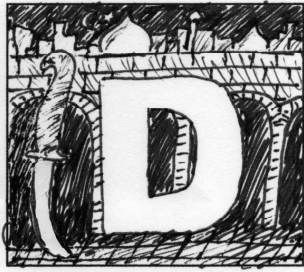
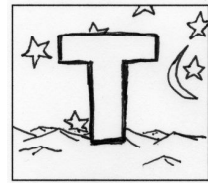




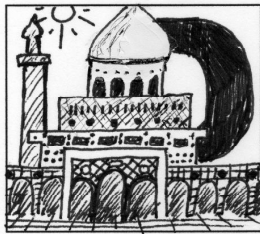
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written and illustrated  
by Aaron Brachfeld



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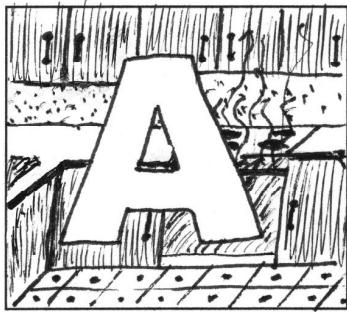
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For Mary with Love  
On her 24<sup>th</sup> Birthday

## Chapter One

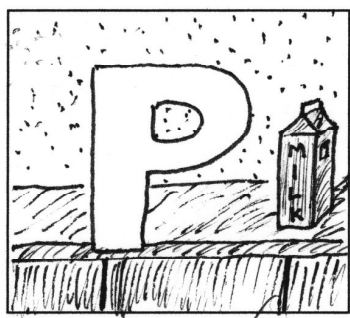


itting by the warm fire, reading her book, Maple ignored the cold wind that pushed through the cracks of the door. It was beginning to snow, Winter expected a triumph—and why not? The darkness was waxing every day, the hope of Spring seemed further every hour. And yet, sitting by the fire that wavered from the draft down the chimney, Maple's thoughts ignored the cold and forgot the cruelty of Winter, trusting in the coming summer. What was the source of this unwavering trust?

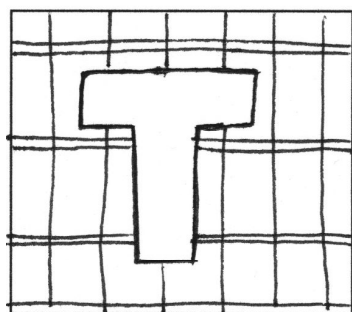


h! The smells from the oven, of cinnamon, of cloves, of ginger, of nutmeg and allspice! Such smells were thousands of years of joy! They were the smells of forests that never have yet yielded to Winter's savage yoke, forever growing in lands that revel in a

never-ending summer of life! Those were smells of tropical paradise rediscovered! She heard the jungle's savage drums beating the pulse through her veins, calling her blood back to her heart, calling her back by her secret names, calling the secret names aloud! She heard the drums call her by her true name. The silence of Winter's fury could not drown out the beating of the drums.



pulling the cinnamon rolls from the oven, she quickly prepared the glaze using the last of the milk. Satisfied by the fruits of her oven, she ate one and left the rest to cool.



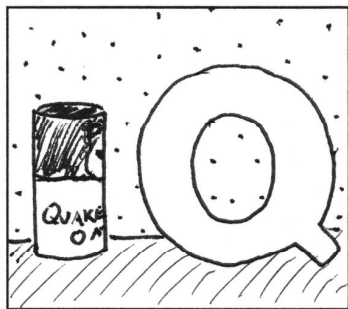
the last of the milk! But she would need some for breakfast? Had she used all the milk in baking? No, it had been a week since they had been able to go to the store, and milk will get used up in that time—even if it is

stockpiled before the storm starts. She had no reason to worry that there wouldn't be *any* breakfast, of course. Even without milk, there was always oatmeal, that stoic, spartan meal. It was not bad food—on such food the Scots and Irish had grown mighty, on such food strong horses worked all day! Yet, she preferred cereal and milk. The thought of oatmeal brought to her a sharp new awareness of the blizzard outside. Winter's siege was cruel! The blockade had to be breached—she needed milk. She would muster a sortie! She looked to where her husband sat on the couch, reading his book in front of the fire. “Agus, we're going to get milk.”

## Chapter Two



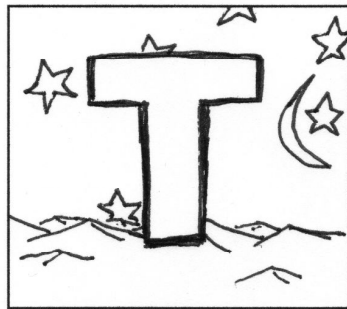
ike her, he was a hardened veteran and ready to be relied upon for any dangerous task in this war against Winter. For years they had fought against Winter's pitiless aggression, fighting through even the most determined siege. Together, nothing could stop them—not even the worst blizzard in Colorado history! He gathered armor and weapons while she reconnoitered the enemy and made a list of the supplies that were low.



uickly, they had all they needed for the one block trip to the supermarket: gloves, hats, snow shovels, a length of rope, a sled, trusty coats, snow pants, heavy socks, waterproof boots and other such winter gear. If they succeeded, the blockade would be that much more comfortable to bear, if they failed...well, there was always oatmeal for breakfast.

