

# **AMANDA TIGNER**

## **Systems and Channels**

“Nothing seems to make sense,” thought Calliope, nostalgic about a past about which she had little concrete idea, trying her damndest to apply metaphysical speculations and pop culture scenarios to her perception of the world as she busily adjusted her chestnut pigtails. Her overworked mind went through steeplechases, across hurdles. Calliope sneezed.

Until that sneeze, an exhausting soliloquy swam around in Calliope’s head as she waited for Chip to arrive and alleviate her boredom. She thought that she was born in 1980. She was, indeed, correct. She was born on October 4, 1980 in Portland, Oregon, as her mother and any of the hospital personnel at the scene could have told her. Her mother, Iris Sangreal, is a librarian. One might find it rather dismaying that a person of twenty-five with a college education would believe quite positively that she will never have it as good as the children’s librarian in the Grotto Heights Public Library. Calliope has been dealt many blows. In Classical Studies 201B, a course

that she took in her sophomore year of college, the spring semester, she learned that Calliope was the Greek muse of epic poetry. Thrilled, she praised her mother for giving her such a name, only to find out that Calliope had been the name of Miss Lila Devereaux's dog. Lila was an old maid, now living in a nursing home, utterly alone. But apparently, Calliope's grandfather had found her dog to be a rather remarkable animal, and Iris had, in a supreme act of filial piety, named her only child Calliope to immortalize the relationship between man and beast. At the time, Calliope had found this explanation anti-climactic at best.

"Hey you," uttered Chip, momentarily putting Calliope at ease upon entering her apartment. "Eurotrash Baby' was just on the radio; you missed it." To Calliope, this did not seem like a great deprivation. "You're not still on about the Pope dying, are you?" He hoped that she was not.

"If Gertrude Stein were alive today, would she be considered Eurotrash?" It was a fair question, Calliope thought.

"Uh, let's watch some tv. There's an old movie, from 1947, called *Morning Becomes Electra*."

"With or without a *U*? Morning as in a.m., or mourning as in grieving the dead?"

"No *U*." Actually, there was a *U*, but Chip lied, sensing that the presence of a *U* would have further complicated his afternoon.

"Okay then, let's watch it." Momentarily taken aback, Calliope wondered why she should even care whether or not there was a *U*. "Do you think that my Grandpa would have cared whether or not there was a *U*?" She asked this question in a shrew-like, pleading voice. She instinctively thought that her grandfather would not have cared, but she sought verification.

"How about some ice cream?" Chip said, trying to add some levity. "Mint chocolate

chip.” But the levity was going out of him as well. “The weather man says that a system is coming down from the Aleutians. It’s supposed to bring something in.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, Alaskan pollen or something.”

The “or something” was strangely troublesome to Chip. After the ice cream, they decided not to watch the movie, in spite of the fact that its title was lacking a *U*. They were about to plan their next course of action when the phone beckoned. It was Iris. She had found a trunk that had belonged to Calliope’s Grandpa Jay, who had died exactly eighteen months, four days, and thirty-two minutes ago, though Iris, undoubtedly, could not have recited such detailed data. Jay left all of his personal effects to Calliope, his only granddaughter, and it was therefore hers to claim. Calliope and Chip set out immediately after Mrs. Sangreal.

“I don’t know how the world will end, but Emperor Kumquat will save us all.” Chip and Calliope sang along to the radio as they drove down Roxanne Street. Calliope was very musical. The song finished, and just as they pulled into the driveway, a weather bulletin came on, reiterating the fact that a system was coming. They were both happy to get out of the car.

They had not been in the attic long, trying to unmoor what turned out to be a massive black suitcase from its jetty of Sangreal family detritus, when Chip burst out with a question. “Mrs. Sangreal,” he asked in a slightly timid manner not in keeping with his personality, “does a system, a weather system, bring anything in when it arrives?”

“Oh, well, airborne particulates, most likely.” She did not share his concern.

