He slid the perfect black disc (©1968) out of its cartooned cover. Johnny wondered, did Chica get better treatment for being a star? No. Nobody knows about that back here. Dressed modestly, hair done simply, she gets the foxy lady privilege, not *even* trying.

Chimes tinkled from corner to corner, circling the showroom. Bongos, bass and harmonized vocals came in. “It’s a beautiful mor-ning. Ah ah. I’ve got to be on my way now…” The salesman had it cranked.

Finger to a cheek dimple, Chica stepped back, considering the upward pointing speakers. “Remarkable,” she said.

“Yes.” Johnny agreed. “Remarkable.”

“Thank you,” she said, her voice, a song all its own. Chica turned to Johnny. “Shall we?”

“We shall.” Johnny patted a speaker as they left. “Thank you.” (Don’t say dude! Don’t say dude!) “Boss.”

Chica stepped outside, crossed the sidewalk to Broadway. Such a star, still a city girl. “Those speakers sucked!”

“My laptop has higher fidelity…” They stepped off the tall curb, waited for a car to go by. Above, a train crossed over. “But quadrophonenia… er… quadraphonic *was* a remarkable effect.” The traffic opened and they crossed.

“Remarkable.” They turned down Leland. “Sure. We said that.”

“Such harmonies,” said Johnny. “The Rascals so, so had it going on.”

“You so, so cannot tell them.” Chica stopped, back to a door. “If you happen to meet that band during this visit.”

“Time continuum, right?”

“Right.” She opened the door, and comforting food smells wafted by. On the radio, Marvin “Heard it through the grapevine.” They sat at the counter eating crunchy tender chicken. “You’re the only white boy here, Blanco,” she told him, sipping the drink that they let her bring inside with her.

“I know.” Johnny clinked bottles. “These folks are nice.”

“I’m so glad to find them still here.: Chica patted his hand “They *are* nice.”

“Not mean, like you.”

“What?”

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

“You *are* a bad penny.” Chica poked Johnny’s chest. “Somebody should melt you down?”

\*\*\*

In 1970, cities have places where seekers work out their personal paradigm. Haight Ashbury and Candlestick Park on the west coast. The Village and Central Park on the east. Old Town and Grant Park in the middle. Strolling Clark Street south from Fullerton, the air reeks of incense and peppermint. Dogs wear bandanas around their necks. Skin shows everywhere, so much hair. Possibilities tickle the air. If the right people get together, this fall we can watch football on Monday nights. If only Jeff Beck made Eric’s guitar gently weep.

Walking to Grant Park, Johnny might catch a rock show. Maybe the Flock gets the audience on their feet. Sly Stone’s crowd gets a riot going on. But people feel safe. Guns are unusual here in nineteen-seventy. Baseball bats keep things safe. The police limit how many you can have in your car for protection. Girls have good legs because they walk a lot, downright dangerous even. Guys know to behave because  the ladies can deck them with a dance move.

\*\*\*

Chica and Johnny got off at Fullerton and walked east to a building faced with Milwaukee white brick. Johnny followed down the gangway then upstairs around back, passing a party on the second floor. Before she knocked, Chica kissed two fingers and touched them to the tube on the door-jam. Waiting a while, she knocked again. Next door, a floorboard creaked. Light went on behind the transom. Chica put a finger to her lips and headed down the stairs.

“They still live there,” she exclaimed, back on the sidewalk. “So does the lady next door.”

“Cool.” Johnny pointed at an Old Style sign. “We could wait in there. Shoot a rack.”

“With what money?”

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

“You do not understand.” Chica patted her purse. “I have it, but I sorted through so, so much money for what I brought”

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

Chica was not having it! “You know what would be nice. For us to get into clean water.” Once again, Chica started down the sidewalk. “C’mon. I know a way.”

“Wait a minute.” Johnny 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 smell like the lake instead of like me.”

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

“No. But one time a land lamprey…”

Chica pushed his shoulder, pushed him toward the curb. He was walking 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 *is* a nice night to go skinny dipping down at the rocks.”

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

Chica pushed him again. “But not for us.”

They crossed into Lincoln Park, the park that insulates much of Lake Michigan from the reality of the city, miles of grass and trees, a mid-west squirrel sanctuary. Feeling the heat of the summer night, they came to the east entrance of the zoo.

Chica walked to the side of the turn-styles, grabbed the bar at the top of the fencing and climbed over. “I know it’s free, but they’re closed.”

Johnny looked over his shoulders both ways and grabbed the top bar. “So, hopping the train wasn’t the only thing you missed doing.”

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

He climbed after, and it seemed like she might have it figured. Not a soul in sight. It was easy getting over the fencing around the habitat. Johnny started to take off his pants, but Chica said leave their clothes on, rinse the funk out of them. “I got you on about skinny dipping?” she giggled, kicking her shoes into a corner.

“Nah.” Johnny’s face felt hot, and he knew what that meant. He always dreaded that, getting up on stage. Audiences laugh when you turn red. Famous singers started out hiding behind amplifiers. Playing drums usually kept him safely in the background. Johnny turned away and tucked the things from his pockets into his shoes. The penguins across the pond watched curiously. The seals still in the water climbed out when Chica dove in. Johnny jumped in, 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 have done this with someone else.”

*“En serio?”*

*“Serio.”*

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

“Yes?”

“They have *no* idea.”

“Do not tell them.” Chica slipped under. Then she came up, smoothing the water out of her hair. “Let’s just stay in here and soak a while. Keep it quiet.”

“Okay.”

“Last time I came, the cheetahs fought. I sat on the rock ledge above their habitat.”

“You weren’t ascared?”

“Not much. The ledge is warm from all the sun light that hits it during the day. Check it out with me before we go – the total zoo experience, swimming with the seals followed by hanging out with the cheetahs.” Having said that, she lifted herself up by pushing Johnny’s head under. “See,” she said when he came up. “I am mean.”

\*\*\*

The way he snored, Chica knew Johnny was down for the night. She put his things by his side, touched her lips to his forehead and ducked out the turn-style of the country’s best free admission zoo. A few squirrels followed her out of the park, chattering from tree to tree along Fullerton.

They turned away when a shadowy figure held his crusty hand out for money. Chica stepped back, hand to her cheek. “Uncle Max! It’s so good to see you!” All her life, this man greeted her family.

“Martha!” His eyes opened wide. “You came home.”

“I. Uh...” She thought a moment. “Yes! I came home.”

He beamed. “Your papa must be so happy!”

“I hope so.” She gave him a hug, a sawbuck and a kiss on the cheek.

