

Chapter 5

Hurricane, Plane Crash, Four Tornadoes and a Blizzard, and what happened to Frank, Les, Neil, and Bill

Frank, Les, Neil, and Bill were exhorted to remain in their seats, and to refrain from making nuisances of themselves, until further notice.

All the other lights flashed on and off as the airplane humped and dove, wracked by prodigious gusts of wind that challenged the vehicle's joints, and tossed Frank at horrible angles with jarring rebounds. Yet the "Fasten-Seatbelt" and "No Smoking" lights stayed lit, bright and even through all the turmoil.

At last they suffered a mighty fall, the terrifying sensation of weightlessness ending with Frank's kidneys bouncing suddenly down to his feet, then back home again, as the wings found air. The plane calmly changed course, and the captain engaged them once again.

"gAahh... Folks? Thanks for, Aahh. Haaaaaaangin' in there. We're aahhhh... We're okay, and we're gonna be okay. That's the good news.

"The bad news is, Aaaaah... that bit of patchy weather was AaaaaaaahhHurricane Arlene. Turns out she, ahhhh, shifted direction suddenly and has stalled over the, Aaaaaaaahhh, Houston area.

"We've been re-directed, but, AaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahHonestly, folks? We are just about out of fuel, so, Aaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh... We're gonna need your, aaaah, help. To perform aaaaaa safe emergency highway landing, AAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH..."

What the pilot understood, but was not permitted to say, was that an executive for his airline had made waves as a Pioneering Intellectual by combining "Just-In-Time" supply chain strategy with "Good Enough" design parameters to create the "Just Enough" approach, lobbying the FAA to rescind profit-killing regulations, and that is why the aircraft carried just enough fuel to get them from Chicago to Houston.

There was a considerable pause during which the passengers looked to one another in an effort to gauge their own need to panic. Frank thought of Missile-Tits, and wondered if they might soon be reunited.

The captain chimed in again before anyone's anxiety could bloom into unhelpful behavior. "Now, our Aaaahhhh passengers from the Houston area will understand. Folks? Aahh, this is Texas. Back in Chicago, the troopers might have shut down a half-mile of interstate for us, but Aaaaahh, down here it's us against them, and Aaaaaaaahh some of these folks don't take relative mass into account when they make decisions. So for everyone's safety, please, stay in your seats with your seatbelts fastened uuuuuntil the aircraft comes to aahh complete stop.

"Aaaaaaaahhh, thank you for flying with us today, and aaaaaaaahhhennjoy your stay in the Houston areaaaaaaa."

Seconds later, the aircraft slammed nose-first into the center lanes of Interstate 10, West-bound. The fuselage cracked in two, and the front half exploded in flame as it ground into the pavement, taking Neil and Bill with all the champagne and blueberries.

Tucked into middle seats back by the rear lavatory, Frank and Les were well protected by the cushioning of their fleshy co-passengers. Frank crawled out from beneath his wheezing benefactors, and found Les, pulling him free of the teeming mass of blubber, charging cords, and trail mix. Together they climbed out of the torn wreck and into the unbroken wind of the hurricane, screaming west down I-10 and pelting them with the loam of the city, swollen by the waters of the gulf. A third survivor climbed out to join them, and they huddled in the lee of the tortured fuselage until the wind and rain abated.

Irredeemably wet and shivering, Frank and Les made their way toward downtown Houston with their new friend. The air was perversely still, after all its great motion, though quite damp. There was no traffic to disturb their progress. The entire city had come under flood, and Frank could see water lapping in the streets as they approached.

"Opportunity knocks!" exclaimed their companion, and excused himself to pilfer an abandoned tenement.

Staring at the ruined city, Les stood dumbstruck. "What sufficient reason could explain this phenomenon?" he asked.

Frank had moved well past reason, embracing the apocalypse. He strode ahead seeking the problems below that surely waited upon solutions, hoping to honor the grace and charity of Neil and Bill, whose conference had now been canceled. Their new friend reappeared, flush with depraved intent bolstered by a fan of soggy cash. This he displayed with a flourish at every lady they came across, regardless of her arrears, until a girl with limp braids and empty eyes hopped from her rooftop to follow him with such an artless expression of bald need that Frank felt his stomach turn.

It was then that the first tornado struck. The roiling warm-front of Hurricane Arlene, pressing her way across Texas, had

encountered a polar vortex thrusting down from Saskatchewan, and the violence of their interplay had spun the sky.

