

## Chapter 18

*What they saw in Shangri-La*

Mahmud chatted up the innkeeper, expressing his extreme curiosity concerning the many wonders of this land. The innkeeper put him off. "I'm very ignorant, and happy to stay that way, but nearby resides an old man retired from the lamasery. He's the most learned man in the kingdom, and the most communicative."

The innkeeper immediately took them both to the old man's house. A small herd of goats grazed at the turning from the road, shearing a swath of the frontage down as neatly as the short grass that massaged their feet. Beyond, crops teemed in the bright sun, bending in the wind and shading the path while bees big as baseballs zipped among their crowns, claiming and carrying tiny bright crystals. The path itself was made of artifacts and mosaics buried beneath a clear resin. Intricate beadwork shared the lane with bottle-caps proudly bearing long-dead brand names, and bits of machines and instruments, calligraphy and painting and etching and art of all kinds. Before they even reached the door, Frank had the happy chance to greet a hundred friends, old and new, beneath his feet.

Onions and beets, tomatoes in all sizes and colors, hemp and bamboo, cereal grains, peas and beans and squashes, herbs and medicinal plants branched everywhere, even covering over the lama's home, a great hill of loam. One by one, a half-dozen friendly pups noticed them, making a parade of their visit. Hives of honeybees burred softly off to their right as they came to the humble door. Birdsong was everywhere, and fragrant flowers breathed from window-boxes, beating back the fiery scents of eucalyptus, cedar, and fir. Frank thought he heard a pond-full of happy frogs, somewhere off to their left. Just as they approached, a mighty hawk sprang from the eaves toward the sun high above, flashing its white belly and underwings at them like a great big show-off.

"Snow-cock likes you. I haven't decided yet." The door to the house had opened, and an old man stood there in his joy and pain, proud and hunched all at once. The innkeeper explained his errand, bowed to Frank and Mahmud, and fled for home.

The old man turned and bade them follow. Bright-faced monks attending the retired lama guided them to supple cushions around a low table. Steaming red-black tea brought vigor to arteries Frank had never felt pulse before. He made to speak and was silently rebuked by their host, who presented Mahmud with a tall hookah, taking up a short steel tongs and setting two glowing charcoals atop the deep silver bowl himself.

Mahmud breathed deeply, and smiled in bliss. Frank pulled gently, and found the mild tobacco a very pleasant stimulant. A second cup of tea arrived. Frank was of a mind to demur, but the look on Mahmud's face told him to drink it. Then a second hookah arrived, and Mahmud gave Frank another look of danger. This hookah contained bhang. Their host indicated that neither he nor they were to speak until the conclusion of these ceremonies, so Frank indulged in a manner that made his host smile with approval, and felt his heart-rate jump!

A third cup of tea arrived, and Mahmud accepted it for Frank, getting his attention and bidding him drink. Suddenly everything took an eternity, yet it all went too fast. Frank sought focus, attending each detail with obsession and still not comprehending. As he drank his third cup of tea, the lama addressed them.

"How the fuck did you get here?"

Frank blinked, and tried to focus his eyes as he tried to focus his thoughts. "Pbphhphph. We must have strayed from the road to Lhasa, and found ourselves on a descending switchback."

The body language of the lama disengaged Frank and moved the question to Mahmud, so obviously that Frank simply stopped speaking. Mahmud announced, "I was born anew with a full beard, beneath a waterfall! Everything astonishes me. There was a great tunnel of water under the mountains, and our boat brought us here."

This pleased their host well enough. He then satisfied their curiosity as follows:

"I am one-hundred-seventy-two years old. My father, then the Panchen Lama, taught me the great mysteries. Our humble valley holds the true seat of what so many celebrate as "Tibetan Buddhism". Yet their grasp serves only as a pale reflection. All know the Dalai Lama, and some have heard of the Panchen Lama, but no one ever told them that both owe fealty to the Shangri Lama!

"Meanwhile, would-be rinpoches in bright red-and-gold silks travel west and pose for photographs in designer sunglasses, and publish trite missives extolling the virtues of smiling through life's bullshit. They fold two-dozen centuries of compassion, patience, grace, and respect into the ever-churning batter of mindless content, yielding the humble dividend paid to any other novel spice, cash on the barrel-head. They hope to free Tibet, misunderstanding. A fan-base is not an army.

"And how much do you suppose our silk-draped emissaries return? Fifty percent? Ten? Bah! It is perhaps one percent, less

than the cost of their designer sunglasses!”

Frank remembered that Les had been a devotee of those very monks and their message of hope. He found himself taking his deceased bartender’s part. “Yet surely, their reassurances have done much good for the desperate seeking solace, who found it with them.”

The retired lama scoffed, disgusted. “False consolation serves only those seeking reassurance without purpose, the lonely and the bored. When your actual existence is threatened, false consolation can only lead you closer to the edge. I submit that our wandering monks, seeking to aid us in the East, did real harm to the West, serving their worst masters. By placating the sorely abused masses, and bidding them endure another month, and then another, they defer the firm redress of tyranny, which is the true and best course!”