“How does a woman who thinks that a smart bomb will be detonated any day now not bat an eyelash at a system with airborne particulates?”

He whispered this question to Calliope, but Iris, who had excellent ears, heard him,

replying, “The weather man would tell us if the system were dangerous, now wouldn’t he?” This reply did not instill great confidence.

The old, rusted lock on the suitcase seemed an impenetrable barrier, so Chip and Calliope took the thing from the Sangreal house to his friend Bone’s house. Bone had an excellent tool kit and had often repaired Chip’s car. Surely, Bone could open the black suitcase.

By six that evening, Chip and Calliope were sprawled on Calliope’s bed, the suitcase, effortlessly unlocked by Bone, balancing precariously on her footboard, as she and Chip rummaged through the contents—photographs of Jay as a young man with various young women, pink ticket stubs, a varsity letter, a pencil. It seemed that the weather system was not coming after all. At the bottom of the pile, something caught Calliope’s attention. It appeared to be some kind of report, written by a man called Harry O’Rourke, Esq. Chip and Calliope read it together.

Harry O’Rourke, Esq.

The All-Seeing Eye  
155 High Street.  
San Francisco, CA  
October 1, 1956

Notes on Client #1203

Fern looks at Jay pensively, her eyes going right through to the back of his brown easy chair. Jay watches baseball on their new television set. Fern goes to bed early, feeling hurt and angry. Jay has a faint sense that she is in one of *those* moods again, but thinks about it only a little. He has another beer and falls asleep in the chair. Fern wakes at 5:45 a.m. the next day, Wednesday, August 21, 1956. Jay never wakes up at 5:45 a.m. Fern is still churning inside, nervous. She feels that something funny is going on.

Jay is an aerospace engineer in San Francisco, California. He grew up in Detroit, never

fought in World War II as he turned eighteen in 1947, and spent the rest of the '40s camping and sometimes at college. During the Korean War, he distinguished himself through his service in Tallahassee, Florida. While President Eisenhower was on a side trip after golfing in Georgia, a man in a black trench coat (Jay was not sure if he was military or not) offered Jay a post in the Secret Service at the White House. Jay declined after three hours of discussions with this man and went into aerospace design.

Fern grew up in a large, religious family just outside Detroit. Before she had the baby, she was very beautiful. She is still quite attractive. Jay met her on his stopover at home between the war and California and married her exactly 22 days later. Fern calls her sister-in-law (her brother's wife) and tells her whenever the baby has diarrhea. She watches television. She tells both Jay and her sister-in-law about her own aches and pains. She watches television. She can work wonders with Jell-O. She is four years older than Jay. Jay assumes that she was a virgin when they married, though they never discussed it. Jay is correct in his assumption. Fern is convinced that Jay had many lovers before they married, though they never discussed this either. She is also correct. In fact, Jay lost his virginity in 1944. He had a steady girlfriend through high school. He would have married her, but she was killed. After her, he had one night stands with many girls, often while camping with friends. He had sexual relations with many of his female pals, including Vi (which is short for Viola, not Violet), Betty, and Lena. Fern does not know any of these details. She never asked. Had she asked, he probably would not have told her anyway. There is a black suitcase in the basement.

On Friday the 23rd, Jay stays out late. He first calls home to tell Fern that he will be out late. He tells her not to wait up. So, she waits up. She wrings her hands and paces the floor. He comes in around midnight. "Who is she?" Fern asks. "What?" Jay is bleary-eyed from the martinis and stumbles into the ottoman. He is very annoyed. "There's another woman," she states matter-of-factly. "There is no other woman, now shut up and go to bed," he bellows. She does not cry and does as instructed. She goes to bed, but does not sleep. Jay knows that she is not sleeping. This bothers him, but he does not get up out of his chair. He falls asleep. The following Thursday evening, Jay stays out late again. This time, like the last time, he went out with three of his co-workers to have drinks, unwind, and talk about their designs for the nose cone of a new type of jet contracted by the government.

