

## Chapter 6

*How a fine Act-of-Faith was performed to prevent intemperate weather, and how Frank was beaten up*

As evening came, Frank and Les were hauled to their feet and frog-marched out to a waiting minivan, then shoved onto the thin carpet of the open trunk amid the crumpled shrink-wrap and roughly used cardboard left over from a day spent in disaster relief. Famished, they set their fingers to grasping up crumbs of graham cracker and lemon curd and sprinkle-laden gobs of chocolate frosting.

Their repast became complicated by the bounding of the minivan as they left the paved roadway for a humbler thoroughfare, which gained altitude until they arrived in a parking lot beside an open natural area. Frank and Les were left in the minivan while their captors exited and put on billowing white robes and pointed white hats. Then they were hauled out and fitted with smocks made from burlap sacks.

Upon Frank's smock was painted a large ear, upside down, in dark green. Upon Les's smock, a great open mouth spat flames in bright red. Cars were pulling up and emptying out and people were donning white robes and pointy hats all around them. Frank and Les were soon joined by other be-smocked persons, and they learned that Les would hang for blasphemy, while Frank, who had listened with an air of approval, was in for a surprise.

Their cohort included a young man who had been caught reading a book during a football game, a boy who had gone to school wearing a shirt that exposed his navel, a man who had applied for a marriage license with a woman whose skin was noticeably lighter than his own, and a woman who had snuck back to Texas from Mexico in order to search for her son. Five years previous and in his infancy, he had been ripped from his mother's arms and dumped in an over-crowded cage with no explanation and no record, in fierce compliance with the most compassionate and responsible of all possible immigration policies.

A bonfire blazed ahead, and a sound-system pumped out J.S. Bach's "Sheep May Safely Graze" a little too loudly, in order to cover the thrum of its generator. A great assembly of people in white robes and pointy hats already stood there. As the stragglers found their places among the throng, the organ flutes diminished. A young woman from the Houston Christian Ladies' Auxiliary took up a microphone and sang "The Star Spangled Banner" very badly.

Everyone sang along, even Frank and Les and the mother from Mexico. It was easier on the nerves than just listening. Frank and Les and their new cohort were then made to march in procession, and an ominous bass drone shook from the sound system, punctuated by drum strikes shimmering with digital echo. It reminded Frank of the evening game shows he once had watched with his beloved Missile-Tits. When they reached the fore, the music stopped abruptly, and the preacher from their little strip-mall church stood and took up a microphone. He wore a robe and pointy hat in red silk, adorned with black crosses.

"BLESSED BE!" His voice came out over-loud, and the crowd murmured his words back. "The LAWD is Aahn-greh!" He announced. The crowd made noises of assent. "He hath looked down upon the wickedness of the people of Houston, and in his infinite compassion and wisdom sent the tempest, as a feah-some warning."

People in the crowd reassured one another, saying, "It was a warning." The preacher continued.

"A WARNING to the snobbish, who hold themselves above ou-ah wholesome cultural traditions. A warning to boys and girls who don't mind they eld-ahs, and a warnin' to they PARENTS, who surely know bettah. And them good Texans at that! The Lawd is angreh with you, folks!

"A warning to the grubbing foreignahs, come to soak up the blessin's earned by the hard work of the American people and steal ou-ah birthright! Ye got no place here!"

Low echoes of "No place for you" and "We're full-up" and "Go back to where you come" echoed 'round. When the enthusiasm began to diminish, the preacher took up once again.

"A warning to those who don't keep their rightful place. You are ugly in the sight of the LAWD! To blasphemers, who come to Houston with their new-fangled notions, speakin' of cause and effect, and sufficient reason. Bull! Perhaps they come for that conference of the iv-ry tower scientists, come to tell us about sea-level rise and degrees in Celsius. The lawd is moved to anger by your arrogance! We've just had a hurricane, four tornadoes and a blizzard in the space of a single day. We are busy cleaning up, we don't have a lick of time for your boring science class!"

The crowd erupted in cheers of agreement. A massive wooden cross, hidden in the darkness behind the preacher, suddenly revealed itself as it took flame.

"We know what the Lawd demands of us! We must cleanse our homes, our city, and one day, heaven willing, the whole state of Texas. We must destroy these abominations that so anger the Lawd, and in so doing earn his grace. Now let's lynch these

goddamned bastards!"

Everyone began shouting and pumping their arms, and The Scorpions' "Rock You Like a Hurricane" began to play loudly over the sound system. Frank was beaten in time to the music by men wielding canoe paddles as Les and the others wearing smocks were strung up by their necks from the lowest limb of a rangy oak.

Before the fire could consume the enormous cross, cloud-cover rolled in behind a high cold wind, and everyone's cell lit up beneath their robes. Another tornado howled its way toward Houston, disrupting the Act-of-Faith and dispersing its participants in a panic and uproar.

Terrified, bewildered, frantic, covered in bruises, and shaking all over, Frank said to himself, "If this is the best of all possible worlds, what are the others like? Being beaten has become a matter of course, and no cause for complaint, but why must Les and the others hang dead from the tree? And Neil and Bill, the kindest of men, did you have to be lost in the fiery crash? And Missile-Tits, my darling wife, murdered by hateful charlatans!"

Frank was moving to cut down the deceased and lay them to rest when a voice spoke from the darkness. "Leave them, or there will be trouble over it. You must come with me, out of the weather." Frank recognized one of the little old ladies from the strip-mall church. Her affiliations inspired little confidence, but Frank went along anyway, reasoning that he had few choices.