Frank sat dumb-founded. Mahmud had run out of things to say long ago, and stared at anything that moved, for he had taken his bhang and then finished Frank’s as well. The retired lama continued. “Lucky for us, we are surrounded by unscalable mountains and cliffs, and so far we’ve been safe from the rapacity of the great nations, who all have an incredible lust for pebbles and dirt. If they could get here, they’d kill us all in a heartbeat, just to prove they own the dust.”

Frank tried to follow as the retired lama held forth concerning the history, culture, and organization of his society. He needed Mahmud, petitioning him to ask the lama what god he worshipped. Mahmud indicated that this was a foolish question, and Frank agreed, conceding *that* was the reason Mahmud should be the one to ask.

The old man’s eyes came to rest on Frank’s own as he leaned back, considering. At length, he held Frank’s gaze, and calmly spoke. “We have much to practice, here in Shangri-La” replied the lama. “Every day, we must practice love, and compassion, and patience, and respect. We each must see to preserving our own honor and integrity, and acknowledge our wrongs and make them right. We must work to advance our health and our community, and cultivate our gardens and clean up where it’s needed and teach our youth and assist our elders. We must indulge our bodies and exercise, we must engage our minds and study, and we must do honor to our spirits, with meditation and with revelry together. Ours is the god made pleased by such enterprise.”

“Do you pray to this god?” asked Frank.

“Only to give thanks.” Replied the lama. “We want for nothing, and so have nothing to beg.”

“Is giving thanks, then, the primary activity at the lamasery?” Frank was honestly curious.

“What? Of course not! Those who feel thankful can give thanks well enough on their own, and should. Why would they need someone else to do it for them? The lamas are engaged exclusively in the ongoing betterment of our society.”

Frank’s brow creased deeply, and he stroked his now-luxurious beard. “So you have no celebrities; no politicians or preachers or commentators, who bark and pound their fists, screaming and blaming as they indoctrinate, argue, rule, plot, and burn people who don’t agree with them?”

“We’d be mad if we did,” said the old man. “We all agree with each other here, and we don’t know what you mean when you talk about your politicians. Our lamas are our scholars, our minders, and our body-politic all in one, so that when something new is learned or observed, it can become a part of our ever-growing happiness right away.”

In the old man’s easy smile, Frank caught a glimpse of what that could mean, for himself and even for the whole bright, broad world. He thought of Les and imagined his faithful barkeep witnessing Shangri-La. Les would be forced to rescind his assertion that his humble tavern in suburban Indiana exemplified the best of all possible worlds. It suddenly occurred to Frank that everyone ought to travel.

After this long conversation, the old man summoned a car and instructed that it should convey Frank and Mahmud to the lamasery. “Forgive me,” he said to them, “for not accompanying you. My age deprives me of that honor. The Shangri Lama will give you a much grander reception than I can provide. Please excuse the customs there if some of them displease you, as the lamas place a high value on patience.”

They sat in the plush seats of the car, which whisked them silently over broad leafy roadways through a dazzling countryside of green and gold and blue and white. They came at last to a teeming city astride a river wending from a lone mountain jutting above the valley floor. Their car slowed with the increase in traffic, and their enclosure opened to bring them the sounds and smells of the city. These were laughter and song, and clove and cinnamon. Though they found themselves sharing the road with a great many others, they heard no wailing sirens, honking horns, or piercing warning beeps. Many of the grand structures stood under construction or repair, yet they heard no pounding jack-hammers, and the workers felt no compulsion to yell at one another.

A great rain squall passed overhead, and the car became enclosed once again as the people of the city paused their errands to stand beneath broad-leafed trees which grew everywhere, and chat with their neighbors. Though the rain came down as thick, dark sheets for several minutes, the water did not stand in deep potholes or collect beside steep curbs. Instead, it

soaked into the living roadway. Seconds after the rain stopped, life went back to normal, save that everything sparkled with dew in the returning sunlight, and the air tasted even fresher and cleaner than it had before.

Frank sniffed in wonder, ever expecting the breeze to bring him a hint of smoking tar or rotting garbage, but it never came. The road brought them in view of the river, and Mahmud exclaimed in joy as they noticed that the water ran so clear, they could see pale-bellied fish kissing the sandy bottom, hunting for their lunch. Snow-cock saw this, too, and came darting. If the bird rose up grasping a writhing fish, the Shangri-Lites would cheer. Yet if the diving bird brought only clatter and spume, coming up with nothing, the people would cheer for the fish, instead.

The warehouses, apartments, shops, and restaurants all competed with one another, each boasting broad and vibrant displays of blooming flowers, drawing throngs of colorful birds and butterflies. Their car came beneath the shadow of the mountain, and Frank turned to Mahmud, musing: "I only wish we had a guide, for there is much I thought to see that I cannot recognize."