He sneaked the five back before Chica walked off. “Bless you!” he said, hand returning from her purse with a quarter.

Walking up her grey painted back steps, Chica passed the party on the second floor of her building. Looking in the open door, such handsome men, was that Jeff Fort playing slap with Mohamed Ali, reddening the champ’s hands. A Carol King song played on a good hi-fi: “So far away. Doesn’t anybody stay in one place anymore?”

Upstairs, Chica found her sister at home. *“Dios mio, m’ermana!”* She got *such* a hug. “Where have you been?” Edna scolded. “Mama!” she shouted over her shoulder.  “Look what *el gato* dragged *en.”* She stepped back, brushed some hair out of Chica’s face. “Why did you dye it.”

“Work related.”

“Oh. Well, no problem. I have a rinse that will take it all out naturally.”

“Chica’s Puerto Rican father and Israeli mother shuffled and clicked down the hall, reaching for a long group hug, wet kisses and eyes.

*“Ay!* Papa. Mama!” They sat up talking – blintze and tamale, chamomile and rum.

It occurred to Chica that the time she missed matched how long she spent in the future. It was perfect. Chica felt so relaxed, *so* at home. Vinnie, the family tuxedo cat sat on her lap, purring. He was a kitten last time she petted him. “Daddy, tell a story. I miss your stories.”

His face glowed. “Oh. I don’t know.” Papa waved a hand.

“Oh Daddy!” Edna exclaimed. “Pretty please! With sugar on top.”

“Okay. *Puedo.”* He looked off somewhere for a moment. “Dominick, the crime boss,” Papa said. “He wanted his wife dead.” This was the Dominick’s grocery store story. “He hired his childhood friend, Artie, the most respected contract killer in the middle-west. Artie took the job, and for such a good friend he could charge only one dollar.”

“If I could get prices like that,” Mama mused.

“Lucky me you cannot.” Papa shrugged. “The hit-man came through the alley to the back door that Dominick left unlocked. Unfortunately, the maid entered screaming while Artie was choking the wife. So, out of the help, also he choked the life.”

“Was this in the paper?”

“It was.” Papa tried to look serious. “The next day, the headlines read ‘ARTIE CHOKES TWO FOR A DOLLAR AT DOMINICK’S.’”

“For real?” asked Edna.

“Why not?” He nodded solemnly. “What’s the difference between an Irish wedding and an Irish funeral?”

“What?” his wife pretended not to know.

“There’s one less drunk at the funeral.”

“Oh stop it!” She slapped the table. They all heard the joke before, and they all laughed. Everybody heard the joke before. Sure as Mrs. O’Leary’s cow never started the fire, they will all laugh when they hear it again.

“A bus pulls up and opens its doors,” said Papa. “Lady at the stop asks: ‘Hey driver, does this bus go to da loop?’ ‘No,’ he tells her. ‘All it goes is beep beep.’”

Mama laughed. Chica made a rim-shot sound. Edna looked troubled.

“Oh-h-h…” She moved her hands awkwardly – distracted by a memory. “I guess I should tell you.”

“What *ija,”* Mother asked, Spanish sounding Yiddish.”

“It’s a scandal, this one is.”

“Do tell, sister.”

“When I worked at the train factory out there, Missouri’s most highly regarded medical educator and practitioner was accused of having sex with his patients.”

“How creepy!”

“Under anesthetic, every one.”

*“Que horrible!”*

“It was!” Edna shook her head sadly. “He was the *best* veterinarian in Missouri.”

\*\*\*

They climbed up from behind, so they never saw the big cats until they were above them. Chica peeked over. Then she slid back on the stone ledge. “Awkward!” She looked away, shaking her head.

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

“I should 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.

“Shh!” She put some fingers over his mouth. “Do not spoil it.”

Below, the cats made frighteningly amorous sounds. He whispered: “Don’t want to rupture their making time continuum.”

“No, you don’t,” she whispered back, leaning close. “It is so, so special.”

“Yeah. For the zoo, too.”

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

“Well.” She patted his knee. “I should apologize. This *is* a head-trip. You must have important people you left behind.”

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

“I’m sure.” She stroked his hand. “You are a real Audy Home boy to do the stuff we did today.” Chica turned to look him in the eye. “What are your favorite bands?”

“Tough one.” He raised his eyebrows. “The Who and Led Zeppelin. Some others. How about you?”

“I was thinking about bands from here, like Earth Wind and Fire. I’m a prairie girl.”

“Right. Well, the Chi-Lites, Kanye, Smashing Pumpkins. I grew up playing in brick alleys, just like you. This is my kind of town. But you know what?”

“What?”

“I never heard about the Aragon’s springs taking people through time.”

“You hang around the dinosaur rockers, bands from way back, word is out about springs with the metal they use for high-end cymbals. They tore down the Trianon Ballroom on the south side and the Spanish Castle outside of Seattle. They had springs. The Palladium in Hollywood has a newer style of spring. That one takes people off the stage. Other big cities have time venues, and people have bounced from one to the other. You spring back when the moon waxes, waning you fall forward, mostly.” She pointed up at the egg-shaped moon. “Let’s hope that is waning.”

“Okay.” Johnny scratched his chin. “Out of all the sci-fi stories, time travel ones have the least scientific scenarios.” He made a dismissive gesture, pushing the stupidity away. “But come to think of it, time travel is so, so obviously happening. Tom Petty for example, he must have time traveled, 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. Hey! That’s a song.”

“No, it is not.”

“It is, once you embellish it. See, your songs do the relationship thing. They do it great. But what you 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, extending his arm: “Good turns come by Fath-er Time’s hands.”

“If you tend Moth-er Nature’s lands,” Chica countered.

“Yeah, yeah. Good turns come around.”

“Yeah yeah. Good things come *to* town.”

The subdued cat growls from below stopped. The Cheetahs were listening. Such an undeniably satisfying sound. The ultimate musician moment – hearing your new song like a lit-up listener would. They sang it through again and again. It sounded catchy and it grew on them. Were it a new single in Chica’s youth, Johnny knew she would have set the tone arm back to restart. He knew because he would scroll back and watch a commercial to listen again. “That’s our chorus,” Johnny said. “The storytelling stanzas come next.”

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

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

“If we did want to steal it, easy pickings.” Chica strummed the air. “Easy pickings and I am picking a guitar.” She twisted sideways so he could see her air-guitar. “My imaginary instrument is always guitar. And we *are* imagining.”

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

“You need to *calmate* down.” Chica waved a finger. “You have us recording a song.”

“Fine. Do it without me. But when? Now or then? It seems like sixties songs had a message or good idea – maybe pointed out an injustice. After the sixties, songs got more downbeat. Everybody did somebody wrong songs, and what not.”

