

Chapter 30

Conclusion

Mahmud had a green thumb, and an astonishing talent for haggling in the markets of Istanbul, so they were able to bring home enough money from the sale of their produce to keep them all alive. Yet the work wore him out and he complained often. However, these conditions were preferable to those he would find in Kabul, so he chose to stay.

Les missed his bar, but had grown too infirm to operate it, and so felt glad to have a comfortable place on the farm. Martin had become more certain than ever that all people throughout the world were equally wretched. At times, he felt called back to his work as a shepherd, but for now he was glad of a reprieve from the abuse universally heaped upon all members of his profession.

Frank went through his luggage and his pockets and dug out every moldy seed and water-logged thumb drive from Shangri-La, and put together packages and mailed them to prestigious research institutions. When the National Science Foundation in Washington, DC received Frank's envelope with a postmark from a rural village on the Sea of Marmara, they exposed it to ultra-violet light and X-rays for twenty-four hours, then burned it to ash at one thousand degrees Fahrenheit, coated the ash in PFAS chemicals, and dumped it 600 miles out in the Atlantic Ocean, in accordance with regulations adopted as part of the Patriot Act.

The Swedish Academy of Sciences returned Frank's package, explaining that he had a lot more work to do before they would consider his submission. Beijing University never received their letter, which sat forgotten at the bottom of a bin in the customs office at Kashgar airport. All the rest had proved too water damaged to be useful. Frank held out hope that some of the seeds may have taken root along the banks of the river that had born them to Xinjiang province, as it flowed on through China all the way to the big city at the edge of the world.

Frank's farm boasted a stunning sunset view over the Sea of Marmara, and there they saw storm-wracked fishing boats at their labor, and gleaming yachts at their leisure, and great billion-dollar warships on their way to the Black Sea to get blown up. These sparked conversation, but when their tall shadows passed over the horizon Frank and his cohort found themselves beset with boredom.

Eleanor could not sit still, even though every motion pained her, and complained that listlessness grieved her even more. "I'd like to know which is worse: to be raped a hundred times by human traffickers, to have one's uterus involuntarily removed, to survive a mass shooting and be beaten, or hanged in an Act-of-Faith, to wake on a cold gurney while being prepared for dissection, to empty trash on a ferry boat - in short, to suffer all the miseries we've gone through - or to stay here and do nothing."

"That's a hard question," said Frank.

These remarks gave rise to new reflections. Martin concluded that humans were destined to live in either the convulsions of distress or the lethargy of boredom. Frank did not agree, but he held his tongue. Les admitted that he had always suffered horribly, but, having once maintained that all was for the best, he still maintained it, though he did not believe it.

One day, Johanna and her tour guide arrived suddenly at their gate, shivering and penniless. Weeping, they bore sad news. With the Italian Prime Minister's blessing, the corporations Shell and Disney had purchased the entire city of Venice and begun converting it to a theme park for water sports. Speedboats and jet-skis now ripped up and down the grand canal, dragging para-sailers and water-skiers. Zip lines criss-crossed Saint Mark's square, and all the shops now sold tumblers and keychains and plush toys bearing the image of a grinning dolphin in a red- or blue-striped gondolier's shirt.

Johanna and her beau had fled in disgust. They moved to Greece, cheated on one another, broke up, got back together, ran out of money, spent some time in jail, and finally stowed away on a mega-barge bound for Istanbul. Their inquiries had led them to the ferryman, the tumble-down resort on the seashore, and ultimately to Frank's farm.

Martin gave Frank an "I told you so" look, and Frank looked back, inquiring. Martin said, "I conjectured that the money you gave them would not improve their station, and now here they are worse off than ever. Just so, you and Mahmud once had bank accounts worth millions, and pockets full of diamonds, and all of it is now gone."

Les and Johanna shared a warm hug, and Johanna wept and proclaimed her delight in seeing her old friend still alive. After everyone had a chance to tell their story once again, they all remarked on how surprising these events had proved, and how none of them would ever have guessed they might one day share a farm on the shore of the Sea of Marmara.

This new turn of events prompted them to philosophize more than ever. There lived in the vicinity a famous cleric, in truth a dervish, who was known as the best philosopher in Turkey; they went to consult him. Les began, "Sir, we've come to ask you why such a strange animal as a human being was ever created."

“Why are you concerned about that?” asked the dervish. “Is it any of your business?”

“But sir,” added Martin, “there’s a terrible amount of evil in the world.”

“What does it matter whether there’s good or evil?” asked the dervish. “When the president sends a shipment to Egypt, does he worry about whether it goes by air or by sea?”

“Sure,” replied Frank, “but there’s also a lot of carbon in the atmosphere.”

“Ah!” exclaimed the dervish. “That is a different matter altogether, which is everyone’s business and worry.”

“Then what should we do?” asked Les.

“Well, whatever you do, don’t keep quiet! Write letters. Organize boycotts. Defend champions. Glue yourselves to roadways and works of art. If you ever get the chance, punch an oil billionaire in the face!” Frank and Melissa exchanged a look then, and she smiled more broadly than he ever expected to see again. “Show up wherever the frackers are, and shout at them and smash their machines and piss them off and keep them up at night, and run away or get arrested. Show up wherever the lawmakers are changing the definition of ‘Green Energy’ or opening protected lands for drilling, and call them liars and fools and hypocrites and murderers, and tell them you’d rather vote for a pig in lipstick.”

“Should we stop driving cars and buying anything made of plastic?” suggested Frank.

“If it makes you feel better, but that won’t help.”

“Why not?”