Abaf-Ya's grinning face appeared in miniature on a screen in the car's dashboard. She bowed with her hands folded, and asked, "What do you wish to learn, Frank Hoosier-Caliph?" Frank and Mahmud both became startled, and required some time to arrange themselves for conversation.

Frank began, "I see no building that might serve as a law court. What do they look like?"

Abaf-Ya frowned, cocked her head slightly, and fixed Frank with her terrifying gaze. "What is a law court?" Frank explained Indiana's legal system as he understood it. Abaf-Ya's achingly beautiful face adopted a range of compelling and heart-rending expressions as she processed Frank's fragmentary synopsis. "We would never practice such misguided arts here, Frank Hoosier-Caliph," pronounced Abaf-Ya. "Shangri-La has no need of them, and I intuit that your homeland of In-Dya-Na has no true need of them, either. Can your lawyers put spilled blood back into a ruined body, or make it course the veins once again? Do your courts serve anyone other than the millionaires? Is the resulting mass incarceration not the newest incarnation of the centuries of horrific slavery which so darkly stain your roots?"

Frank felt his heart break, knowing that he had caused Abaf-Ya to feel disgust. Yet his thoughts kept bubbling up as great big questions. He asked if Shangri-La had prisons; the answer was no. He asked to see the midden, and Abaf-Ya changed her tune. "Ah! This question I understand. Centuries ago, we took all our rubbish and brought it to one place, away from everything else. A midden, as you would have it, that towered and rotted and stank and wasted space. The scholars among our lamas smelled this from their windows so often, they bent their minds to its improvement.

"They learned that we: all of us, the people and plants and dogs and snow-cocks; we are the midden. It is given to us to transform one fruit into a new plant, another into the loam that feeds it. The lamas devised a practice for mastering this process, guiding it with a will toward grace, and taught this practice to all of us. When our manufacturers eschewed toxic ingredients, replacing them with natural and sustainable materials, our world grew brighter. Everything became less expensive, and the manufacturers' products even improved in quality. Now we build no middens, and instead shape every layer and corner of our world to suit our preference."

Just then they arrived at the foot of the mountain. The car stopped before a tall stone stairway, and the doors opened. Abaf-Ya bade them farewell, with this final guidance: "When you reach the top of the stair, you will find answers to your puzzling questions in the Hall of Science, Frank Hoosier-Caliph. Meanwhile, take all that is offered you in this place, for you will need it!"

Abaf-Ya smiled broadly and showed her wondrous teeth, and folded her hands and bowed in such a manner that Frank felt the weight of her honor upon his heart. As before, he peed a little, and Mahmud fell from their car and prostrated himself in the dust before the tall stair. Abaf-Ya's image winked out, and a compartment in the center of the car's cabin opened to present them with generous hide canteens and great satchels of smoked fish and dried fruit.

Heeding Abaf-Ya's advice, Frank and Mahmud took up the canteens and satchels and mounted the stair. Their climb persisted for three days, and at each great overlook Mahmud would say to Frank, or Frank to Mahmud, "I think I shall cast myself down from here, and forever end my suffering, rather than climb any farther."

Then, the other would say, "Oh, but look how far we have come! Surely it must be a shorter way up, now, than down. Let us keep on." They drank their water, and ate their fish and fruit, and climbed, and panted, and complained.

When at last they reached the looming majesty of the lamasery's front door, Frank and Mahmud collapsed upon the stoop. Frank wheezed, unable to catch his breath, shaking in pain. Mahmud opined, "I no longer wish for seventy-two virgins. I know, now, that they would destroy me! I shall pray for twenty virgins, no more, to greet me in the after-life!" Mahmud's eyes crossed, and his face went slack, and he fell unconscious upon the stone, just as Frank's eyes closed.

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Frank woke to a gentle hand stroking the hair at his temple. He lay naked in a steaming bath, surrounded by gracious women who brought him cool water to drink. They tugged his hair and combed his beard and massaged his thighs and rubbed his belly and fed him dates and carrots and plump mountain berries, and all had a wondrous great time together. They dressed

Frank in fine silk and anointed his hair and beard, and brought him out to a grand hall where Mahmud stood similarly dressed and anointed, wearing the expression of a man who had just served twenty virgins.

A mighty orchestra performed upon a stage along the far wall, and their efforts exceeded anything Frank had ever imagined from their medium. He found his soul reaching out, yearning to meet them as they shone, glorious. The near wall suddenly bucked, one great booming shrug across a hundred square yards of ancient wood. Dust fell from the upper lips of the bracings like flour in a bakery, coating everyone in gray. The timbre of the instruments dulled as they took on weight. Their wondrous music fell beneath the grinding din as two massive and ancient doors swung slowly open, grating upon the stone floor as they had not for untold years.