“Taking out cocaine and shooting sheriffs.”

“Right. I thought you might not know what I mean.”

“I know the rock stories did not have to make sense.” Chica shook her head. “Such a big deal about the detective Billy Mack not letting those two escape justice. Then they got the money and they got away. So the story’s big build-up was for nothing!”

“You see what I mean. And now…” He paused. “Wait. Not now. I mean, where I’m sprung from, hit songs say harsh things.” He tapped the back of her hand. *“Your* songs are inspiring. Your happy nature comes through.”

“Happy nature? You said I’m mean.” 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, elbows out.

“Some of his songs inspired people to experience altered states,” Chica said as Johnny drifted toward an alpha state, contemplating an altered state from within an altered state. “In the nineteen-sixties,” Chica told him. “He was a guitar hero, and they thought he could teach them about psychadelics.”

“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 rail, sidewalk and sewer, living in infinity.”

“Nicely said.”

Sixty-seven years after founding, this was the second American city by population.” Johnny had a pleasant voice. “That was 1900.” Loud cat purring from below accompanied his words. “The cheetahs purr because they feel good, and that makes them feel better,” he said. “It’s like sitting in the barber chair, a mirror in front and in back. It goes on forever.”

“If only we could purr!” Chica mused. “It would be good for us. Like laughing.”

“Racoons purr, and… Zzz.”

“Johnny. Are you falling asleep? You cannot sleep here.”

Johnny slapped himself. “Did our ancestors exploit the frontier?” he socratically sputtered. “No! The north woods lumber shipped down to the second city, it rode the rails to make towns. Farmers and ranchers beyond the Mississippi lived better with goods from Sears. Historians say the men who made money in the California gold rush sold shovels.” Johnny’s head spun. “And where did those shovels come from?”

\*\*\*

During peak times of inspiration, creative people dream about flying. A city girl like Chica, times she wrote her best songs, she dreamed about flying along on a bike. Moving fast, Chica squinted at the shadows. Her sister in front on the tandem pedaled fast and ficticious. She was okay. Chica’s purse over Edna’s shoulder with the bundles of bills stopped two bullets. Another slug grazed Chica’s finger.

Edna looked back over her shoulder. “Your stop is coming up, *mi’ermana*.” She eased the brakes. The pawls and rachets click, click, click, click, clicked.

“I cannot go up there,” Chica protested, standing by the ladder. “Not in broad daylight.”

“Oh, stop,” her sister scolded. “Go for the first clothes line you see.” She gave Chica an A-frame hug

“But…”

*“You* are lit up!” Edna leaned in closer. “It’s dark down here, but I can see your glow.”

Chica grinned. “I have not felt this alive in a long, long time.”

“See. You’ll be fine. Now get up there and do your thing.” She hugged her again. *“Te amo,*always!”

\*\*\*

1970 felt good. 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 stolen hit rupturing the time continuum jazz, Johnny wondered about an exception scenario, a lesser hit by a prolific band that a deserving time-traveler might borrow before the band got around to writing it – save them the trouble. Artists always complain about how they never experience their songs fresh like their listeners can. This time they could. Would they like 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, of course, 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 case on the table, neck pointed at Johnny. “What’s the…”

His first words of the day, Johnny interrupted with what he meant to tell Chica before he crashed: “St. Louis barged wheat to New Orleans in the farmers’ bags. Then our brokers on La Salle Street boldly comingled the inbound liquid gold, a graded commodity bought and sold without ever leaving the grain elevators. That was grindable wheat, not the sticky grain they came to cut with steel in Minneapolis, blowing the bran and germ off, 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. “A pizza can feed a family of four.” He got defensive. “I play guitar too but, right now, I’m having trouble feeding myself.”

“Why do you think that joke’s old?” A knowing look. “Did you hear it in the future?” On the surface, the visitor spoke friendly enough, or did he? “Look at your equipment.” The tall thin man pointed at Johnny’s found-art drum set. “Groundbreaking instrumentation.” He pretended an admiring tone. “1970 has never seen anything like it.”

Johnny looked over his shoulder. “I went through time by accident. I’d go back if I could.” Feeling a jolt of adrenalin, he held his hands up. “I heard about people like you. You police time.” Johnny looked at the large caliber hole, pointed directly at him. “That’s a weapon, isn’t it?”

The man leaned over the machine head end of his guitar case, brushing a finger across his mustache. “That hole.”

“Yes?”

“It’s just a hole.”

“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 pointed off-ward. “Let’s walk and talk.”

“Well.” Johnny considered his drums.

“C’mon.” He clutched the handle. “We’ve got places to go, people to see and things to do.” A chuckle. “Or should I say ‘Places to see, things to go and people to do?’”

Pulling his pack on, Johnny followed JJ into a standing flock of pigeons that stepped aside for them. Four took flight. They walked southwest across the park, heading toward Armitage or Division. Kite strings slanted out over the lake. “Four noteworthy guitarists started as drummers,” said Johnny.

Passing a couple talking intensely on a bench, 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. It *is* so!” Johnny hid his irritation. “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 played drums first.” Johnny paused, caught his breath. “Eddy Van Halen tried drums as his first instrument.” Johnny 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 that man *can* play. His band released one of the first two-disc rock albums. The other three drummers, they might or may not matter someday, depending on what happens.” They stopped at a street corner on the edge of the park, waiting to cross Clark. Across the street a van pulled up to the curb. “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* sparingly.”

\*\*\*

Chica awoke to coffee percolating and hash browns crackling. The front door buzzed. From the hall she heard familiar voices – John Washam, Tom Podobnik and Benny Powski. Benny had a special status with the boys, those mentioned, Bartlow, Thornton and so on. One night Ben got arrested for something he was innocent of, so he gave them the wrong name. Up in the third floor holding-cell at Cook County, he looked at the street below. A strong man, Benny knew he could jump it. But the fall broke his ankle. Nonetheless, Benny dragged himself to California Avenue where a police car found him. The next pair of checkerboard hats took him to the hospital.

“It’s the boys,” Chica’s mother exclaimed happily, huddling a hug with Nicky and Mike Bradberry. Speaking loudly, she welcomed everybody into her kitchen, let the boys put the hurt on her pantry. Jeanie flipped pancakes, and Trudy Cornakowski made more coffee – coffee with Tullamore Dew, a big bottle somebody left in the hall on the second floor. Laura Munves fried hash browns. Chica took a phone call. Both bathrooms got a workout. Chica had to wait to fix her hair.

