

## Chapter 25

*A Visit to Signor Pococurante, Venetian senator*

Frank and Martin took a gondola down the Brenta to the home of Pococurante. The gardens were well laid out and adorned with beautiful marble statues, and the palace was an architectural triumph. The master of the house, a wealthy man in his early sixties, received his two visitors with great courtesy but very little enthusiasm, which Frank found somewhat off-putting, though Martin took it in stride.

Two pretty, well-dressed girls served them cups of frothy chocolate. "I feel like I'm in a museum painting!" declared Martin. "And such lovely young women!"

"They're rather pleasant girls," said senator Pococurante. "We are fortunate in Venice to have an ever-reinvigorated supply of youthful energy. It is a blessing, but they will soon bore me."

Strolling down a long gallery, Frank was struck by the elegance of the art he saw. He asked which master had painted the first two.

"They're by Raphael," said the senator. "I paid a high price for them several years ago, out of vanity. They're said to be two of the finest paintings in Italy, but I don't like them at all. The colors are too dark. It's as if the "brightness" dial had become askew in the artist's brain. I find no true imitation of nature in them. Indeed, I see nothing to spark my soul in any of them. I own many paintings, but I no longer look at them."

Frank and Martin followed their host as senator Pococurante made his way to a charming music room, where they observed a traveling chamber orchestra in the throes of setting up. They were joined by all the palace staff, and the orchestra performed a modern piece by a celebrated young composer. As the audience sat quietly, the first violins made noises like cats fighting over a fish-head while the second violins imitated the sound of fingernails scraping over chalkboard. After several minutes of this, the cellos joined in a dissonant drone. At length, the oboe danced atop, delivering a cascade of notes in striking intervals, as though a drunken butterfly found itself caught in a windstorm.

The percussionist performed a vigorous strike upon his snare drum, grinning in satisfaction at having delivered this attack at precisely the right moment. Frank had developed a headache, and put all of his concentration into holding his brow smooth, and resisting the urge to frown, or rub his temples. After an hour had passed, the musicians abruptly stopped and lowered their instruments. Led by Pococurante, Frank and Martin and all of the household staff applauded heartily, as everyone does at modern concerts, showing fully their enthusiasm that the end of the performance had, at last, arrived.

As the musicians packed up, Frank felt an impulse to approach them and describe his experiences as a trumpeter in his elementary school band. Then he remembered the breath and power of the orchestra at the lamasery in Shangri-La. This reminded Frank of his friend from the mountain, who rarely began a sentence with an "I", and it occurred to him that such an overture might not create the impression he desired.

After the orchestra had loaded out and left for the city, everyone breathed sighs of relief and complained of their headaches. Martin wondered aloud why these clearly talented musicians bothered performing such unpleasant music, and Frank confessed his own thoughts had strayed in that very direction.

"It is the sad result of the composer's strike," explained Pococurante. "For one-hundred-thirty years, the composers all over the world have been on strike. Yet they are composers of music, and not of letters, and so can only speak in the native language of the heart. Thus, they have failed to inform the world of their strike, or of their demands for reconciliation. They have even failed to stop composing, continuing instead to turn out thick folios of nonsensical notation."

"Now, why would they do that?" asked Frank.

"Because they don't know any better," explained Pococurante. "They believe the conditions of their bargaining position are universally understood. The whole world has fallen into squalor and hatred beneath a blanket of poison, and there will be no new music that is pleasant or enjoyable until everyone cleans things up."

"How?" asked Martin. "How could this condition persist for one-hundred-thirty years?"

Pococurante shook his head. "People don't trust their own sensibilities. Everyone develops a headache when they listen to such music, but no one dares to admit it. They blame themselves for having poor taste, swallowing the pain at their temples and smiling along with the rest of the ever-thinning audience. The fools pretend to admire everything in a celebrated composer, abdicating the power to judge for themselves. I like only what suits me personally."

They sat down to dinner, and the staff brought antipasti: aged sausage made from wild boar, grilled polenta with a creamy

spread of dried cod with capers, and soft-shell crabs wrapped in pastry dough and lightly fried, served with pickled asparagus and cauliflower. Frank and Martin stuffed their cheeks like chipmunks beneath the last chestnut tree on earth, but Pococurante nibbled distractedly. There was a hearty deep red wine from Montepulciano to match the peppery tang of the sausage, a very dry chardonnay that brought out the sweetness of the cod and crab, and a lightly fruited rosé that gave great pleasure when sipped following a bite of crab and vegetables together.