On Friday at 6:34 a.m., *another* car drives slowly by Jay and Fern's house and takes three quick photographs. The car is a black Ford. It is obviously them. Both cars come back and take more photographs Friday after dark. Both parties understand each other by this point. Neither party is in each other's way, *per se*. It seems ironic that Jay and Fern do not understand each other, and yet have inferred so much correct information about each other. For dinner this evening, Fern has made a beautiful green bean casserole, an exquisite Jell-O mold, and hot dogs. "Who is the other woman?," she asks herself. She has no idea how the meal materialized. She does not remember cooking it. Jay enjoys the meal, but is annoyed by Fern's mood.

There is no other woman. One woman is included among the three co-workers with whom Jay often goes out, Lila Devereaux, but Jay believes (correctly) that she is a lesbian. Lila claims to live with her sister and has told Jay that she and her sister go to the Flapping Flamingo

Club together frequently. He does not bother to explain this to Fern. It does not seem like the sort of thing that she would understand, much less believe. She might not even believe that lesbianism really exists; he is not sure. He would never ask. Fern doesn't know her husband. She only knows that he is attractive and easily bored, and for her, that is more than enough to cause a permanent state of alarm. "If only he were ugly," she must think. "If only he were my father." Fern hears a noise, then another. It is September 28.

Jay is in the shower. When he got home, his trousers were very muddy from a site visit. He flopped his briefcase onto the kitchen table on the way to the shower. It came open. In the past, Fern has always been very good about not going through his belongings, but the man with the binoculars in our car notices that Fern has begun going through his briefcase. Inside, she found several documents relating to the nose cone, sketches on cocktail napkins, half a sandwich from Pete's deli, Lila's business card, and a photo of a girl. A girl. Fern became incredibly agitated. She called Lila's number, but hung up before there was an answer. The girl in the photograph was much too young to be an aerospace designer anyway. Jay had obviously been with Lila since they were teenagers, or so Fern thought. She probably did not understand why they had never married. Fern put the contents of the briefcase back, including the business card.

Even from here, one can tell that she has become very sweaty. It is a good thing that she has never noticed the black suitcase in the basement. Fern says nothing. Her heart is obviously racing. She cannot hold her hands still as she and Jay watch baseball. It is 11:05 p.m. The people on behalf of Fern get out of their car and come up to our car. We have a frank discussion in the hydrangea bush, as we both know what is going on, and have the best interests of both parties at heart. But then Squinty notices that something is up. Instead of going to bed, Fern has gone to the bathroom. This, in itself, is not surprising as she goes to the bathroom an average of 7.5 times per day according to a man in the other car. However, Squinty notes that she has been in there a long time, that he cannot see what she is doing. Jay gets up. Something is definitely up. Someone from the other car calls 9-1-1. The cars must leave and only two of us are left in the hydrangea bushes. The ambulance arrives. Fern has slit her wrists. She never mentioned the business card or the photo to Jay. She will probably live, thanks to us.

There was no other woman. The car comes, and I follow Jay to the hospital. He is in the waiting room. I tell him that she went through his briefcase and found Lila's business card and Jane's photo. "Maybe Jane's ghost was jealous," Jay sputters. I don't believe in ghosts. There is a long pause. "You know, Jay, this sort of thing never happens to people who are no good with secrets...." He does not respond. "So, who won the pennant?" I ask Jay.  
End.

"I am named after a lesbian's dog," Calliope said, unnecessarily loudly.

Chip was frantic, trying to make sense of the contents of the report. "Yeah, and your grandmother was a nut, a real paranoid, and tried to commit suicide. And your grandfather was

involved in some weird surveillance of her with a detective. There were sets of detectives! Real '50s gumshoes. Some shit like that. Is this suitcase right here the same one in the report. Has to be. Calliope, good lord, what's this about? Aren't you floored? Don't you care?" He was transforming before Calliope's eyes.