“I adjusted the chain on your toilet,” Nicky told Chica on his way out, spinning a finger through his curly hair. “Did you ever hear running water in there?”

“I did!” said Chica, eyes wide. She heard it four years ago.

Mama did not want whisky, but she would take another toke – got so buzzed she used up her *afikomen.* Mama was having*fun!* Only the girls heard her pray: “Let us comport ourselves in the way Yous command, and may nothing from our mouths pollute the minds of children. Amain.”

“Amen!” said Julie, her tone so Imaculata girl reverent.

“Right on!” said Jeanie, *way* cool.

“*Ija*. Where’s Toby?”

“She went downtown to this new kind of get-together, first one ever.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Yeah. A gay parade.”

“Sounds like a happy thing,” said Mama.

Smokers climbed the porch ladder through the hatch to the roof. Chica followed along and borrowed a Kool. Buzzed strictly by caffeine, it seemed a nice way to end a perfect breakfast. Hanging her legs over the front parapet, looking down forty feet to the chemically treated lawn (Keep Dogs Off) she thought about how the only vaccines she could get in 1970 covered Small Pox and Polio. From where she sat, Chica could see the pediatric clinic down the street where kids get injected. How recklessly the narrator wove in the weaving of aluminum sky-lines: looking at the clear blue sky, Chica wondered. If they truly make our weather healthier, were chem-trails a sky vaccine?

“Edna! Stop that,” she called to her sister. Hair flowing down her shoulders, Edna danced the parapets, barefoot and topless.

“Chica, what about your dance classes?” asked John Washam sitting next to her. Shoulder length blond hair, he had a look. “Remember? You could do what she’s doing with a stack of books on your head.”

“I suppose.” Chica tried to relax which meant being the only one not watching Edna dance, the only one not wondering if Chica would look just as fine with *her* top off. Chica remembered dance classes with Edna. Their old-school teacher, the way they drilled. It felt like spending the afternoon at the dojo: “Hi-yah!”

Bartlow noticed everybody putting cigarette packs away. “So, are we ready to go?” he nonchalantly asked the man with the black four door Catalina parked out front.

Nicky wiped his pipe stem with his shirttail. “I guess so.”

“Shotgun!”

“Back, right window!”

\*\*\*

“Take-er easy, professor,” said JJ with a wave. He and Johnny walked a few blocks west, a few south, another west, another south. Keeping the Hancock building visually the same distance, they hit a stride, making time, side by side. People who live in big metros walk fast. If aliens studied humans, they would conclude that walking fast makes them happy. Herein lies the problem with Lamborghinis, Volkswagens, and everything in between. At certain points along the human timeline, the availability of easier transportation keeps people from healthful walking.

Reading while you walk will never get safe, but writing anything of value takes a walk or two to get the head right. Johnny 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 gaily glittered.

Johnny was the kind of man who could win game shows. A mind like Ken Jennings! He knew the south branch of the river connected the North Atlantic to the Gulf of Mexico. Digging that Illinois canal took new technology that made the Panama Canal possible. And Johnny knew about the Irish neighborhood across that river branch from the loop. “Hey. It’s 1970,” he said. “If we walk south of here, we can watch his honor Richard J. Daley go off to city hall. 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 who live in *this* neighborhood who don’t feel safe. Going to the store, they try to pick the Good Times.”

“Then why do they live here?”

“The Irish vote too often. The Polish use too many consonants. The blacks…” He held his arms wide. “The blacks get this place.”

Now Johnny recognized the storied development from channel 11. The concrete-framed towers had walls filled in with locally baked common brick, brick used only on the hidden sides of buildings everywhere else in town. “This is Cabrini Green.”

“Yes. This is Cabrini Green.” JJ stopped walking and laid his case across a bus-stop bench. “Regarding your playing…” He unsnapped his case open, blue guitar set in gold velvet. “I would say ‘Let’s hear what you got,’ but I doubt that you can play this.”

With the hole in the case, he did not expect much. Now Johnny stared too long to play it cool. “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. Call me JJ. I’ll call you Johnny. No last names.” He pointed off somewhere. “Like you said, careful with the time continuum.” He scowled. “Like the time continuum ever took care with me.”

“Huh?”

“A roadie with the Wailers warned me about time springs when they played the Castle, out between Takoma and Seattle. A drummer played his symphony cymbals one Friday afternoon as I snuck in the basement door. I meant to hole up there until the show started. Instead, I time traveled. 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?”

“Word. How could I know that a dressing room would bring me here?”

“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.” JJ rolled his eyes. “Much less ruptured it.”

“How did you survive?”

“I don’t know.” He frowned. “I couldn’t eat. I couldn’t sleep. In every direction, I saw only purple fog. Lucky I had a guitar. It saved me from dying of boredom.” He nodded, a faraway look. “My fingers took comfort from the strings.” He looked at his hands. “Science fiction I read – 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 good, right?”

He nodded. “And staying away from other players made me unique. Without any equipment, whenever I played, to me it sounded full and slabby like a Marshall 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 guitar sound like those cymbals, to find that missing chord and play it fast enough.”

“You made your guitar sound like a cymbal?”

“Finally, and I learned to play a lot of strange notes.” JJ looked disappointed. “Oh well. Too bad you can’t play some stepping-stone action on this ax. Hey! That’s a song title.”

Johnny reached but before he touched the guitar, he made eye contact. “Do yous mind?”

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

Putting the strap across his shoulder, Johnny took the vintage guitar into his arms. “I’m ambidextrous.”

“That’s about how religious I am, too.” JJ sat on the bench next to the case, watching Johnny. “I can play right-handed. I like to come from the left better.” He smiled slyly. “You can face down any 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 volume. Johnny put his foot up on the bus stop bench, standing, the way he did at the picnic table, making quick precise touches. That guitar and his fingers, they felt so right. “Your Lucille is fine,” he said, using the name that blues legend BB King gave his Gibson.

“My mother was 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 quick moves, just so. Look here now.” He put a hand over Johnny’s fingers, sliding them down the fret board to an impossible set of high notes. “Play it.”

Johnny strummed.

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

Johnny did, and then he gave his fingers a rest from that contorted place at the bottom rungs.

“See. Like a cymbal. Do it a few more times so you remember.” JJ took a puff, blew a thoughtful smoke ring. “Music is powerful, like it puts a spell on people, especially people in crowds.” He put out his smoke. “Our radio jingles, everybody knows they’re getting hustled. In your time rock and roll music, the stuff we record now, it plays in the background to make commercials convincing or to tell people how to feel about things. Nobody notices.” He managed a sarcastic chuckle. “Social scientists use our songs to engineer consent because rock music can make something wrong sound right.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“They change people’s minds, but you can change their hearts.”

