

Chapter 21

How Frank and Martin reasoned with each other as their aircraft approached France

The “Fasten-Seatbelt” light popped on with a friendly chime, and the pilot announced their descent into Bordeaux. The will to sleep had left them, so Frank passed the time querying Martin.

“Have you ever been to France?”

“Yes. I’ve travelled in several provinces, and visited Paris. It was a popular weekend destination when I was at Oxford, though as a divinity student I had to rely on the charity of my peers for such adventures. It is a wide and varied land.”

The subject seemed to bore Martin, so Frank moved on. “Do you believe the world began as a great super-continent, a Pangaea?”

“No. It could not have begun that way, or the planet’s spin would have been sorely affected, and wobbly. It must have been an intermediate stage in the arrangement of the earth’s tectonic plates. Perhaps it is responsible for the tilt of our axis relative to the sun, which creates the seasons that bring so much wonder and variety. We should consult a planetologist.”

“What about those who proclaim that the earth is flat?”

“Don’t be stupid. We’ve just taken a great circle route from Kashgar to Bordeaux, though we had to duck around Ukrainian airspace. Why do the airlines bother? Because those routes take advantage of the curvature of the earth, which is a spheroid, saving time and fuel by climbing less while traveling the same distance.

“Such cockamamy theories represent the efforts of cruel despots, who seek to confound and divide the population. They’re designed to appeal to cowards who cannot accept or comprehend a universe of endless void. The notion threatens their antiquated cosmology. For them, God *must* be waiting just on the other side of the clouds.

“They have neither the courage nor the imagination to incorporate the ever-accelerating growth of our trove of knowledge about the stars and planets and galaxies and nebulae. They jump happily at a set of cherry-picked rationalizations pocked with glaring holes of omission, adding to all the damn noise and confusion, choosing the role of blind beasts just when the world needs more sharp eyes.”

“For what purpose was the earth formed?” asked Frank.

“To drive us mad,” replied Martin.

“No, really!” insisted Frank.

“Very well,” replied Martin. “The earth was formed just like every planet, by the interplay of cosmic forces. There is no purpose behind such things, at least none that we can comprehend. Since the earth became covered with people, they have driven one another mad.”

“Do you think the joke I told you about the girls and the monkeys is funny?”

“No. But I understand why so many people from the ancient world find it so.”

“I confess, I have been curious about that,” admitted Frank.

Martin took a deep breath, and explained. “When someone from Tabriz, or anywhere you visited on your tour of the Middle East, thinks of Americans, they don’t think about Elvis and NASCAR and Mount Rushmore. They think about the Americans they have met, who are oil men, soldiers, and operatives.”

“What no one in America understands, but everyone in the Middle East suffers daily, is that the operatives are king makers. They fund and advise despots, because it is much cheaper and easier to give wealth and power to a loyal handful, who will obey your whims, than it is to promote actual democracy and individual empowerment. Given the chance, of course the people will realize the value of their resources, and insist on fair trade. So they must be held down beneath an iron fist.

“Sometimes this works, such as with the House of Saud, Qatar, Kuwait, and Iraq under Saddam Hussein before he went rogue. Other times, the backlash is severe, and you get Khamenei in Iran, or the Taliban in Afghanistan, or ISIS. Either way, the people suffer. In time, they give voice to their suffering, and so enter the soldiers. Our soldiers. They kill indiscriminately, nonsensically. A man carrying a bucket and a fishing pole becomes the target of a drone strike. Another man, picking up his children from school, is shot by a sniper as they run to his arms, his head exploding and his brains spattering across their

terrified and screaming faces.

“Why do you think our soldiers all come home with such horrific PTSD? Anyone in possession of a human soul would struggle to readjust after being compelled to commit such atrocities.

“Then there are the oil men, who stroll calmly through the midst of all this suffering with an air of approval, boasting about their clever deals and soaring profits. The people of the Middle East assume that every American understands all this and applauds it, and that is why they hate us. That is why they think it very funny to hear you say, ‘We fuck everything’”.

Frank sat back and thought about this as the wing flaps and landing gear groaned through their approach procedures. “Do you believe,” said Frank, “that people have always slaughtered each other as they do today, that they’ve always been liars, cheats, traitors, ingrates and thieves, weak, fickle, cowardly, envious, greedy, drunken, miserly, ambitious, bloodthirsty, slanderous, lecherous, fanatical, hypocritical, and foolish?”

“Do you believe,” said Martin, “that a bear shits in the woods?”

“Yes, of course,” said Frank.

“Well then,” said Martin, “if bears have always had the same character, what makes you think that people may have changed theirs?”

“Oh!” said Frank. “There’s a big difference, because free will-”

This discussion was still going on when the plane landed and taxied to the gate in Bordeaux.