The ladies retreated with the musicians, and sure-footed monks guided Frank and Mahmud through the ancient doors into a hall of everything. Wide and cramped, it was dusty from having just been cleaned. Bright sunlight revealed the deepest shadows, and everything felt utterly foreign and completely familiar.

A procession of two dozen monks, robed and anointed exactly as Frank and Mahmud (save that they were entirely shorn), entered from a portico high and away to their left. A boy of seventeen strode purposefully at the core of their mass, in robes that appeared gold or blue or white, depending on which monk's question he was then answering. At one point, no one spoke to him for a brief interval. Then, the robe showed a very bright green.

The procession descended a melange of stairs, and at length the boy in the wondrous robe came to stand before Frank. He flashed all of his colors as his eyes probed Frank's, finally settling upon a green so pale it seemed almost white. He smiled with a smile that struck Frank like Abaf-Ya's and the old retired lama's put together. He embraced Frank, kissing him once on each cheek. He pushed back with straight arms, as if to behold his new friend entire, then released Frank's shoulders and bowed to the floor before him, kissing the hem of Frank's robe.

"Rinpoche!" he declared, with a passion that brought tears to everyone's eyes.

Frank somehow stood with composure, and asked, "What can you mean? You live behind a thousand-year door, high in the mountain! I'm just an idiot who got in a canoe because he ran out of road. I know nothing of your wondrous grace, and have everything to learn from you!"

The Shangri Lama laughed, a sound like bright bells possessing happy souls, all tickling each other. "It is true, I have a thousand-year door high in the mountain. As such, I have never known a road, or a canoe. In fact, everyone here is so smart, I've never even met an idiot! When I look at you, I understand nothing of what I see. So let us race, and I shall endeavor to learn more from you than you can learn from me. Yet I shall hide nothing, and so must you promise!"

Frank's face stretched a dozen ways from sheer confusion. "You are but seventeen!" He declared. "How can you be so brilliant yet so humble, so beautiful yet so gracious, so wise and patient?"

The Shangri Lama took both of Frank's hands in both of his own, and knelt slightly so they met at eye-level. He grinned mischievously and declared, "I am one-hundred-six!" He bowed deeply once more to Frank. As he treated with Mahmud in much the same manner, his robe became silvery-white. Addressing them both, he declared, "my friends will bring you to your new chambers, and show you our lamasery. Tonight, we will dine together!" Then he retired as he had come, thronged by the host of monks, his wondrous robe flashing gold and blue and white again as they conversed.

The window in Frank's ample room revealed the city far below, and the tumbling rock before it, and bits of the river. Beyond, vast fields dotted with burghs and cities stretched to severe and handsome peaks in the distance, and the blue sky breathed in through the portal and filled Frank with joy. The big bed gave warm welcome, and the walls boasted empty shelves and compelling art. Frank approached a photo-realistic painting of a mosaic done in strands of colored yarn. He reached out to stroke it, yearning thereby to discover its true nature. A heads-up-display greeted him as he raised his arm, querying:

\*Do you like this?

\*Do you dislike this?

\*Should I leave you alone?

Frank engaged the interface, understanding that it would be more fun to discover the nature of the piece by searching its description. He quickly learned that it was a projection of an original paint-on-canvas, and could be swapped for any image in their library, as could all of the art. Side-bar links politely encouraged him to fill his bookshelves with friendly tomes. These stood in sharp contrast to the flashing and blaring ads bracketing search pages in all the world beyond, and Frank finally noticed that he had not seen or heard a single advertisement, of any kind, since coming to Shangri-La.

He flipped through the digital catalog and arranged his room according to his preference, then went in search of Mahmud, who had been assigned a similar room down the hall. They were joined by two monks who served as guides, and together they explored the hallways of the lamasery. What surprised and delighted Frank most was the Hall of Science, a gallery two thousand paces long displaying instruments of measurement and determination. Each new window described a break-through

in research, or the summary of a particular line of inquiry, and included an explanation of how the knowledge had been applied for the betterment of the people of Shangri-La.

Frank engaged with a number of displays revealing a stunningly advanced program of genetics. He remarked, "With these techniques, you might readily grow a tomato larger, faster, and more resistant to pests and pesticides than anywhere else in the world!"

One of his guides frowned in thought, and replied, "What good would such a fruit do for us, here? We are not impatient or greedy, and we don't pour poisons on our food. When we cultivate our flora, we do so with an eye toward improving nutrition, texture and flavor."

Frank explained, "Back in Indiana, the farmers and grocers would all like to sell more produce. If their fruits grow faster, they might come to market early, reaping a windfall, and ultimately produce more throughout the season. If they grow larger, the fruits will appeal to customers, and command a higher price. If the plants all stand proud and do not fall to pests and pesticide, there will be greater yields."

The monk observed, "Here in Shangri-La we do not grow tomatoes to be sold, but to be eaten. We do not raise our tomato plants all in one close-packed field, but spread them out among the gourds and rosemary and lavender, which abate the pests. This practice also improves the health of the plants, and the flavor of their produce."