“You believe that?”

“Sure. I took my audiences amazing places with music, up and down, sad to celebrating. They went home with my words ringing in their ears, words that made them feel good.”

“But how do you come up with the words?”

“That’s the hundred dollar question.” He scratched his ear. “Best I can say, do the dishes, dig a hole, just do your thing, and wait for it to come to you. When it comes to you right, your words will make your audience feel alive.” He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. “You help people feel like keepin’ on.”

“Hey coach, are we okay here?” So many people had begun to gather. Johnny felt his face warming.

JJ pointed directly overhead. “Look up.”

“K.” A steady breeze blew off the lake. Nobody burned much coal in the summer. The sky looked crystal-clear, fluffy clouds floating across.

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

“Pretty enough to play us a song.” That got laughs.

“You’d better play that funky music, white boy,” JJ said, putting him on the spot.

Johnny looked at all the people, and a tidal squirt of adrenaline numbed his mind.

\*\*\*

Nicky and the boys took the sisters down Clark to the Royal Pawn shop. Older and better than the pawnshop in Vegas, it was a divergent rocking chair on the edge of the universe. Bartlow checked out the glass pipes, went into a corner to test one. Podobnik hung on the pay phone. He slid a strip of cardboard down one of the flat coin slots, dropped a penny in the dime slot for a discounted call. He was calling about Chica. Trudy strummed a harp, figuring out how the strings compared to a keyboard. Mike Bradberry looked at sextants. This was a cool pawnshop!

A devoted fisherman, Mike hoped to buy his own ship one day. Bradberry was amazing. At an early age, he legally changed his name from Hans Lundman. One night, Mike was at the jukebox, singing along for all it was worth. When he returned to his stool, he met the Irishman that got him his job, working the Northwestern Railroad, making so much money he claimed to worry about falling off his stacks of twenties.

Washam followed Chica to the window with the notice to customers on one side, credit card logo hung on the other. “Do you have any Turkish cymbals?” she asked the lady.

The bottle blonde held up a finger. “One moment.” She stamped a few forms and dated them, stubbed out a Chesterfield and came out a side door. “You should have been here last week,” she said. “I had Buddy Miles’ drum kit with four Istanbul cymbals.” She lowered her voice. “Turkish Mehmet cymbals are, no matter how old, the best.”

“Right.” Chica nodded. “They are!”

“Steve Goodman’s putting a band together.” The pretty lady covered one eye. “Aar! They be Lincoln Park Pirates, matey.” She regarded an imaginary parrot on her shoulder. “He bought them.”

“Heck!” Chica slapped the counter.

“But wait. I do have something.”

“Oh?”

She went to a shelf beneath a wall of guitars, picking up what a gangster would call musical brass knuckles. “These are antique harem cymbals, made from the same metal as the springs under the Aragon’s floor.”

“Oh my!” Chica put a hand to her mouth.

The proprietress turned them over in her hands thoughtfully. “The son of *The Des Moines Register*’s star reporter gave his son a Pontiac Judge. First time behind the wheel the accelerator stuck, and the fellow crashed his brand new car.” She held the finger cymbals closer so Chica could see them. “In the middle ages, people who made it to their thirties without getting the plague lived long healthy lives.”

Chica scratched her head.

“You’re wondering why I’m telling you all this?”

“I am.”

“If you choose to acquire these.”

“I choose!”

“Be aware that new things to you take great care. Even your life. Until the age of twenty-seven, anything can happen.”

“Oh. That’s how old I am. I think.”

“Ah!”  The lady had a knowing look. “So be careful not to lose or damage these.”

“I will.”

“I know you will.”  She dropped them into Chica’s purse with a wink. “May they take you where you need to go.”

\*\*\*

Johnny thought he stewed in his shyness a long time, fright fraught, but only a few measures passed before he got it together. “Here goes.” He played a funky theme song he learned years ago, the whammy bar doing the work of a wah-wah. When he played, the sound came from the guitar case, loud as a car radio, getting 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? To think Chica had to smash his lighter!

“That sounds boss,” said the man with rose-colored glasses. “Like a song on the radio.”

Johnny took encouragement and kept on with that run of notes, humming violin parts. When he had it down, Johnny improvised JJ’s cymbal-chord into the mix. He went on longer than a radio song, and people dug it, man.

A girl stepped out of the double-dutch ropes. “Who wrote this?” she wondered.

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

Taking the strap off his neck, Johnny pressed the guitar into velvet and blew that bench. JJ seemed anxious. Johnny felt safe. Way he saw it, he spoke his mind in the language of music. His new friends danced their reply and smiled on their brother. 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 white boy’ song yet, either.”

“Wild Cherry.”

“Same difference.”

At the avenue, they turned right, Johnny crossing the bridge over the greenish-brown waters of the north branch. The river looks good downtown with drawbridges, the corncobs towering up from the marina, the two story Whacker Drive – the part of town that got trashed in the Transformers movie. But even there where the river first flows out of the lake, it runs only seven-yard deep. Johnny figured this more of a lake town than a river town. While Johnny mulled the way he might categorize his city, JJ led them to where four lanes of the Kennedy Expressway flowed between them and a train platform.

“Listen up, Johnny.” JJ flicked a butte. “It’s about Chica.”

“You know about her?”

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

“I drummed up enough change to pay the fare. I’m not hungry anymore.”

“Save it. We can buy a six of Schlitz Malts to take where we’re going.” He pointed northwest. “Make ourselves welcome.”

“This early?” Take him to see Chica. That sounded right. Johnny owed her that. “All right. It won’t be my first foolish choice.” Johnny bent down to pull his laces tight and tie his shoes.

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

“Leave it. I’ve got other ones I can give you.”

Then 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.

Barely twenty-seven years old, Johnny hung onto his new guitar. He ran!

\*\*\*

Leaving 428 south Clark Street, Trudy got shotgun. Jeanie sat on her lap.

Chica felt a girl vibe. “Our kitten, Vinnie,” said Chica. “It’s amazing how he’s all grown up.”

“Do you want to know what’s really amazing?” asked Washam. “Man?”

“Sure,” said Chica. “I want to know what’s amazing, man.”

“Since the beginning of time, a baby is born. It learns to talk, to walk, and it grows up.” He shrugged. “And every time, everybody is always amazed.”

“Time is amazing!” said Jeanie.

“It’s amazing that it’s amazing. Time is what always happens.”

“Yeah. And it’s amazing.”

“Like a flower looking at its seed how big it’s grown,” Nicky said, in conclusion. “Awe. It’s a plant just like me. Too bad I’m falling over.”