"You're disappointed that the report made no mention of how the detectives repelled an Alaskan weather system, aren't you?" He was. There was a long period of silence, fifteen minutes of silence. A ridiculous amount of time, given the pace of modern life. The words "between your sighs" emanated from the radio. Chip had misheard, hearing "thighs" instead. Clearly, they were at an impasse: Calliope, interested in the paranoia stemming from the lack of communication in her ancestors' intimate relationship, and Chip, engulfed in a two-front war between his anxiety over the approaching weather system and his primal need to take stock of the mysteries in Sangreal's suitcase. But they are master communicators. They were both born in the year in which Reagan was elected the first time, though it had still been the Carter administration.

"Look, why don't we drive down to California tonight? I want to talk to Mrs. Devereaux—it seems like maybe she and Grandpa loved each other the way that you and I do—and we'll probably miss the bulk of the effects of this system so far to the south." It was agreed upon instantly. They reassembled the contents of the suitcase, inserted it into the trunk of his car with perhaps less decorum than was called for, and drove off into the night.

Lila Devereaux lived in a nursing home in San Francisco. The following day, Chip and Calliope entered the parking lot of the home, awed by the large sign, looking like something out of a set for Carmen. It read, "System of Bay Area Elder Care Facilities. Park in rear." They made their way inside. Mice in a maze, they wove their way through the foul stench of the end of life in

twenty-first century America. Lila's room was, in retrospect, fairly easy to find.

"There's a Miss Sangreal and her friend here to see you, Lila," said the nurse, an object in space, overfed and seemingly immovable.

"Sangreal? I should have gone looking for her," Lila quipped. But that was the last that she said of any significance. Chip and Calliope pelted her with a gentle barrage of questions on topics ranging from the breed of her dog to her thoughts on ideal love to her knowledge of weather patterns to her view of television. She merely murmured, "Can't live forever, can't live forever." While her advice had, for both Calliope and Chip, the stamp of truth upon it, it did not seem to answer any of their questions. Chip persisted with his questions, but Lila's voice grew hoarse, and finally, she gave up her mantra, and just sat there and rocked gently. They would try again the next day.

The rains came the following day. Ordinary rain. Rain like they had seen a hundred times. Was this the system foretold to them by the weather man? Calliope, wearing a Care Bears t-shirt and with her hair in pig tails, seemed a long, slender child, five feet and eight inches of a four year old. Chip was bothered by the rain. It might as well have been the poison anthrax breath of a komodo dragon, liquid seepage from a biohazard container, or some other natural or constructed biological evil. He would not go to the nursing home that day.

"It's an ordinary enough suitcase. It has handles," Calliope stated matter-of-factly, jolting Chip out of his rain, komodo dragon and anthrax induced malaise. "Yeah, it's a suitcase all right. Handles and everything. Black, capacious, dusty suitcase." Not impressed by this revelation about the ordinary black, capacious Sangreal suitcase, Chip went out of the room into the wide world of their hotel, Hotel Libra, in search of something, something to numb his awareness of the rain, sex or alcohol. Anything but rain. Calliope Sangreal was not what he was looking for. So,



though the tempest strummed along, Calliope went forth, alone, to ask Lila Devereaux. To ask what? She hardly knew. She had once read that Jimmy Carter is particularly distressed at the sight of roadkill, especially of aquatic animals, muskrats, turtles, and the like, and this, to Calliope in the state that she was in, seemed an excellent place to start the new day's line of interrogation.

Upon arrival at Lila's room, however, a momentary and unexpected wave of something akin to common sense washed over Calliope like a breaker, causing her to ask, in a straightforward manner, "Mrs. Devereaux, could you tell me about your relationship with my Grandpa Jay, and why I was named after your dog? What happened between you, if anything? How did things like that happen for your generation?" Calliope did not speak the name of Jimmy Carter, sensing that it would only complicate matters unnecessarily.

"We weren't intimate, if that's what you're asking. I didn't go that way."