Frank was surprised by the monk's response, and asked, "Are you communists, then?"

The monk laughed, "No. We are not any type of -ists, here. Once you pick an -ism, you must continuously strive to fold the stubborn truths of the world into its strictures, forever rationalizing and justifying and reasoning backward from your preferred conclusions, creating a trail of nonsense that cannot quite reach all the way to the observable facts. It is an ingenious means to keep a mind busy, and yet yield nothing.

"Here, we strive for peace instead of business, and wisdom instead of nonsense. We bend our backs to ensure that we raise enough food for everyone, and then see that it reaches their tables. Thereby the -isms gain no adherents, because they serve no purpose. Only hungry people seek explanations and assign blame."

When Frank heard the word "blame", he was reminded of a certain former President who did not appear hungry, in fact never had been in his life, but was nonetheless a great purveyor of many -isms and an incorrigible assigner of blame. He inquired of the monk: "Have you no great whales, then? No people who are forever hungry, and seek to accumulate wealth over and above their neighbors?"

"Of course we do," replied the monk. "Such people are rare, here in Shangri-La, as most eventually learn the greater happiness of living well, then leave their treasure hoards behind. Yet those that persist are permitted to accumulate as much as they like, so long as they take nothing from any of their fellow Shangri-Lites."

"But what objects of value might be found that are not already owned by someone else?"

The monk smiled, and his eyes sparkled in the manner of the people of Shangri-La. "Ah! An excellent question! We leave it to the greedy among us to research the answer. It is *our* ingenious means to keep a mind busy, and yet yield nothing."

Frank and Mahmud and their two guides found ample topics for discussion among the displays in the Hall of Science. They had not travelled half its length when another monk arrived and summoned them to dinner. Continuing to muse and inform one another, they made their way to a quiet room of gold-brown wood, boasting yet another low table outlined by supple cushions.

After they were seated and served steaming cups of tea, the Shangri Lama arrived and joined them at the table. He had left his robe of many colors behind, and came dressed in purple silks so rich and deep that if Frank chanced to stare into them, he immediately felt his eyelids droop. His head was shorn, and entirely unadorned, so that his face spoke for itself in every word and nuance of expression. Frank found that he could not meet the lama's gaze, as it would rejoin his own with a wisdom and self-assurance that might tame even Abaf-Ya. Mahmud sat in silence and wonder.

A platter arrived covered by lightly pickled jicama and carrot, decorated with cilantro and fish flake, woven atop mountain crayfish with their shells removed, and the flesh firmed in lime juice. Along with this, a salad of thin-sliced radish and peppery greens came dressed in garlic and rice-wine vinegar, beside wasabi mustard and roasted chili oil.

The Shangri Lama laughed, merry bells again, and declared, "I can see by your faces that you don't know how to eat this. Let me show you the way I prefer to enjoy this food!" Reaching out with clean chopsticks, he took a layer of the carrot and jicama and cilantro and laid it in the bottom of his own bowl, then wiped his sticks on his napkin and brought them to the salad, which he piled atop. Turning his napkin and wiping again, the Shangri Lama then re-addressed the first platter, plucking puckering white-purple morsels soaked in bright citrus from the bottom and laying them atop his growing construction. Bowls of steaming rice arrived, and the Shangri Lama added two spoonfuls and a chunk of mustard to his cache.

Frank and Mahmud emulated this ritual, and they ate in joyful silence. Mahmud finished first, and immediately reached for seconds. The Shangri Lama smiled at this, forbearing for the sake of Mahmud's pleasure, even though Frank could tell that the lama wished to speak. His robe did not change color, but Frank could read it in the man's face.

They made eye contact as Mahmud ate, and the Shangri Lama understood this as permission to begin without giving offense. Looking directly into Frank's face for several heartbeats, he asked: "How the fuck did you get here?"

Hearing this question now for the second time, which so profoundly echoed the astonished sentiment of his own soul, Mahmud sprayed the contents of everything from the bottom of his bowl to the middle of his esophagus across the low table. Scoops of jicama and crayfish hurled back into their trenchers and across the polished wood and supple cushions. Frank became deeply embarrassed, and turned bright red. By the look on Mahmud's face, Frank understood that his friend would happily forego any and all virgins if only he could die right now, in this instant.

The Shangri Lama laughed and clapped, and stood and danced about rather foolishly, and declared this the finest dinner he had ever enjoyed in all of his one-hundred-six years. He looked upon his guests and grinned and sighed with happiness, and shrugged and stretched while his attendant monks cleared everything away and helped Mahmud to the restroom, where he might restore himself.

As the table cleared, the Shangri Lama sat across from Frank once more, and addressed him. "I'll be honest, I'd much rather hear his story first." The lama pointed his eyes at the doorway that had swallowed Mahmud. "But not all schedules are of my choosing. So, while we wait for our friend to recover, please tell me. How the fuck did you get here?"