“For each trip you take to the market on foot, you lose an hour you might have spent writing a letter to a manufacturer, or a lawmaker. Meanwhile, a group of teenagers is driving around in the country, revving their engine and burning rubber on the pavement and belching black clouds out into the sky. Up the road, a meticulous young mother is pouring carbon out from her tailpipe so that her engine can supply power to the outlet that feeds a little filter-clogged hand vacuum that she scrapes furiously over the already-clean carpet of the trunk of her minivan.

“Worse, those are but droplets next to the torrent of tanker spills, pipeline leaks, and train derailments that never get cleaned up by the bloated and myopic mega-corporations who are too busy patting themselves on the back for having learned the trick of pissing into their own mouths.

“And how are they answered? Your virtue signaling does nothing to recover even one atom of carbon from the atmosphere. Meanwhile, the thoughtless masses sign up for para-sailing adventures in Venice. The solution, the *real* solution, must come from the top down. And those at the top have already shown that they are determined to fight, and fight dirty, to the bitter end. They must be dragged screaming from their thrones, or we are all doomed.”

Les appeared quite put out by all of this. “I’d been looking forward with pleasure,” he said, “to having a little discussion with you about cause and effect, the best of all possible worlds, the origin of evil, the nature of the soul, and pre-established harmony.”

At these words, the dervish slammed the door in their faces.

Dejected, they made their way home on foot. As they came within range of a tower, their cells all lit up with a pressing news story. The president of Turkey had been ousted by a military coup, and the generals promised sweeping changes for a better nation. They planned to leave NATO, but keep all the missiles and warplanes. Pogroms against the Shia were to begin immediately.

“I guess the days when a person can keep their head above politics have come and gone,” lamented Frank. “We can no longer fail to cast our votes or raise our voices. In any modern country, such behavior is commensurate with abdication. Many years ago, before the bomb and the grid, perhaps, politics only affected politicians.”

“Oh, only politicians?” needed Martin.

“Well, also those without the pluck to evade their armies.”

“Which was everybody,” insisted Martin.

“Point conceded,” pronounced Frank. “Yet today, our politics are the unchecked wheels on the screaming bus to hell, and everyone’s on board. I only wish the Shangri Lama were here. He would know what to do.”

As they walked back to their farm, they noticed a regal man sitting on his front porch beyond a grove of orange trees, enjoying the fresh air. Les asked him if he knew the name of the general who had just seized power.

"I don't know," replied the old man. "I've never known the name of any general. Theirs is the business of tearing down and killing, while mine is the business of building up and bringing to life. Besides, they never tell the truth about anything, so it is worse than useless to listen to what they say. I let the fruits of my farm speak for themselves, bringing joy and vitality to the people of Istanbul, instead of terror and bloodshed."

Having said these words, he invited the strangers into his house. His two daughters and two sons offered them chilled fruit juices they had made themselves, as well as boiled cream treats with candied citron, oranges, lemons, limes, pineapples, pistachio nuts, and local mocha coffee.

"You must have a vast and magnificent estate," Frank said to the man.

"I have only twenty acres of land," he replied, "which my children and I cultivate. Our work keeps us free from three great evils: boredom, vice, and poverty."

Martin inquired, "Have you suffered much from the effects of climate change?"

The old man frowned. "There have been years of drought, and high prices for our raw materials. When it does rain, it really dumps, and sometimes this floods the fields. If it happens early in the season, the crops rot in the damp soil and we lose them. So we do what we can to mitigate things."

"Such as?" inquired Martin.

"Such as planting, not just crops and fruit trees, but vines and moss and ivy. Not just in the fields, but everywhere! Every plant you've ever seen is a little factory for scooping carbon out of the air. We use wind and solar energy, and make our own fertilizer from last year's plants, and so avoid feeding the great smoke-belching beast. You call it 'sustainable farming'. We call it 'farming'."

Frank invited the old man and his children over to visit their farm, and to teach them these practices; then they took their leave. On the last leg of their journey home, Frank pondered the old man's remarks. He said to his friends, "That wise old fellow seems to have made a better life for himself than any of the famous people we dined with in Venice."

"High position is a very dangerous thing," replied Les, "as philosophers have always pointed out. Just remember JFK, Elvis Presley, John Lennon--"

"You know," interrupted Frank, "when we get home, I'm going to do some planting."

"You're right," said Les, "because when Adam and Eve were put in the garden of Eden, they were tasked 'to dress it and to keep it,' that is, to work. We were not meant to be idle."

"Let's work without theorizing," suggested Martin. "It's the only way to make life bearable."

When they reached the farm, the whole group embarked upon this commendable plan, and planted much. The little farm yielded abundant crops, and they sold potted plants, and planted young trees all throughout the region. Seed-scattering hikes became a thing. Melissa and Eleanor talked the innkeeper at the tumble-down resort into letting them cover the place in ivy and berry bushes and flower beds. They took pictures and posted them online, and business picked up for the resort. Johanna embroidered and did laundry, and her boyfriend had a knack as a carpenter and handyman and helped keep the farmhouse in good repair.

Every once in a while, Les would find a bottle of spirits in the city, and come home and pester Frank with, "All events are interconnected in this best of all possible worlds, for if you hadn't been fired and driven from your mansion, if we hadn't been seized by the Klan, if you hadn't stabbed Dick, if you hadn't toured the middle east with your terrible joke, and if you hadn't lost your sheep from Shangri La, we wouldn't be here eating candied citron and pistachio nuts."

"Well said," Frank would reply. "Help me plant these seedlings."