The dull silver light failed suddenly beneath a new low blackness as the loam that Arlene had driven uphill was now spun back toward the sea by a howling twister. Frank and Les could not seek low ground, as the city stood in flood, so they took shelter in the doorway of a strip-mall church.

When the tornado had passed, their new friend found them again. He had acquired a bottle of adderall and a pint of horribly cheap vodka. Frank and Les put him off until the second tornado arrived, and he brought forth a healthy crop of mushrooms and a pack of cigarettes. These indulgences, wantonly applied, sufficed to sustain their spirits through the third tornado, and the fourth.

During all of this, their lips loosened and they got to talking. Les addressed their new friend, curiosity overcoming his struggle to find the words. "Man, how could you fuck that chick, man? She was like, ... I dunno, just, you know, like ... doin' it that easy just for the money, man. You know?"

Their friend replied, "Yes, I do know, much better than you. That girl was miserable and poor, and now she's well-fucked and rich! I did her as much a service as she did me amid all this hell and misery, and you can't reason that away. In your best of all possible worlds, can we not find some joy amid the agony you insist is so abundantly necessary?"

Before Les could formulate a decisive reply, the fourth tornado passed, and the polar vortex arrived in a bright white blizzard. The emblems of the church became visible in the sudden light, providing sufficient reason for their friend to seek other accommodation. A calendar in the window proclaimed today June 13, though their vision was blurred by the driving snow.

"This is June in Houston?" wailed Les.

"Indeed," Frank replied, "Neil and Bill and Carl had chosen this date as the least likely to incur interference from the weather. Tornado season is said to be ending, and Hurricane season still quite young. As for this snow, it has historically confined itself to winter. Those sages did mention, however, that the climate has already altered so severely that now all bets are off."

"Still, surely this is for the best. For if the blizzard should follow the tornadoes that came on the heels of the mighty hurricane here in Houston, today in Zimbabwe they shall have soft sunlight and a gentle breeze."

The air beneath the low clouds of the tornadoes had been warm, but the wind that blew the snow was cold. The glass and aluminum that formed their berth groaned, and a piece of the storm-wracked sign above fell and wounded Frank's neck and shoulder. His own resources could not staunch the bleeding.

"Les! I need your help, man! I..."

Yet Les Payne had grown agitated. Beset by the mounting evidence provided to them in Houston, he searched his mind for reason sufficient to absorb these events without abandoning his optimism. He paced and gestured, heedless of Frank's injury. "All of this is nothing new. Why, already this year tornadoes have leveled swaths of Kentucky and Mississippi! Same causes, same effects. There must be an atmospheric river connecting all three!"

"Nothing is more likely," agreed Frank, "but please help me staunch my bleeding neck!"

"Likely?" Les shot back. "I submit that the fact is demonstrated!"

Frank passed out from blood loss, and Les obtained bottled water and gauze from a store whose frontage had cracked open in the storm. After applying these, the two slept in the doorway, utterly exhausted. In the morning, they were discovered by the preacher of the little strip-mall church, who seemed pleased to find survivors with enough sense to seek the shelter of the lord.

The congregation came to join them, one car-load at a time, bearing home-baked desserts and shrink-wrapped pallets of bottled water and unopened boxes of tampons. Les sought to comfort them, assuring them that all was for the best. "If a hurricane makes landfall in Houston, it could have done so nowhere else. It is impossible for things not to be where they are, for all is well."

Hearing this, the preacher came to sit across from them, and spoke up politely. "Apparently, you do not believe in original sin, sir; *for*, if all is for the best, then there can be no fall, and no punishment."

"I humbly beg your pardon, sir," said Les, even more politely, "for the fall of man, and his curse, were necessary components of the best of all possible worlds."

"Then you don't believe in free will, sir?" The preacher's congregants were massing around them, consternation in their faces.

Les pressed on, heedless. "Excuse me, sir, but freedom can coexist with absolute necessity, *for*."

When Les pronounced the word "Coexist", the preacher nodded to his congregation, who seized both Les and Frank, and

brought them to a dusty storage room. They were bound hand and foot, and gagged, and sat down between a rack of moth-bitten choir robes and a great foam Tower of Babel meant to fall before the enthusiasms of rambunctious Sunday-schoolers.