An answer! She could not drink from the cup of optimism, but Calliope felt that she had at last pressed her ruby lips to the cup of knowledge. A source, a fountain was left in this woman who would soon turn to stardust, thought Calliope. "How curious."

"What were you then? Co-workers, I know, engineers, but what else?"

"You're wearing pink, and that surprises me. Some of the strangest things in this world are pink." As she said this, Calliope wondered if perhaps the nurse who looked like some sort of creature of the Nile had made Lila's pills stronger. "And what's more," Lila continued, "is that Calliope's mother helped fight the Fascists in the Spanish Civil War. She was an ambulance dog."

"That's amazing," Calliope said reverently, softly. "I can't imagine what those times might have been like, when there was a real enemy, when there was unity, dogs and people

united against Fascism in Europe.”

“The Fascists hated pink. The Flapping Flamingo Club was pink. Pink barstools, pink women, pink drinks, pink jazz. They still hate it. They’re still with us....” Calliope interrupted, interjected, “Oh yes, I’ve heard about these neo-Nazi teenagers, what losers, nothing like us kids, like us indie kids.”

“I’m not talking about teenagers,” Lila replied, almost scolding Calliope. “They’re harmless, mostly. No, I’m talking about people of my generation. We were all so paranoid, told in five hundred ways to be afraid of the Pinkos, that the Pinkos were coming, worse still, that they were among us. We forgot the Browns.” This saddened Calliope. She had hoped that their generation had been so vigilant, so unerring. Everyone erred. This hit her with all the force of the letter *U*, komodo dragon breath, pink ponytail holders with glitter interwoven, and summer rain. “Mourning Becomes Electra,” mumbled Calliope, not having the faintest idea what that meant, or even what the movie had been about on a literal level.

There was still work to be done in the sickening room, fouled by aromas of overcooked squash, human fecal matter, and Windex. It was no place for a Care Bear, no place at all, but these were desperate times. “Were you ever party to a frank discussion in a hydrangea bush?” Calliope began, unsure in what order to investigate the contents of the report, unable to develop a system capable of ordering things based upon their relative importance, or assigning priorities. Her question elicited no response. She tried others.

Chip was watching *Rumbly Friends* on tv when Calliope entered their room at Hotel Libra. “Stop pulling my tail,” one Rumbly said to another. Chip was naked, letting the glowing light of the Rumbly-filled television bathe him in pink and green and blue glory. He smelled like

sex. For several minutes after arriving back, Calliope, her hair drenched with rain, her head burning with images of her friend having had sexual intercourse with an anonymous woman, could not speak. She ate kiwi fruit. She held her toy possum. The Rumblies droned on, “Nettles taste the best when you dip them in honey, silly.”

Finally, she broke down the communication barrier. “Only people born about 1980 would ever watch this show,” she observed. Younger people would want something more sophisticated, older people would want something less intrusive. “You can’t get their song out of your head.” She was right, of course. “La la la la la la la, we’re the Rumblies and we’re coming to your town....” She had something else to say. So, she said it. “Chip, I need to go to Augusta National.”

“What? What’s that?”

“It’s a golf course in Georgia.”

“God, you’re not stalking Jimmy Carter, are you?” Chip did not think it beyond Calliope Sangreal to stalk a former President. She often went looking for things when it was not her business or she did not belong.

“This has nothing to do with Jimmy Carter. It’s about the report in Grandpa’s suitcase. Lila told me that I might find what I’m looking for at Augusta National.” This statement seemed immediately to indicate the hopelessness of her cause. She felt, at that moment, no better than the middle-aged people who marry three, four, five times, looking for something that they ought to know they can never find in a million years—in themselves, let alone in someone else. Looking for something at Augusta National seemed equally grievous.

“What are you looking for?” asked Chip, without really caring. He had tired of his Rumbly Friends and had settled on one of those shows in which music from the ‘80s is profiled. “Video Killed the Radio Star” was on at that moment, and he was thus incapable of giving

Calliope his undivided attention.

