

## Chapter 24

*The secretary and the historiographer*

Standing water on the runway caused their aircraft to hydroplane as the brakes engaged, the great machine slowing quickly as it spun into the muck beside the tarmac. The flight attendants distributed tall bright yellow plastic booties for everyone to pull over their shoes and up to their thighs, then they all got to ride the big yellow plastic inflatable slide depending from the aircraft's doorway, down into the shallow pond atop the mud, and hike through the fog to the airport, which hulked like a gray mountain on the distant horizon.

Everyone milled about in distraught confusion except for the airline staff, who had already experienced this new inconvenience and took it as a matter of course. Frank and Martin followed their lead, and held their stuff atop their heads with their arms, wading into the unknown.

In the hotels of Venice, first floor rooms proved widely available, though there was no discount. Frank was pleased to find that his mattress lay far enough above the water-line, at high tide, that it did not become saturated, and his bedclothes remained dry. He slept comfortably, listening to the waves lap against the baseboards, his shoes and luggage perched atop the dresser. There were cardboard boxes filled with tall bright yellow plastic booties on the nightstand, beside the towels in the restroom, and mounted high near the entrance. Placebo fans, whirring against the humidity in micro-abatements, abounded.

Martin popped in for a visit after wringing things out in his own room, and posited: "The fans do more harm than good. After all, they derive their impetus from processes that add more carbon to the atmosphere at large, trapping solar energy in the troposphere and raising the average global temperature, thereby melting polar and glacial ice. That melt accretes in the world's oceans, creating the rise in sea level that is making everything in this venerable city so very, very soggy."

Frank twisted water from his socks into the sink. Anywhere else, he would have rinsed this down with a cleansing blast from the cold water tap, but here that seemed ridiculous, as if the water from the tap would immediately infuse the socks he currently wore. He met Martin's eyes and smiled, saying "Yet they will upbraid us if we try to turn them off. We must pick our battles."

Foremost on Frank's mind was a reunion with Missile-Tits, and he splashed in the shallows and gondola-ed everywhere, asking after his beloved wife and his dear friend Mahmud. None had heard a whisper of their names, nor met anyone of their description. Weeks passed thus, and Frank's keel began to list. He consulted Martin, begging his friend's honest opinion of their circumstances, and Martin obliged.

"Man, I am one-hundred-percent positive that you have lost your mind! When you told me your plan, I never thought you seriously meant to plant your ass in a flooded city you have never visited, there to wait for your terrorist-cum-sidekick to deliver your estranged wife to your doorstep. You must be a fantasist!"

Frank took this in stride. He had been shown himself much, much more harshly in the lamasery. He smiled and bowed and apologized and left and went back to his room and meditated.

The next day, the water receded from the streets and walkways and baseboards back into the canals, and the city came to life like a nest of baby birds blessed by the spring sunrise. Booming baritones burst forth with commanding vibrato from the sterns of gondolas, drowning out tour guides attempting to shout over one another in a half-dozen languages, pointing things out to herds of tourists holding bright yellow plastic booties in various states of readiness.

Shops displayed postcards and kitsch in bright colors, summoning the eye to stacks of cardboard boxes displaying price tags that translated: "Water damaged. Each box one Euro."

Frank found himself intoxicated by the bright atmosphere, and took a stroll through the streets. He found Martin in St. Mark's Square, and asked if he felt any better now that the weather had cleared and Venice had awakened.

"No," lamented Martin. "The people of Venice are glad of you, Frank, for you appear to be a rich tourist, and tourism is their principle industry. They are not, however, glad of me, as I appear to be a penniless refugee, and penniless refugees are about as welcome in Italy as Uyghur people are in Xinjiang. While you have been watching the waves lap your baseboards and pining for your estranged wife, I have been cursed, threatened, chased off, harassed by police, refused service, and flatly ignored."

Frank found this news extremely disheartening. "Stick with me for now. They dare not treat you so roughly in my company. You can have your revenge by enjoying a lovely day in Venice!"

"Please do not expect me to become happy," insisted Martin.

"Perhaps not, but surely your mood must feel somewhat lightened around all of these joyous people."

"They aren't joyous."

Frank said nothing, he just raised an eyebrow and gestured at the festive color and motion all around them.

"They aren't joyous," insisted Martin, "they're professionals in a dwindling market. Each of these gondoliers and tour guides and shopkeepers must be on their best foot today, for tomorrow the high water will likely return, and no one will want to tour Venice, and they will go without."

"What about the tourists themselves? Surely they are well-pleased to finally have a proper day in Venice?" Frank was enjoying himself.