She counted to ten before speaking. Chica did not expect all that. Potheads! “Can you give us a ride to Norwood Park?” she asked Nicky.”

“Terry’s pad?”

“Right.”

“There’s a faster way,” said Podobnik. “The underground bike trail.”

“The ITT tunnels?”

“Yep. Nickey, can you take us to the Palmolive Building?”

“Okay.” Nicky scratched his head with a circular motion. “I think it has a different name now.”

When they pulled up at the Oak street entrance. Podobnik and the sisters got out.

“You got train fare to get back Uptown?”

“Hmm.” Tom explored his empty pockets. “Come to think of it, go around the block a few times. I’ll make it quick.”

“Cool.” Freaks said cool, not groovy. They were freaks, not hippies.

Podobnik knew the coat check girl. “Hi Ginger.” He pointed behind her. “Can we go downstairs?”

“No way, Tom.” She smoothed back her long blonde hair. “The boss doesn’t want you around because you spilled your pipe on his bathrobe.”

“Oh yeah.” He looked embarrassed. Then he smiled. “I’ll bet he still has that pipe.”

“And it’s got better wine in it.”

“Well. Can you show *them* the way?” Podobnik pointed behind himself.

“Absolutely.” Ginger folded the counter up. “There’s nothing the boss likes more than a couple of foxy ladies. They look like twins.”

“Thanks Dob.” Chica hugged him, slipping a key into his pocket, a fiver wrapped around it. She never suspected that Podobnik squealed to the time fuzz. He hit the revolving door as Nicky pulled to the curb. Bartlow was back in the shotgun seat.

Before they went down the ladder, Chica leaned over, spoke a few words: “JJ’s back in town. He called me this morning.”

“Oh.” Edna put a hand to her chin. “Are you getting back together?”

“No. I’ve got a younger man I’m traveling with. I owe him one.”

“Well!” Edna said it like Samantha Stevens. “If you don’t hang out with JJ, he thinks your sister will.”

\*\*\*

Johnny ran with everything he had, guitar swinging through Owsley’s patterns. This was serious. Johnny *had* to swing his arms to go fast enough. The weight difference threw him off. It hurt where his butte got bumped. Cold stabbing fear generated ugly patterns, an experiential stumble. Flowers and rainbows Escher-morphed into barbwire and skull.

The empty hand swung farther than he meant, massive adrenaline rush, but the longer reach felt all right. Johnny let it work for him. One lane, two lanes, three lanes, drivers’ scared faces. Don’t look! He gazed beyond the last lane, and he ran across it, pressing against the cement divider, catching his breath.

The fence on top. That was low. No train coming. JJ climbed up and stepped over, one leg at a time, jumped down. Then he reached across for the guitar, shaking his disapproving 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 his arms.

JJ studied the painted metal map. “We’re going out by the end of the line, Norwood Park.”

“Avoiding all that *crosstown traffic!”*

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

“Huh?”

“Here it is.” The gun grey train squeaked to a stop. The doors twisted aside, fast, “Sprong!”

Riding northwest/outbound in an empty car, they took the corner three seats. JJ put his feet up, and got talkative: “WLS, 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.” He sounded horrified. “This could have become America’s country music capital!”

“Whoa!”

JJ’s face got serious. “I hit the scene too hard. Now I can’t live with the intimidated way other guitarists treat me. If you hear bad news about me, don’t believe it. I will go to another time to play a different part, wooden music I hope – but not country.”

“That’s a relief.”

“Martha thinks your own time is best for you, with your temperament being what it is and all, y’know, erratically mellow with a closing time streak.”

“Who?”

“Er… Chica.”

Johnny kept quiet, thinking about all that happened since he drummed the Aragon, particularly what just happened. Sitting led to mentally rerunning his run, and that totally wrecked Johnny’s harmony. Felt it would freak him out forever, how one false move could have left him dead beyond recognition. Then again, after walking with the squirrels through tall trees and bonsai lawns, Johnny felt better, coming down easy. They entered a three story, six-apartment building, St. Louis red brick in front with Indiana limestone accents. JJ pushed one of the black buttons beside the mailboxes. The black hexagon floor tiles floated above the white ones.

“Hello?”

“It’s me.”

Buzzed in, they walked up six and a half flights of stairs. Johnny got glimpses through the railings to an open door, steadily nearing the sound of a guitar and a bass, amplified, not amplified so much the police would get a call. Johnny knew the song. He liked the driving pulse. “Good thing I brought this along.” He held up the guitar case. “So you can jam.”

“I won’t need that.” JJ stopped at a window landing. “You know how some people, you get out on a road trip, 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 and sound with his sound.”

\*\*\*

Chica and Edna stepped off the deep ladder, eyes slowly adjusting to the spot-lit subterranean space. “Brr!” Edna crossed her arms. “It’s nippy down here.”

What stark contrast, oval shaped grey tunnels converged upon this switching area. The walls and arched ceilings of the offload zone, everything looked grey. Pitching pennies against the grey wall, servers from the club upstairs wore brightly colored uniforms.

Chica regarded their skimpy outfits. “Aren’t you cold?”

“We have sweaters.”

There he was, silk bath-robe, pipe in hand, the innovative publisher’s beatnik cartoonist. “You get used to it,” he said.

Edna read the magazine. It had good articles. She hugged him. “Hi, Sheldon.” They knew each other from Hyde Park high holidays.

“Edna!” he looked astonished. “Martha! *You’re* the girls for the shoot?”

“Uh…” Edna held up a finger. “If we model for you, can we get a ride to the northwest side?”

“Sure. Anything!” He gave them long leather accessories. “Put these on.”

Chica knew the man by his work. “Really? I’ve never seen anything like this in *your* cartoons.”

“It’s for another artist.” He took out a roll of tri-x black and white film. “Clearly, I don’t depend on photos.”

“I thought not.”

“I take pictures for the other guys in front of green curtains.”

Edna got ready right away. Her sister took longer. Edna had to help. Chica had her finger cymbals, and she took great care taking them off to put on gloves. “Hold on to my purse.”

“You look like twins. I love the streaks of blonde.”

“We have Hungarian mother, dahling!” Edna said it with an accent. “From old country.”

The bearded humorist worked his Hasselblad, the camera that photographed the moon – or the Nevada dessert, depending on your memory – clicking and clucking, taking pictures while the sisters danced about the grand union, flowing green cloth. Edna sang an old song, and Chica practiced her tuned finger cymbals. Pennies clinked against the wall in time. The jazz sisters had not danced together for *so* long, Chica had that excited feeling like staying up late playing kick the can as a girl.