Frank thought about where to start, and brought himself all the way back to the e-mail from Gladstorm. He didn't get far before the lama interjected, inquiring. "So, this boss behaved badly, making a choice that did not best serve himself or his community. Yet instead of learning and growing from his own mistake, he blamed you in order to escape its consequences?"

"I hadn't thought of it that way," admitted Frank, "but yes. He blamed me in order to escape the consequences."

"He must be a fool! What sort of consequences?"

Frank thought about this question for so long that the Shangri Lama reached across the table and took Frank's chin in his hand, bringing his face up so their eyes could meet. Once again, his mind froze over while his mouth ran. "Well," said Frank, "Ya gotta listen to the whole story."

The Shangri Lama smiled playfully, and sat back, eyes shining like any other joyful Shangri-Lite. Frank related the details of his journey from Indiana to Shangri-La, and the lama stopped him several times to query in desperate confusion.

As Frank described the horrors of the bus from Bloomington to Chicago, the Shangri Lama grew impatient. He interrupted Frank. "So- the moment you came to the bottom of the hill, everyone you met carried guns around with them, shooting all the time?"

"Well-" said Frank.

"Atop the hill, did you ever see guns or hear gunshots?"

"No," Frank confessed. "Never in all my life, which I spent in homes and schools atop similar hills."

"Yet below, fists and firearms have thus far met you at every turn."

Frank paused for effect, and adopted the tone he had used while his mind was frozen. "Ya gotta listen to the whole story!"

They laughed, and Mahmud entered through the door that had swallowed him earlier. Assuring them that he felt much better, Mahmud rejoined the table. Frank picked up where he had left off. The lama had a thousand questions about Neil and Bill and Carl, and wept when he heard of their demise in the fireball amidst the hurricane on I-10 West.

When he learned of the Act-of-Faith at which Frank had worn a smock and sung the national anthem, and then been beaten while his bartender was lynched, the Shangri Lama adopted an expression of deep concern. "So- these people endeavored to solve the ever-escalating problems brought by climate change?"

"Yes? That's- not how *they* would put it, but- Yes."

"And they directed their efforts to appeasing their god, who they believe holds the power to apply or withhold events pertaining to the clouds in the sky?"

"Yes."

"And they believe that this god, the one with cloud powers, would favor them with mild weather if they murdered a handful of

people that they didn't like?"

Frank sighed deeply, as the Shangri Lama's perplexity with the absurd landed in his gut like a weight now added to his pre-existing trauma. "Yes."

"Wow."

"Yes."

During these developments, the attending monks darted in and out of the room. They wore terrified stares and ashen faces, and fled without lifting their eyes or raising their voices. At length, the Shangri Lama called for the roast, and mountain boar with braised plums and apricots arrived, served in prodigious slices. Crisped skin topped a band of glistening fat over muscle so tender it would pull with only a fork, or chopsticks. Greens boiled in goat's milk, and yellow rice with a dark brown curry, came served alongside. Frank found that all these elements, brought together, made for the most satisfying of all possible bites. Mahmud ate sparingly, though with appreciation.

As the chewing slowed, the lama bade Frank continue. Yet for the events thereafter, they had no common ground. The Shangri Lama became deeply upset when he learned that not one, but two men had died at Frank's hand! He pushed his plate away to the center of the table, and folded his feet atop his knees, closing his eyes. His forearms arced slowly out from his elbows, fingers relaxed and palms held upward. His robe darkened from "pass-out purple" to "deepest blue midnight" as all expression left his face, while his head lolled in perfect repose.

Frank hung his own head in shame, his cheeks burning. He never meant to kill anybody! Those events didn't define him, it was all just a matter of-

"He is floating," proclaimed Mahmud. Frank ignored him. How did the hallucinations of his vomiting tag-along pertain to anything right now?

"Dude! He is fucking floating!" Mahmud's tone snapped Frank out of his miserable revelry. Frank opened his eyes and looked at Mahmud, who stared back astonished, and glanced and gestured at the space across the table and atop the cushions opposite, where the Shangri Lama's ass might presumably rest. Frank ducked down and peered beneath the table. Just as Mahmud had described, the Shangri Lama levitated eight inches above the cushions.

They spent several moments ducking down and springing back up, witnessing and re-witnessing this wonder, and meeting each other's eyes, and opening their mouths in astonishment, then peering once more beneath the table at the air between their host and the ever-dragging earth. They became silent, awe-struck and fearful. Mahmud gestured to Frank, suggesting they retreat. With Frank's acquiescent nod, the Shangri Lama farted. It was a long high-squeaker, like squeezing a balloon, loud enough to echo from the walls. Frank and Mahmud stared at one another in disbelief. The lama suddenly opened both eyes and stared at them in accusation. His bulging gaze begged them to say something, anything!