"Of course not! Each of these plastic-booty-bearing dumplings has forked over thousands of dollars in airfare and hospitality, sacrificing other holidays to take this time off from work. They have suffered the frustrations and indignities of international travel willingly, as their wishes and hopes have bent upon this handful of days for half a year or more. And for what? So they could catch cold in the gloom and watch tv in their soggy hotel rooms? They are making the most of today, as not doing so would be foolish, but each of them is furiously disappointed inside."

A handsome young tour guide passed them, giving a private spiel to a beautiful young woman as they walked arm-in-arm, smiling at one another.

"You'll at least admit that those two are happy," said Frank to Martin. "'Til now I've met nothing but unfortunate people in all the inhabited world, except perhaps in Shangri-La, but I'll bet that girl and that tour guide are very happy."

"I'll bet they're not," said Martin.

"All we have to do is invite them to dinner," said Frank, "and you'll see if I'm wrong."

He immediately went up to them, paid his respects, and invited them to join his dinner party, as Frank had reserved a table at a famous restaurant for that evening. He promised that the saor served there deserved its fame, and paired beautifully with the local wines. The young lady blushed; the tour guide accepted the offer and she followed him, looking at Frank in surprise and embarrassment, her eyes dimmed by a few tears. As they sat across from each other at the table, she said to him, "What? Don't you recognize your old friend, Johanna, Frank?"

At these words, Frank looked more closely at the young lady. Indeed, it was Johanna, the friendly secretary from his former place of employment! Speaking at the same time, they asked one another what in the world they were doing in Venice, and laughed. Then, at the same time, they asked after each other's health, and had to laugh again. Frank gestured that Johanna should begin.

"Things fell apart after you left, Frank. Your lawyers kept up just enough pressure that the lack of due process in your banishment became evident, and the whole building turned into one big game of hot potato. I think Prisse-Buldge is *still* on sabbatical in Gnome. HR found my updated resume on a job-hunting site, and tried to scare me back home by waving my medical needs in my face. I resigned in disgust, but found I had nowhere to go. Even Les and Dick had left, and-"

Frank interrupted, "Wait, you knew Les Payne?"

"What do you mean, 'knew'? Has he?" As Johanna took in Frank's comforting and deeply saddened expression, her mouth opened downward at the corners and her lower lip trembled. Tears overwhelmed her eyes as her whole face flushed, and she wept.

"It was me, it was me, it was me! Oh GAAAAAAWD!!" The scream flew from the bottom of her chest, rattling and growling and uncontrollable. "I gave him AIDS!" She gulped air, and bent over with a hand at her breast.

Frank folded his napkin atop his charger and stood from his chair. Crossing the table, he knelt beside her, holding his head lower than hers. Gently, he laid his right hand atop her left, and matched her breathing. When they had calmed, Frank said, "Johanna, Les didn't die of AIDS. He was lynched in an Act-of-Faith in Houston. He was managing the disease very well, up until the end. His death was not your fault."

Frank let Johanna weep on the back of his hand while she processed this information. Eventually, the restaurant resumed its normal din and bustle, and Martin shared a look of helpless discomfort with the tour guide. The staff were incredibly gracious, and filled their water glasses and brought extra napkins, and waited to bring the saor until Johanna had fully recovered herself.

After everyone had had a chance to wipe their mouth and register their impressions of the celebrated dish, Frank inquired of the tour guide: "It seems to me you've got a pretty sweet gig going on here, living in a story-book city, celebrating its history with other vibrant young people, while the tourists overflow your tip-jars in gratitude. What do you say, young man? How fares the life of a Venetian tour guide?"

The young man's face froze like any performer's when blatantly asked to go against the script. He was about to bounce his head and respond with smiling pleasantries, but on the first bounce he beheld Johanna, and remembered that this was a serious conversation. He sat up straight and cleared his throat, and tried to meet Frank's eye for a moment, but quickly thought better of it.

"Even before all the high water days, this place was a shambles. None of the gondoliers ever studied Italian opera, they're mostly self-trained hacks from the Philippines, or some place just as distant. One of the guys is even a Russian albino! He spends an hour every morning putting on dark make-up, and another hour every evening, taking it back off!

"The shopkeepers all had their shops bought out from under them when they missed their flood insurance payments, and now they work the very counters they built for minimum wage, while some bank they never heard of collects all their profits.

"As for us, the historiographers, things could not become bleaker. It is true that I have re-discovered a few scandalous tales of lechery, along with a handful of apocryphal anecdotes about obscurely sexy Venetians. Weaving these into my walking tours, I gained much esteem. But it matters little, now. On the high water days, I make no money at all. Increasingly rare are the bright and lovely days like this one, and even then, nobody wants to hear about some mezzo-soprano's hypocritical and jealous husband. I can't get a word in edgewise between the complaints about the weather, and the over-loud rationalizations of the foolish climate deniers!