They heard it in the distance. The approaching train sounded like the ten-speed club going down Sheridan road past the Bahai Temple, heading toward Lawndale. Were this story a movie, you would see alternating action shots, looking forward from the back of the train, a view across the nose. Perfect legs working peddles. Fashionable flats tucked into titanium toe-clips. Athletic as a rowing team, Pan Am employees broke speed limits through oval tunnels, shaped just right for the lightest, most precisely engineered train that ever sneaked out of the Paducah roundhouse.

Chica and Edna said their good byes and looked for their street clothes. The train raced into the station – four Reynolds 531 framed railcars, each with two Pan Am girls leaning down to squeeze Campagnolo train-brakes. Eight with the freight. It looked like the August issue’s tandem bike pictorial – yellow front car, green car second, blue one behind it, caboose car, cherry red, matching paniers. Unexpectedly, the caboose riders opened violin cases and brandished bizarre weapons.

This was a tough situation. Nobody had a phone, and 911 had not caught on yet. Sheldon quietly tucked his camera away. He knew he had excellent pics.

“They must be from the future,” said Chica, a worried hand to her face. “Electric guns won’t go on the market until California outlaws gas-powered bullets.”

\*\*\*

At first, the man at the door seemed goofy, longish sandy hair, big grin, but the telecaster decorated with stickers, to Johnny that marked him cool. Who knows what country music wasn’t? Rock and roll has always been cool.

“TK, right on!” JJ held a fist up. “What’s happening?”

“Grokin’n’arockin.” They shook on it.

Johnny followed them in.

“Hey, hey, JJ!” said the bass player through clenched teeth. “Have you got one of your jet city joints?”

“Nope.” JJ handed him a matchbook with a lump. “But I’ve got this downtown roach for you.” He passed out tall cans, tore the folded rings apart behind his neck, checking if he broke all the rings.

For morning, the living room had a good crowd. Johnny knew the vibe, a band, wives and girlfriends – no Chica. Black lights lit posters. Sound turned down, *Bozo’s Circus* had won out over *Let’s Make a Deal.* Bookshelves brimmed with record albums. So did the fireplace. *The Seed, Eye*and the *Sun Times* sports section crowded the spool table. People outnumbered the alley-run chairs. Move your feet lose your seat – jailhouse rock – a cool pad.

The guitarist stepped onto the platform that filled the sunroom at the front of the apartment, working his wah-wah pedal.

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

“You know this song?” somebody asked suspiciously. “It doesn’t come out as a single until tomorrow.” Johnny recognized him from a youtube video as his favorite flugelhorn player.

The bass and the guitar stopped. Everybody awaited Johnny’s answer. With people like them, his face must be red. “I heard it off your second album, the one with your new name.” Johnny hoped his chronological half-truth would not rattle any non-spatial continuums.

“You did?”

“Doesn’t matter what they call you,” Johnny added. “Rocking!” He remembered Wikipedia: “The upcoming European tour. I’m thinking that will change things.”

“Sounds familiar,” said JJ, standing by the front door. “My man Johnny here *can* play.” He swigged his tall silver and blue can. “Maybe he should’ve gone to Europe instead of coming back in time.”

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

“Hey.” The horn player gestured past Johnny into the sunroom. “We got a piece of Trianon floor you can play on, springs and all.”

The guitarist unplugged and adjusted his two-speaker amp. He reached the black coil across the floor to Johnny. “Play something.”

“Well…” Johnny struggled to think of a song written before now. He wondered at the last tune he picked to play, a Black song for a Black audience. Was that disingenuous, bordering on interracially disfunctional? Would he play country if he went fishing downstate? Y’all instead of yousis? As far as Johnny knew, only Kenny Rogers changed genres, rock to country, without making things weird. Bottom line, guys who make cover songs sound cool have their own cool songs. Wait! Johnny had something, worked the words out walking. He opened his case, and everybody but JJ made a comment or involuntary exclamation.

“Far out!” said the guitarist. “A sonic-blue Fender *Stratocaster*. The Beatles have those.”

“It’s like yours, Honey.”

“Not quite. Mine’s a *Telecaster*. It’s built for speed. That’s built for finesse, like using a lightweight pool cue at the Family Billiards.”

Johnny jacked in, got the volume right. He adjusted the low E, tuned the other strings that the tremolo-arm stretched. Then he stepped on stage. Mortified, Johnny closed his eyes.

\*\*\*

“Pan Am waitresses that stick up Playboy models,” the cartoonist grumbled. “You can’t make this stuff up!”

“This is not a stick up,” said the blonde with the silky bun. “This is about meting out time justice.”

“Do you really think you can keep tabs on infinity?” Chica’s voice started like a question and ended angry. She was scared.

“Martha Maroquin, we tolerated you performing as Chica in the future,” proclaimed the blonde with the pixie cut. “But coming home puts you in violation.”

“My sister’s trying to go back,” Edna pleaded. “What is your deal?”

“We serve and sit sessions.” The bombshells moved in.

“Remember our training!” Chica called. And it all came back, the moves of the eight competitive animals – ox, tiger, rabbit, horse, dog, goat, the pigeon and the squirrel. All the dance lessons at the American Conservatory of Music taught their arms and legs to move for themselves: Pirouette on, pirouette off!

The action paused. “Come peacefully,” said Edna’s adversary. “Nobody gets hurt.”

Edna rock-stepped into a defensive stance. “The key to police work is enforcement,” she taunted. “Wouldn’t you say?”

“Why you!” A flurry of arms and legs, the girls in blue charged.

Flying as if on wires, Chica and Edna counterattacked. A girl fight of monumental proportions, think Cat Woman versus Batgirl, Uma coming after Lucy Liu or Laverne pranking Shirley Feeney. No rules! It could get ugly. Reading about it, your body would feel as if it were you. But somebody brought electric guns to a dance fight.

\*\*\*

“Rambling Mother Nature, *golden grain*, Providence in-bounding *on a train!”*

“Trains,” a chick whispered. “Like Steve Goodman.” The bell sounded, and JJ buzzed the downstairs door open. 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, boxcars timed right.” Johnny did a touch there, flirting with the chord JJ taught him at the projects. “You want to make money. You want a good life. Respect Father Time, take care of his wife.”

“Righteous.”

The hometown folk singer was all right. The comparison was not. Johnny put his foot to the pedal, a stand for rock! The bridge before the chorus, Johnny hardened the edge – short staccato blasts, gave way to long sensual tones.