They all started laughing, and over dessert they agreed to have fun and relax for tonight, and tell more stories tomorrow. The rest of the evening passed happily, and Frank felt reassured when he reached his warm and welcoming bed. That night, he dreamt that he dined with the Shangri Lama and one other man, though this man was certainly not Mahmud. All about and arcing above their low table, a great amalgam of doors faced them, ten paces apart on the horizontal, balcony stacked upon balcony, curving inward until the highest of the doors seemed to open directly above them.

Frank and the other man were both murderers, and knew this about one another. When Frank confessed his murder to the Shangri Lama, some of the doors above and about him slammed shut, but most remained open. The Shangri Lama then heard the other man's tale, and that man attempted to hide his crime in the recounting. The lama came to understand his subterfuge through the artlessness of the telling, and nearly all of the doors slammed shut. Only two dark tunnels on the lowest level remained open, utterly unappealing. Frank woke with a start, terrified, and recognized his comfortable room by the art he had chosen and the graceful breeze in the window. Taking heart, he lay back and slept.

A month passed, and Mahmud managed to refrain from any further vomiting, though he remained astonished. Frank spent hours in conversation with the Shangri Lama, and continued to explore the Hall of Science and the other wonders of the lamasery. Learning so much grace in so short a time, Frank woke often in the night. Sometimes he fled terrifying nightmares, but more often he found himself impelled to action by some confluence of abstractions. He learned to keep pen and paper at his bedside. Some of it made sense in the morning and some of it did not, yet Frank threw nothing out. He could see the flashing robe, and hear the Shangri Lama speaking in his mind: "Morning is not the only time."

Newness and wonder ultimately gave way to routine, and Frank found his thoughts and dreams ever returning to Missile-Tits. He mentioned this to Mahmud, asking if he had a lover back home, and whether his thoughts also flew their way. "I am a new man," Mahmud replied, "but I am astonished to recall that in my past life, I had a wife and seven children in Kabul." This decided Frank. When next they met, he raised the subject with the Shangri Lama, begging permission to leave the wondrous mountain valley and return to the broad world below.

The Shangri Lama smiled with great joy, clasped his hands together before his chest, and shook his arms in an expression of

victory. He embraced Frank, kissing him on both cheeks as he had the day they met, and laughed his belly laugh. "I am so glad that you were right! You once told me you were an idiot, and your will to leave Shangri-La has now irrefutably proven the claim. Yet it is our fondest wish.

"For seventy years, my meditations have been troubled by the ever-souring notes in the wind. Our ring of mountains has protected us for millennia, but that time is ending. Your satellites and spy planes will find us eventually, and your bombers and ballistics will follow. Meanwhile, the poison in the sky has shifted the wind and the rain above Shangri-La, just as it had twenty years ago in Australia, or five years ago in Seattle.

"Here in Shangri-La, we have the technology to reabsorb all that carbon, restore the atmosphere, build back the polar ice and the permafrost, and even scoop up and repurpose all the damned garbage. I have been scouring the libraries, exhausting my colleagues, and praying so hard I drop fat tears on knuckles bruised from squeezing each other too much, desperate for some way to bring this information out to the world at large. But none of my people have any knowledge of the roads or the customs, so that anyone I send will certainly come to harm.

"No one would refuse me if I asked, but that is only because they all know that I would never ask such a thing of them. If the worst should happen, I would lose everyone's trust, and the office of Shangri Lama would hold about as much esteem as the presidency of FIFA."

"Far and away, you are the wisest leader I have ever met," replied Frank, "but why don't you just log on to the world wide web and upload the documents to a few appropriate sites?"

The Shangri Lama's eyes sparkled with fearsome intensity, and he slapped the table with his palm and stood and danced. "This is a wonderful idea! Do you know how to do it?"

Frank considered the unique characteristics of Shangri-La's technology, and his face fell. "No," he confessed.

"Me neither." They immediately ran to find Mahmud, who also did not know. The monks all convened to discuss the possibility, and concluded that safe interaction with the world wide web must remain constrained to read-only. Uploading anything would leave them vulnerable to discovery. The Shangri Lama addressed Frank and Mahmud. "It appears you get your wish! You two shall be our emissaries, and bring the seeds of our salvation to the soil beyond the mountains."

Over the coming weeks, all of the energies of the lamasery became directed at the construction of a vehicle that Frank thought of as "the Water Rocket". A great ovoid of hemp- and bamboo-derived plastics would float in two sections. The rear half would contain a breeding pair of red-wooled sheep, stacks of burlap sacks filled with seeds, and hard-copy back-ups of the documentation informing their proper cultivation and application, which Frank and Mahmud also carried on multiple thumb-drives. They would sit in the front half of the ovoid, sharing the space with a very few comforts for themselves and the controls for the drill, mounted at the fore.