"All day I hear, 'the sea isn't rising, Venice is sinking'. Idiots! Every place humans tread is sinking. It is the natural consequence of building a great big heavy city that gets stomped on all day. Yet, in other cities, mass becomes added, year after year, layer after layer, until the sinking becomes overwhelmed by the additions, and over the centuries cities build their own little hills. Except in Venice! Here in Venice, we can't keep growing up like that, or we'd lose our canals. We've been forced to hold the bar, as it were, in order to maintain our identity. Until now. Today, we are the harbinger. Tomorrow, Venice goes the way of Atlantis, and no one will dream of coming here anymore, and everyone will forget a part of Italy's soul forever.

"In the same manner, every day another miraculous reason to stand up and fight back is washed out of the world. Forgetful and more forgetful, the people turn their backs to the howling wind and point their faces between their knees, waiting for the storm to abate. But it's our storm, so it will never blow over until we stand up and face the rain. I try to inspire my fellows, but they are all too fearful, and claim that they don't believe we can make a difference.

"If I hadn't met Johanna, I'd have drowned myself in the canal months ago!" The tour guide said this a little more loudly than he meant to, and Frank wiped his mouth and cleared his throat. He told Johanna and her tour guide a joke, which they both proclaimed to be the worst joke either had ever heard.

Frank demanded, "Tell me a better joke, then, if you want dessert!" and the evening ended with laughter and smiles.

Having sold off all the camels and barrels of oil upon returning to the West, Frank had deposited his proceeds in a Swiss bank with an Italian affiliate based here in Venice, in order to keep Martin and himself in comfort as he waited for Missile-Tits. Frank transferred Johanna and her beaux 2,500 Euros each. "For the soul of Venice!" Frank toasted, and they clinked glasses and drank. The local wines improved with each sip!

At length, Johanna and her tour guide bade them farewell, and thanked Frank for dinner and for his patronage, and honored Martin's wit and companionability. Johanna embraced Frank and expressed her wish that they might cross paths again while in Venice, or anywhere they might be.

As they left the restaurant, Frank and Martin found that the tide had come in while they sat at table, so they had to put on their bright yellow plastic booties before descending to the street. On the walk home, Martin needled Frank. "So? Have I not won the whole bet?"

Frank's head bobbed into his breastbone in acquiescence. "Well, perhaps the money I gave them will add to their happiness."

"Or perhaps it will make them even unhappier," rejoined Martin. "In all our travels, have you noticed that a person's wealth has no bearing on their actual happiness? Your Shangri-Lites have an altogether unique view of what constitutes wealth, but everywhere else the rich folks are just as likely to feel miserable as those who have nothing.

"Of everyone you mentioned having met in your travels, the Uyghur man who had earned a day off was the happiest by a far cry. Since we have travelled together, the happiest person we've met was certainly François, and *that* scrawny old nut-ball was broke as any airport cart-driver, and old enough to die of it tomorrow. And his happiness was born of cruelty, so much so as to be self-mitigating in the grand equation."

Frank's brow furrowed. "Well, now, what about the folks on the road to Lhasa? They were vibrant and healthy, and knew just where they were going."

Martin looked Frank in the eye. "The journey to Lhasa is a pilgrimage. One does not undertake a pilgrimage out of comfort and certainty, but out of the deepest spiritual yearning. Each of those you met on that road felt profoundly compelled to seek

something that was missing, every morning when they woke, for a long time.”

Frank pondered this as they crossed the threshold into their hotel, where the particular sub-strain of mildew that dominated the corridors greeted them with a now-familiar funk. They sloshed through ankle-deep water until they arrived at Frank’s door. Before they parted for the night, Frank observed, “Well, at least one thing reassures me. Everywhere I go, I run into people I never expected to see again. If the red sheep can reappear in the Black Sea, and Johanna can be found crossing St. Mark’s Square, it’s quite possible that Missile-Tits will appear at any moment!”

Martin shook his head. “I hope she’ll make you happy one day,” he said. “But I strongly doubt it.”

Frank changed the subject. “Have you heard of this senator, Pococurante? I’m told he lives in a beautiful palace on the Brenta, and always gives strangers a courteous welcome. They say he’s a man who’s never known sorrow or trouble.”

“I’d like to see such a rare specimen,” said Martin.

They bade one another good night, and Frank e-mailed the senator, requesting an audience for the very next day.