“I don’t know.” Calliope’s voice trailed off as she noticed that, besides having sex with a stranger, Chip had gotten a tattoo in the course of the day that she had spent with Lila Devereaux. “What is that, exactly?” pointing to Chip’s leg.

“You know, it’s the funniest thing. I don’t even know what it is. The girl had one, so I got one too. Looking at it now, I think it kinda looks like a Pocky. The tattoo parlour was right here in the hotel.” He almost said, “and you can get one too,” but he knew that Calliope did not want a Pocky or whatever it was on her person.

Calliope perceived something sinister in the tattoo. It did not matter whether or not it was a Pocky. At first, she thought that she was only suffering from the same paranoia that had kept Chip from venturing out into the rain. But no paranoid ever believes such things. Calliope was not sure if she was paranoid or not—such decisions were very difficult for her—but the thing was frightening. “I’m going out for a drink; I’ll be back,” she said as she grabbed her possum and ran out of the room, down the stairs, furious with the elevator, and out into the rain. Chip knew, of course, that she would not be back. She had grabbed her possum. Besides, she really wanted to go to Georgia. Calliope boarded a flight to Atlanta that night. “The Questing Beast” was playing on her iPod.

The sun shone brightly at Augusta National, dancing on the azaleas. “It’s too bad,” Calliope said to herself, “that there aren’t any hydrangeas.” The ghost of Bobby Jones was everywhere, and as she thought to herself that she should buy a very grand hat to wear at such an important and solemn golf course, Calliope realized what the tattoo represented. It was a golf club without a head, plain as day. Suddenly, golf bags took on a startling similarity to suitcases. “My God,” she said aloud, though no one but the birds could hear her, “the people of 1920 had

the Fascists and the Communists and McCarthyism, the people of 1950 have Skull and Bones and Al Qaeda, what is it that the children of 1980 have? Whatever it is, don't let it pollute this golf course." Walking past the clubhouse, she noticed a young golfer with an insignia on his bag, the Pocky headless golf club.

"What does that symbol mean?" She could not believe that she asked a strange man such a question with such assertiveness.

"Oh, hey. Yeah, I've seen it around lately. My friend Phoenix told me it's a Tlingit totem symbol. Hey, I've gotta get going, see you around the clubhouse maybe." And the amiable golfer was gone. Calliope remembered from anthropology class and time spent watching *Northern Exposure* that the Tlingit are a native group in Alaska. She did not believe for a moment that the mark was a Tlingit totem, indeed she knew that such an abstraction was not a totem, but she felt that he was sincere. Whatever muted post-horn was haunting Generation X was already active throughout the entire Pacific Coast and had spread to Georgia. "The wind howled at the mating call of the wild caribou." That line stuck in Calliope's head, reminding her simultaneously of Chip and President Carter.

After four days in Georgia, standing as a garden gnome on America's greatest golf course, snacking on fried green tomatoes in southern dive bars, Calliope got a call from Chip on her cell. It was still raining in the West, but that was not why he was calling. He had not called about the system, but rather, he thought it only proper to inform his friend that Lila Devereaux had died. Her body was to be flown to Savannah for the burial. Devereaux had grown up in Savannah, and her nieces and nephews still lived in that city. Calliope would search for them.

Beau Devereaux, who had been discovered by Calliope in the Savannah yellow pages, ran a lumber yard in nearby Francaise, Georgia. He enjoyed Jell-O pudding snacks. Like the young

golfer, Beau Devereaux was also amiable, a bored family man of about forty who liked to discuss things about which he knew nothing with people about whom he knew even less. “Say, Missy, you’ve got the same name as ol’ Auntie Lila’s ol’ dead doggie. You know that dog could sniff the socks right off a ya.”