The river that had brought Frank and Mahmud to Shangri-La flowed across the majestic breadth of the high mountain valley, and then down beneath another vault of rock. The tunnel under these mountains, however, narrowed so that it would not pass a canoe. The scholars of the lamasery floated rubber balls graced with positioning sensors down the channel, increasing in diameter with each pass, until a ball two feet wide became stuck for a time. Calculations began immediately.

There were hand-cranked and foot-cranked for Frank and Mahmud in their half of the ovoid capsule, which they would have to turn at a very specific rate, so that the turning cranks would spin gears attached to more gears in an array until the outer blades spun so fast they could grind granite into powder. The cascade was so powerful, however, that the friction of the spinning gears could cause even the frigid mountain waters to flash into steam, which their capsule could not long withstand. Frank pictured a thousand ways that they could die, and Mahmud came up with even more.

At last, the construction was complete, and Frank and Mahmud took their leave of the lamasery. So did everyone else, and they made a great excursion from the mountain all the way down to the river. They brought the Water Rocket in ten pieces, to be assembled at the riverside, and everybody had to take turns lugging the damned thing down the stairs. Immediately after departing, the red-wooled sheep bolted for the pastures far below, and Frank and Mahmud were asked to set the pace, when they were not carrying parts of their conveyance.

Burdened by the massive objects and traveling in a crowd, their descent lasted five days. Realizing that this was the last chance, the monks of the lamasery constantly plied Frank and Mahmud with questions about the outside world, and about their impressions of Shangri-La. When they reached the bottom and came to the riverbank, they set their contraption down gently and everybody slept in the grass for a full day and the entire night that followed. In the morning, there were warm good-byes all around while the Water Rocket was assembled by its engineers and their assistants.

The Shangri Lama approached Frank and Mahmud, his robe shining bright green. The twinkle in his eyes had changed character, from glad mischief to solemn purpose, and he intoned a deep-throated chant as he blessed Frank and Mahmud, the will of his spirit pushing out from his palm and striking them like a sudden blast of warm air. He bowed to them, and bade them farewell, and took his leave.



Frank and Mahmud found their seats as the sheep and seed were loaded in the rear compartment, and the engineers sealed the canopy above them. They waved and blew kisses to their friends as they cast off. The river coursed through the city, and from its banks the flowers and birds and butterflies and joyful people looked even more vibrant than they had from the road. Beyond the city, the river took them through meadows and fields, farms and parks and woods and wild-lands.

At last, their little tributary fed the big river that had first brought them here, far upstream. For three days, Frank and Mahmud watched the mountains to their north grow on the horizon, until the river picked up speed and they came beneath the shadow of the high rock. Things grew truly dark as the river's course plunged underground, and they began to turn their gears as instructed, slowly, left hand and right foot, then right hand and left foot, spinning the blades of their drill so that they would already be in motion when they slammed into the rock at the narrows.

This was the tricky part. If the blades spun too quickly, the river would flash to steam and melt the plastic of their berth. Too slow, and they would stall against the rock as water built up behind, jamming the blades so they became impossible to set in motion. In that event, the water pressure would ultimately collapse the capsule and drown Frank and Mahmud along with their sheep.

Frank double-checked his harness. Wham! The Water Rocket slammed into the narrow rock, and he lurched forward and bent his limbs to the cranks of the drill mechanism as Mahmud did the same. It was difficult to keep cool through the protests of the sheep behind them, but two months in a lamasery does wonders for one's focus. Calmly, Frank turned his gears, counting each revolution in his mind and checking it against the furious pace of his heartbeat.

Suddenly, they shot forward into empty air, then went into free fall. Their craft plummeted seventy-five feet through the darkness and cracked into a thousand pieces on the surface of the water far below. Soaked and freezing in the pitch black, Frank tried to calm himself enough to take stock. By the sounds of bleating, he could tell that the sheep had swum to shore and made their way toward a hint of fresh air, up ahead.

The shock was so severe that Frank was numb all over, and had to course his hands over his feet; toes, ankles and shins, to satisfy himself that nothing had broken. He reached over to Mahmud's seat and realized that his friend had gone missing.

"Mahmud?" There was no answer. Frank finally panicked, casting his hands about in the darkness, splashing and bloodying his knuckles on the twisted wreckage of the Water Rocket. At last, Frank heard a splash and a deep breath being drawn off to his left.

"Mahmud?"

"Frank! You must come and help me."

"Are you hurt?"

"No, Insh'Allah! We must recover the bits of our drill while we can."

"Why would we wish to do that?"

"Did you not realize? Each of them is made of diamond!" Frank unbuckled himself and dove into the icy water, visions of countless wealth causing the freezing of his lungs to seem a mere trifle. They cut their hands to ribbons, fumbling about in the dark, but after several hours Frank and Mahmud emerged from the cave as bloody millionaires. The sacks full of seeds had largely swept away with the stream, but a few sodden remnants had tangled in eddies or caught between rocks. These they recovered as best they could.