The pasta arrived, linguine with clams harvested from the mouth of the Brenta that morning, in a vegetable broth thickened with Romano cheese that had been aged until its saltiness matched the nutty flavor. Frank and Martin both observed that the clams were the sweetest and most tender either had known, while the cheese had no peer. Pococurante smiled in bemusement, sipping more of the dry chardonnay. Tart hints of stone fruit in the wine came clearer when paired with the broth, a pleasant surprise.

Port wines in all manner of chubby bottles came with their dessert, an assortment of fritole, crostoli, bussolai, and chocolates around a pinza veneta bursting with plums, cherries, and dark raisins. Fresh grapes and strawberries with burrata completed the table. Frank enjoyed a bit of everything, relishing the way the baked fruit complimented the port wine, and the contrast provided by the burrata. Remembering the lesson of his first night in Shangri-La, he focused his energies on the fresh fruit.

After dinner, they visited Pococurante's library, and learned that a Venetian senator's education departed significantly from that of an upper-middle class kid from suburban Indiana, or from an Oxford divinity student's. They spent long moments realizing this, and settled upon seeking authors they all knew in common.

Pococurante's disappointment was palpable when he discovered that only Italians still read Virgil. He became pleasant again, however, when he learned that he could surprise his guests with his indifference to Homer. "Now so antiquated, his formulae are the laws you must break, as an artist, today. Can you imagine sitting on a blanket, listening to this, for eighteen hours? Any of us would go mad! After all, Greek wine is not *that* good.

"I confess a certain respect for the history and evolution of our literature. As such, I believe Homer should be taught, and I'm proud to have him in my library. Yet our poetry has come a long way, and our hearts and passions are better informed by, and reflected in, modern works."

Frank agreed with Pococurante that Dante was superior to Milton, but Martin shook his head. Though clearly exasperated, he could not summon the words for his defense.

Pococurante did not know Chaucer, though he owned the volume. He proved well-versed in Shakespeare, particularly those plays set in Italy. The senator held forth with firm certitude that the events portrayed in those plays could never have transpired in his country.

Shakespeare's histories he denounced as English hauteur, and of the tragedies he complained: "Here more than anywhere we feel the lurching gait of the celebrated iambic pentameter. What heavier shackles might one conceive for a poet? It is like watching a footrace in which the contestants must stop every four strides to cut off a toe! What greater miracles might we attribute to your wondrous bard, had he been freed from his Elizabethan corset?"

Frank turned his attention to the shelves, and moved one step to the right, away from Pococurante. This took him from England to France. "Ah! Here is Voltaire. Surely you find some enjoyment in his wit."

"Voltaire?" Pococurante gestured with his arms wide, imploring the heavens. "Which of his glaring short-comings do you prefer? The racism, misogyny, or anti-semitism? Or perhaps you always fall in love with the sort of fool who adopts a sarcastic nickname and makes absurd promises. In the course of history, his work proved oracular. Yet he was of the comfortable class, unable to truly grasp the condition of his servants, and his work reads more like an unheeded warning from a sycophant to his superiors, than a call to action for the down-trodden."

Frank stepped back to his left, and found a few shelves of Americans. "Well, now, here's Mark Twain. His work has formed the intellectual character of the US to this day. Do you not hold his talents of wit and observation in esteem?"

Pococurante laughed, joy and derision in equal measure. "First of all, I invite you to reflect more deeply on what you mean by, 'The Intellectual Character of the US.' Beyond that, the man was a fuddy-duddy. Myopic at his best, at home upon the Mississippi, he was more often befuddled by his travels. His career would have plummeted at the start if it hadn't been for his wife, who threw out all of his angry letters instead of sending them."

Frank rejoined, "Yet he was the first to openly discuss the inhumanity of sla-"

"No!" interjected Martin. "He was *not*. I invite you to *actually* read the works of Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, and W.E.B. Dubois, among many others. Frank, I assure you that the difference in their accuracy is as striking as that between what *you* were able to observe in Xinjiang, and what was shown to *me*."

This exchange pleased Pococurante as much as anything that had transpired so far. He looked wistfully at Melville, but couldn't get a bite. Frank and Martin moved on to Hemingway and Vonnegut, and debated whose language was more child-

like. No small attention was devoted to the subject of whether such language demonstrated mastery or imbecility. At length, Frank and Martin agreed that they were equally child-like, and the strategy contributed to their staying power. Frank opined that Hemingway used the medium more artfully, at times, while Martin held that Vonnegut's observations contained more value for a modern reader. Frank suggested that anyone with a basic grasp of the English language could gain something of value from Hemingway, while no person of the same description could take Vonnegut seriously.

