

Chapter 16

What happened to the two travelers with two girls, two monkeys, and the infidels who sneak out to night clubs throughout the ancient world.

Long before they reached Tabriz, it had become understood by everyone with a cell that the Old Hoosier Caliph had been murdered with a ceremonial scimitar by the New Hoosier Caliph, who stole his clothes and weapons and beard and could shoot an assault rifle from the passenger window of a bouncing truck. Enthusiasm beyond their wildest expectations met Frank and Mahmud as they came to the narrow, dusty streets of the city. Timbrels and dancing, palm fronds and scented oil greeted them.

Frank bade Mahmud take a wide turning toward an open, paved area. Mahmud spun in figure-eights, leaning into the potholes to bounce the truck as much as possible as Frank fired his assault rifle from the passenger window. Everybody went crazy! Frank gave them an encore, then Mahmud drove them to the bazaar. They found themselves upon a wave of celebrity as they exited their truck, and passed the evening in such revelry that it sparked a strategy for Frank and Mahmud and some of their new friends.

Frank had read that there was a total ban on alcohol and other such indulges in the Arab world, and so felt astonished at just how drunk he got at the bazaar in Tabriz without even trying. Mahmud had even provided him with bhang, promising the best of all possible worlds. Frank conceded that while most of his complaints had, in fact, fallen from his mind, he felt the urge to puke and to sleep at the same time. Mahmud apologized profusely, and suggested that next time Frank only take half.

It was then that a man approached, and told them a joke. It didn't seem funny to Frank, but Mahmud laughed a great deal. The man said, "I think if you take this microphone, and tell that joke, Hoosier Caliph, you will make us all very rich!" He was holding a karaoke mic, and pointed it at Frank. "I'll bet you a night with my wife!"

This notion terrified Frank, to the point where he dared not say no, and have to argue with this man. He took the microphone and began, in clear and simple English, like the comedians on the internet. "I was down in Nicaragua hunting-" Frank paused for effect and made eye contact with the air above his audience, "Nicaraguans." He waited for a laugh and didn't get one. "And I came to this riverbank, and running along the bank, I see two bare-ass naked women." A couple titters came then. "I kid you not, these little bronze Nicaraguan goddesses aren't wearing a stitch, I mean, not even beads and feathers." Frank got a few giggles. "And these two little monkeys, I mean American monkeys, long arms and very stupid; these American monkeys are biting these bitches on the ass!" That got some full-throated laughs. Frank warmed to the task.

"Anyway, I see these monkeys chasing these naked women and biting them in the ass, and I mean I'm out huntin', right? I've got my rifle, brand new scope, I take a bead on those monkeys and from two hundred yards it's nothin'. I cap them both, Dap! Dap!" The area of the bazaar around the karaoke speakers had fallen silent. Frank's audience was rapt. "And the naked women start freaking out! Moaning and weeping, they pick up these dead-ass long-armed stupid monkeys and stroke their bloody fur, like someone just shot their favorite dog, you know?" Some of them did know, and made sounds of assent. "So then this dude pops up and asks me why I shot the women's lovers, and I'm like, Whaaaaat?"

People started really laughing then, engaged and unselfconscious. "And he's all, 'Yeah, that was super un-cool, those girls loved those monkeys. You just broke their hearts.' So I asked him, 'Wait, in Nicaragua you let your daughters fuck monkeys?'"

"And he says, 'This is America! We Fuck Everything!'"

The crowd went wild. They lifted Frank up and carried him on their shoulders to an open square. Someone handed him a machine gun, and Mahmud motioned that he should fire it into the air as the people carried him about. He ran through four belts of ammunition before their arms grew tired and the cheers abated.

With their new friend from the bazaar in Tabriz, Frank and Mahmud made a circuit of the big cities, bouncing their truck around oil refineries, playgrounds, hospitals, universities, and mosques while Frank fired an assault rifle from the passenger window. Then, he would tell his joke, and everyone would go crazy and fuel their enterprise with cash and hospitality in abundance.

They played in Baghdad, Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Kuwait City, Islamabad, and Lahore. Someone posted a video that got a billion views! They became rich, and spent their days composing ultra-concise burst transmissions to their aids in urban areas concerning the disposition of accrued resources. Frank found himself trading in camels and barrels of crude over a satellite phone, and wondered what Les might say about that.

In Dhaka, the weather struck again. With the typhoon, the air turned to water and the ground to flowing mud, and they could not swim up for breath. Frank and Mahmud made their way north on mule-back, and felt lucky about it. The air chilled as the mountains came to own the sky before them.

In the hills north of Dhaka, nobody cared that Frank was a Hoosier Caliph. They didn't think his jokes were funny, and they had no interest as to what he did in the passenger seat of his bouncing truck. Frank and Mahmud learned to hide their carrots.

Their mules were impossible to hide, however, and so were ultimately expropriated by mountain villagers, as reasonable as they were numerous and well-armed. They encouraged Frank and Mahmud to continue on foot. At eight thousand feet, Frank began to despair. Everything was too little: his desert attire, their water, their food. Even the very air offered less in this place.

At nine thousand feet, they came unto a wide green meadow with a broad brown trail running across it, and upon this trail they met a bright-eyed woman with rosy muscles and a relaxed smile. She taught Frank and Mahmud how to breathe and stretch to become warm and keep walking all day. Others came along the trail who followed these same practices, and Frank and Mahmud grew into them out of necessity.