

Chapter 22

What happened to Frank and Martin in France

Frank and Martin stood with their luggage before a huge display labeled “Départs”, searching for the gate that would open unto their flight to Venice.

“Ah! Here it is! B25,” said Martin. Frank followed his pointing finger to confirm this information for himself. As he was nodding in agreement, a voice piped up behind them.

“B- vingt-cinq? B- vingt-cinq? Quelle d’hommage! C’est deux kilometres à pied. Montez dedans! Je vous conveyeux.” They turned around to discover an electric cart piloted by a thin, mischievous old man. He was bent over his steering wheel as a spring is bent, ready to leap. There was something of a sneer in his smile, which Frank perceived as an odd counterpoint to the shine in his eyes, bright like a Shangri-Lite’s.

Frank and Martin took seats behind him on the cart. “B- vingt-cinq!” declared the old man, setting the vehicle in motion with an unfriendly jolt. “Je m’appelle François.” Frank and Martin introduced themselves, and their driver immediately launched into a torrent of invective concerning everything and everyone around them.

François informed them that the chief occupations of his countrymen, in order, were love-making, malicious gossip, and talking nonsense. He accused a group of doctors, claiming that their conference served no purpose beyond agreeing to a universal raising of their fees. He narrowed his eyes and sneered at a flock of Jesuit priests, postulating unpublishable suppositions about their sexual habits. To a circle of matronly women, all laughing together, he hurled allegations concerning their dishonesty in card games.

François punched at the center of his steering wheel and said, “MBIP MBIP MBIP!” with powerful exuberance, causing some few of the persons blocking their path to turn and notice their approach. As those moved off, he said, “MBIP MBIP MBIP!” again, and the balance of the traffic finally took notice.

Resuming their former velocity, François continued his tirade. They passed a billboard for a theater production, and their driver shared his strong opinions as to its triteness and vapidty. Frank remarked that the actress on the billboard was quite alluring, and bore a striking resemblance to Missile-Tits. François’s eyes lit with mischief and appreciation.

“Indeed, she is lovely, but a wretched actress. A month ago, she was polishing banisters in a Paris boarding house. When the play closes, which will be soon, she’ll take up with some jealous patron and spend her days bearing his children and keeping his chateau.”

Sitting behind their driver, Frank held out his left palm face-up, and drew his thumb and forefinger in squiggles above it, favoring Martin with a look that said, “Should I be writing this down?” Martin laughed silently into his hand.

François continued, unaware. “It is a great dishonor, but what can you expect? That’s how people are. Imagine every possible contradiction and inconsistency, and you will find them all in the governments, law courts, religions, and entertainments of our world.”

François found it necessary to say “MBIP MBIP MBIP!” again, and so gained the attention of a fellow reading a newspaper article. This fellow recognized their driver and held up the article, recommending it with enthusiasm. “Drive!” proclaimed François. “The author is a spiteful man, who earns his living by attacking all earnest undertakings in the arts. He hates anyone who succeeds, and endeavors to undo their advancement just as one crab will reach out to pull another back down into their bucket. He’s one of those snakes of literature who feed on filth and venom; he’s a hack.”

They passed an advertisement for an American film, all shining robots and alien fireballs. Frank observed that such films were just as trite and nonsensical as anything François had condemned, and he agreed. “Yet your American films are still much better than our own. Dull, morose, and utterly motionless, our films are embraced only by students, stay-at-homes, and others who celebrate the tedious. That is why we began the festival at Cannes, to import the vibrance we seem so incapable of producing. MBIP MBIP MBIP!”

Frank noticed that their driver appeared to be the only native Frenchman employed at the Bordeaux airport. Senegalese, Ivory Coasters, Haitians, Vietnamese, and Thais operated the counters and services everywhere about them. A family of Quebecois found themselves waylaid by an Alsatian ticket-man, and stood deep in the throes of a contest to determine who could infuriate the other more thoroughly, without raising their voice or demonstrating any facial expression whatsoever.