Martin explained that seriousness wasn't the point, and posited that by Frank's definition, Shel Silverstein's "The Giving Tree" was the best book ever written.

Pococurante struck a match, a big old woody that produced a broad flame upon ignition, and brought this in an ostentatious arc to a cigarette depending from his lips. He lit the end, shook out the match, and discarded it in an ashtray beside him, drawing deeply from the tobacco and making eye contact with both Frank and Martin. "Shel Silverstein's 'The Giving Tree' is the best book ever written," he declared. Looking down at his cigarette in disgust, he snuffed it out in the ashtray next to the match.

At a loss for what to say next, the three gentlemen attempted a foray into women authors. Martin opined: "Women do not often feel compelled to write, as theirs is the business of living, and driving the stories we so enjoy. Yet when they do, the result attains such grace as to defy any response other than adulation. Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Harper Lee, Ursula K. LeGuin, I could go on and on."

"What about Ayn Rand?" prompted Frank.

Pococurante again raised his arms to heaven dramatically, and declared, "What is wrong with you Americans?" but left off as Martin engaged them sincerely.

"What an incredibly beautiful mind. What a profound passion for language, and for life and the human experience! What stunning prose she gave us. If only she had descended from her high tower of locked doors, and actually met some of the people she so casually condemned. Throughout her life, she embraced her ideology blindly, without ever testing its validity. What her immigrant father taught her, it was to keep a young girl alive in a foreign country. Her zeal proved bankable, and it's the only reason we know her name. I can think of no sadder example of true art coerced into the service of the truly artless."

"It's almost as though she's the opposite of Barbara Kingsolver," mused Frank. They were each quite surprised to remember just how many Barbara Kingsolver books there were, and how many they had read, and how much they enjoyed them.

"In the same vein," observed Martin, "here is Isabelle Allende. But she's a Spanish author, and you have her among the Americans."

Pococurante appeared extremely surprised by Martin's remark, then solved the riddle himself. "Oh! Because of the language. No, she writes in the Spanish spoken in her native Chile, but to anyone in Europe she is as American as you two."

Frank noticed a copy of "Infinite Jest". He confessed, "I never got around to reading DH Lawrence."

"How much time do you have?" asked Pococurante, chuckling.

At the same moment, Martin said, "Seems to me the longer it takes to tell a joke, the less funny it is."

They moved on to the digital media section. Frank felt deeply impressed by the subscriptions the senator kept. "Here are eighty of the most prestigious scientific journals! There may be something good in them."

"There would be," said Pococurante, "if only one of the authors of that hodgepodge spent an occasional hour talking shop with their peers in other disciplines, or with their publishers. The abundance of jargon in each field makes access to the broad range of primary literature impossible for anyone. Without a unified language and format, how can we come to understand the true value of all this research?"

Once they had looked through all of Pococurante's movies, they went downstairs to the garden. Compared to the sweeping loam of the retired lama's expansive fields back in Shangri-La, there was little here to impress, but Frank remarked upon the shrubs and fountains and statuary out of politeness. The senator scoffed, "I know of nothing in such bad taste. I'm having it all ripped out tomorrow and replaced with wetlands."

"Aren't there enough wet lands in Venice already?" needed Frank.

The senator smiled back with exorbitant friendliness. "Proper wetlands absorb the tides and heavy rainfalls. The more wetlands we can restore, the longer we can keep our beautiful city. I don't care for much. But if I failed to do my part, in that regard, I could not forgive myself."

Frank and Martin took their leave, and made their way to the city. Looking back at the riverbank from the railing of their boat, Frank remarked, "Well, you'll have to admit that there's the happiest man alive, because he's above everything he owns."

"Can't you see," said Martin, "that he's disgusted with everything he owns? As Plato said long ago, the best stomachs are not those which reject all foods."

"But," said Frank, "isn't there pleasure in criticizing? In being aware of defects where others see beauties?"

"Do you mean," said Martin, "that there's pleasure in having no pleasure?"

"I suppose not," said Frank. "In that case, I'll be the only happy man in the world when I see Missile-Tits again."

"It's always good to hope," said Martin.

Days and weeks went by, however, and Mahmud did not come. Frank regretted not hearing from Johanna and her tour guide again. He hoped to share another meal with them, even if it were only *pesse frito*.