“Yes, I used to think I inspired epics, but I don’t think that anymore.” This comment made no sense whatever to Devereaux, but he was undaunted, and on a pristine piece of canary yellow Georgia Pacific letterhead with his name printed at the top in cheery red letters, he drew Calliope a map to the gravesite. His Aunt Lila, the forgotten engineering lesbian, had been buried overlooking her father’s greatest failure, the Devereaux Channel. Calliope learned from Devereaux that Marlon Devereaux, Lila’s father, had been a brilliant structural engineer, undertaking numerous projects under the auspices of the Tennessee Valley Authority. His career ended abruptly in 1938 when his most important project to date, a giant dam and hydroelectric powerplant known in its planning stages as the Dam of the Ages, collapsed under its own weight during construction. There was much lore surrounding this blunder; all of the regional paranoids say that a government man in a black trench coat had approached him several times during construction. All that remains of the Dam of the Ages is a gash on the face of Georgia known to locals as the Devereaux Channel. Lila had joined her father there—the man who defaced Georgia and the woman who flapped flamingoes while Calliope’s grandmother tried to take her own life.

“I’ve got your radio waves and they’ve made you come for me” played on the radio as Calliope manoeuvred her rented car along the one-lane road that snaked along the river, ending at the infamous Channel. Calliope was unsure if the singer had sung “come” or “cum,” but it hardly mattered. The letter *U* did not matter so much anymore; a woman was dead. She tried calling Chip, but there was no signal. This lapse of technology was invigorating, making her feel that she

was in Eden at last, one of the cottonmouths the serpent of the Old Testament.

“Perhaps this is where George Bush should launch his next war,” thought Calliope as she drove. “Go ahead and try to signal the Apocalypse in the land of cottonmouths and Bobby Jones and Jimmy Carter. Toss the dead into the Devereaux Channel. Into the Devereaux Channel.” She wished that those four words were a song title.

Calliope parked the rental car and walked through woods as deep and thick as those of Broceliande. And then, she saw the thing, and the disappointment set in. A dead end. She had reached the Devereaux Channel, and it was shaped almost exactly like a golf club. It certainly was not the mark that she had both hoped for and feared for. The club had a head, a very pronounced one at that. “Perhaps,” Calliope thought to herself, “Marlon Devereaux had refused to be a part of this government conspiracy, so the black trench coats had sabotaged the dam. Just like Grandpa was approached by a man in a black trench coat, but wouldn’t play ball with him, and left Georgia.” A worthy observation, it seemed. “Maybe this whole conspiracy started under the Eisenhower administration right here in Georgia, not in the West, because he would always come here to play golf.” There was a welcome glimmer of coherence in Calliope’s overworked mind, but it was fleeting. Yes, she had—at least so she thought—fitted together the basic facts of the conspiracy. That she did not have any idea what ills the conspirators were planning was of little matter for her at the time. She did not understand Lila’s and her Grandpa’s love, and that was much more troubling.

Her silent reverie was interrupted by the encroachment of a coach bus filled with Japanese tourists. Their bus had run over a cottonmouth some miles back, and they were very excited. To have maneuvered that hulking thing down the slender road was truly a marvel of engineering, creating a strange foil to the Channel below. One of the girls, a Japanese girl, was

wearing a tight pink t-shirt with H-A-M-A-S spelled out in rhinestones across her breasts, glittering away in the Georgia sun like the venom from the dead cottonmouth. There was nothing more for Calliope Sangreal here.

Calliope called Chip upon returning to Savannah. She feared becoming like her grandparents. “No matter what transpired, the channel of communication must be kept open,” she reminded herself. She sensed that he was receptive, in one of his good moods in which he is capable of putting anyone at ease, even poor Calliope. She told him everything that had happened since she left California, left out not a single detail. Calliope chided him, “Hamas, you idiot, not humus.” It was another *U*, so she had to do it. He was not as well up on current affairs as he should be, at any rate, so she felt justified.