Then Chica walked in, and Johnny’s face went hot again. Hair brushed out, faded jeans, white blouse, shirttails tied in front, she looked incredible. Her slacks hid the tall boots she wore posing for the joke page pictures. The long black gloves and the clothes pins did not register.

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

“Me either. Phew!”

“No kidding! Wow.”

“Hi,” Johnny said. “Martha?”

Chica nodded, moving her hips with the beat. “Old fashioned, right?”

“I think…”

“We look about the same age, you and I, about twenty-seven.”

“Yeah.”

She stopped moving. “But I was born first.” She brushed the moist hairs from her face. “So I can have an old-fashioned name if I want.”

Johnny was still playing, but no words.

Chica took up the slack, stepping to his mic and singing out: “Good turns come by Fah-thah Time’s hands, if you tend Muh-ther Nature’s lands.” The antique harem cymbals on her fingers sang out, acoustically unaffected by the bullet dents.

Johnny managed to sing the next refrain: “Yeah, yeah. Good turns come around.”

“Yeah yeah. Good things come *to* town.”

Chicago’s best guitarist played rhythm. Bass and horns joined in, taking the song into a jam. Chica’s resonant finger tones merged with Johnny’s haunting shredding. He found the lost chord and left out the fifth note.

The time-travel chord fit the song like Chica’s key fit the conductor booths. The sounds buzzed dizzily through Johnny’s head. Chica moved closer and put a hand on his shoulder to steady herself. As the room turned into a pointillist painting like the one at the Art Institute, JJ shook hands good-bye. “Kiss the sky, Johnny!”

\*\*\*

After dinner, they walked up the alley along the tracks toward Lawrence. Stepping through a gap in a fence, they climbed the gravel bank. Two rungs up a ladder at the end of the platform, they walked past the padlocked sand-bin. Evening rush. Nobody said anything.

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

“Believe it or not, shadow-producers patrol the time portals.” She bit her lip. “They sit in on recording sessions to keep their chosen bands in power, and they will not hesitate if you look like a threat.” Chica looked up the tracks. Johnny heard the train coming. “Watch for violin cases. They can take you out in this time or any other. They can even get you while you travel between times.”

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

She nodded. “It kept us on the other side of Lawrence from the Aragon, and…” She looked down. “The sneaking on, my boyfriend is a big star now, but he was hand to mouth when I knew him, showed me the ways to do it. The safe stations anyway.” Chica frowned. “Cheated on me with my sister, too.”

Johnny wondered what to say.

“He played guitar on the soul circuit, and I’d see him when he came to town. I was the barmaid girlfriend, such a good wife she would be.” She stepped close so Johnny could hear over the train. “What I just said, that sounded so, so like you.”

The doors rotated open. Johnny saw a few empty seats, none together. Up and down the car, passengers stood, holding bars and reading. No phones. That looked *so* strange. No phones! Johnny was going to mention it to Chica, and then he saw her in the corner of the car, peeking into the conductor’s booth.

When Johnny got there, she used a long key to open the door and locked them into their own private space. “My sister worked at the Missouri factory that made these train cars.” 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.” She dropped the key in her purse. “We will only go to Fullerton. Do not let the train lull you to sleep. Seriously. *Quidado!* When it catches up to you, time travel knocks you out.”

The train stopped at Wilson. Riders got off. Riders got on.

Johnny slid the window open. “How many years until they cool these things?” He wiped his hair back.

“Try not to talk weird with my parents.” She made a conciliatory gesture. “You want them to let you use the shower. Trust me on this one, Blanco.”

“Just call me Chico.” said Johnny, surprised with himself for flirting out of his league. “You know, Chica and Chico. Easy to remember.”

“I am sure you would like that.” She pushed him. “Move over.” Chica pushed again. This time she left her hand on his shoulder. “Queer, is it not? I had everything in the future, but what I missed, I missed sneaking on the L and having my own room for the ride.” Letting out a big breath, Chica wiggled into her seat. “I missed being with regular people.” She kissed Johnny’s neck. “Like you.”

“Wow.”

On your CTA tour of Shy-town, you look across flat white rooftops dotted with black water tanks. You see factories, parks and coal yards. In places, tall buildings on both sides give the feel of a canyon. Bored passengers stare at apartment windows that face the train, and they wonder about the deep discount, lack of self-esteem or hearing impairment that got somebody to move into that noisy home, a home without any privacy when timing slows the trains.

But if you are a starving musician, you tell yourself: “I can have a guaranteed audience every five minutes during rush hour?” Mike Royco never proved 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, just like REO and Siegel Schwall, also rumored to unpack in from the poh side of the tracks, also blue collar men.

\*\*\*

Ricocheting through time took time this time. Things happened. Steve Goodman went by with a bottle in a paper bag, weren’t no one keeping computation. Rod Stewart hid behind stacks of amplification, and Joni Mitchell turned into butterflies, above our nation. The dancehalls: Miami, Kansas City, Montpelier, fashions fluctuated. Musical inclinations expanded. They contracted. Evaporation. Condensation. Ideas in mind. Hope in hearts.

Flowers, calligraphy and diamonds superimposed within motion lines. To Johnny, it looked like Heaven. Sensational! Los Angeles venues phased in, phased out. Dylan played the Hollywood Bowl. Johnny knew the street at Universal Studios by the leaf and litter free gutters, not by Kurk and Spock taking two flight attendants into custody, an episode that he never saw. Next clock-ochet, Johnny saw the stage of the Palladium – Van Halen, back-to-back with his singer.*Dios mio!*Eddy freakin’ Van Halen! Johnny lost control. He leaned away and coughed his coffee.

Movement through time deescalated, Chica was losing that molecularly scrambled look, like successfully beaming aboard. Johnny laid his hand upon her waist. Subtly, her hip muscles vibrated beneath her velvety skin. She was happy! Then Johnny felt it in his chest. He was purring, too! His muscles massaged his vital organs, flooding his bloodstream with tonic secretions. Or something.

“Oh. My. God!” Chica wiped Johnny’s chin with a doily from her mom’s crib, popped a lifesaver into his mouth. “Johnny! You’re the next guitarist in the chain.” She kissed his neck. He felt her breath. “Like the man who lost Clapton his lunch or like Clapton making Van Halen sick when they met.”

Johnny shook his head. “I don’t feel different.”

“Well, I like you.” Chica got her hands in his back pockets. “Girl band or not, if we come back, same time, same place, will you play guitar for my act?” She looked down shyly. “At least come to my after-party.”

“I’m not worthy! I’m not worthy!” Johnny said it like Garth to Alice Cooper up in Milwaukee. Then Johnny swung his strat behind his back and pulled Martha close for a so, so long kiss.