Chip is excessively fond of Middle Eastern cookery. Calliope Sangreal, on the other hand, detests Middle Eastern food. As Calliope thought about their respective alimentary preferences, she could sense Chip drifting away again, back to his pain pills and his nose drops and his boxes of Sudafed. He was two different people, at times the most maternal and reassuring man she had ever met, at others, floating around in a hypochondriac stupor. Anything to ease the imaginary pain. It seemed that before the black suitcase and the Aleutian system, she had heard from the Mother Chip much more often. “A lot of systems and channels,” she muttered to herself, inaudible to Chip. She needed the Mother today.

Lingering in Savannah, snacking on more fried green tomatoes, drinking more Blue Moon in bars that do not stock oranges, getting suntanned, watching *Rumbly Friends* compulsively as an act of modern self-flagellation, avoiding driving past golf courses, Calliope had come to a dead end. There seemed something inherent in the nature of Calliope Sangreal, this woman of the Fascist-fighting lesbian dogs, though she felt so profoundly tied to the



cynicism of her generation, that would not admit to the unsuccessful resolution of such a quest as this. Perhaps, in cynicism, lies the greatest true optimism to be had in modern American life.

When Calliope looked up from her tomatoes, an old man was hovering over her. “I heard that Calliope Sangreal was in town. Is that you?” She bristled instinctively, never liked talking to strangers. He had a northern accent.

“Very pleased to meet you, Miss Sangreal. I’ve been looking for you for a long time, ever since I found out you were in Georgia. You were named after Calliope the Dog, you know.”

“Yes, I know. You knew her mother, I suppose.”

“I did. Best damn dog in the whole world. I, too, was in Spain fighting the Fascists in the ‘30s. Well, after the wars, in ‘46, I came back to Georgia and worked for thirty years at the Marlon Devereaux House. It’s been torn down since then. A shell of a house and a shell of a man; they both had to go. Devereaux was a good man, I don’t mean any disrespect, don’t get me wrong. It was the Channel that did him in.” The British Open was on the tv above Calliope’s head, but she was too engrossed to notice. “What I’m trying to say, Calliope, is that I’d like to give you something, a lamb, in fact. Its name’s Calliope as well.”

“What am I supposed to do with a...”—her voice trailed off as she realized the gorgeous possibility. “Is it a male or a female?” she inquired with a frightening urgency that took the man aback. “I’d really like to know the sex of that lamb.”

“Female.”

Wells of enthusiasm that had been lost pondering George Bush and Georgia roadkill and systems and channels came back to her. Was it 1980 all over again? A ewe. What a bland old morality play it all was, but gorgeous at the same time. A damned morality play. The man arranged for her to pick up the lamb at Beau Devereaux’s lumber yard in four days’ time. She

never even got his name by the time he left the bar. “He had probably been a caddy for Walter Hagan,” she thought. But Calliope Sangreal had to choose her battles. She had, at least, followed the clues and won a small victory against American sanity. It inspired her. She called her mother. She wanted to go back to the University of Oregon and found a Department of Pyrrhic Victories, Questing Beasts and Canine Paratroopers. Three worthy subjects of academic inquiry, her new department would reflect the absurdity of American life. She would start the daft children of Oregon writing morality plays.

Chip sounded fairly lucid and warm on the telephone that evening, as warm as a perfect quesadilla from the little cafe at the Oregonian Oboe Conservatory. He listened through a somewhat incoherent retelling of the old man, the Fascists, the tomatoes. Finally, though she had made a commitment to herself to remain calm so as not to send him back into some sort of systemic stupor, whether weather- or drug-induced, Calliope could not contain her excitement, bursting out maniacally, “It’ll grow up to be a ewe!” After uttering these words, she laughed uproariously. Chip was nervous about Calliope’s mental stability, or the lack thereof. They had come full circle from *Morning Becomes Electra*, and he felt like nothing had changed. She bleated into the telephone. “Baaaah.” A ewe. How perfect. Calliope did not want to hang up, but she was also eager to begin making the complicated arrangements to ship herself, with ewe in tow, back to Portland.