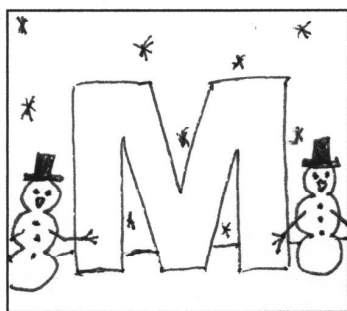


hey said goodbye to their pet toads (fast asleep under their log in the warm apartment and full from a recent meal), stepped outside and immediately encountered a ten-foot high drift of snow. No problem! They tunneled through. After getting through the drift, they found that visibility was not much better out of the drift than inside: there was so much snow falling and blowing they couldn't see their hands in front of their faces! No matter...they roughly knew where the store was.



he going was slow. Drift after drift blocked their way like dunes in the Sahara—only they couldn't walk on top of these snow dunes because the snow was so light and fluffy. It was dark: the even the bright moon couldn't shine through the storm. Moving was more like swimming than walking. But at last, they found what they thought was the side of the

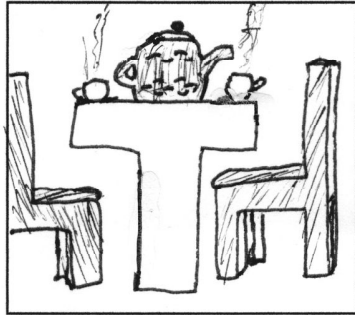
store's building. Carefully, with one hand on the wall so they didn't lose the building in the storm, they walked the perimeter and found the doorstep. Was that the smell of Chinese food? They pushed their way into the door and they discovered not shelves of food waiting for them, but a kitchen full of steaming vegetarian Chinese Korean Brazilian American food.



Maple and Agus, confused as they were, recognized their neighbor, John, welcoming them in. Maple took off her hat to warm up some.

“Hello John. Sorry to bother you—we thought your restaurant was the supermarket. I guess we took a wrong turn.” John laughed and slapped his knee. “And it’s a good thing, too! You poor people!” Maple and Agus began shaking off clumps of snow and ice. “You look to be half-snowmen, and your other half looks frozen! As long as you’re here, you’d better have some hot tea. Won’t you sit down with me for a while before you

head out on your way?” Nothing sounded quite so good to in a very long time.

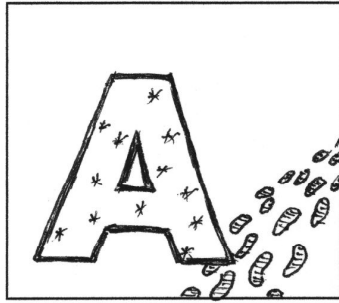


he restaurant was run by a small family: John, the father, was originally from China. His wife, Jane, originally hailed from Korea.

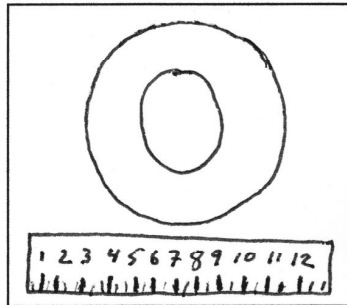
They met in Brazil, where they had their son, José and became vegetarian. Later, they came to America and set up a restaurant. It was the most popular restaurant in town because of the great food. “I’m so glad you stopped by. Things are wonderful!” John confessed, smiling large as he poured tea for Agus and Maple. “We’ve been stuck in here for a week, unable to get home. And, what’s better, the customers have also been stuck in here a week, eating, eating, eating!” John sat down opposite Agus. After taking a sip of tea he asked, “how deep are the drifts, now?” When Maple and Agus told him, he smiled, hopped up and ran to the kitchen while calling out to his wife and son, “Hey, Jane! José! 10 foot drifts now! Can you believe it!”

Joyful laughter could be heard from the kitchen. One of the customers muttered to another, “as long as we’re not getting out of here for a while, let’s be thankful that at least we’ve got good food to eat.”

## Chapter 3

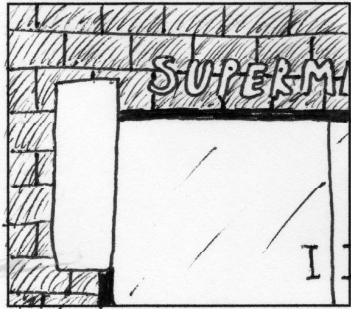


t last, Maple and Agus had warmed up enough to consider leaving for the grocery store. They went to the kitchen to say goodbye to John, Jane and José, and tried to pay for the tea—but John wouldn't let them. Their kind hosts said goodbye, never expecting to see either Maple or Agus alive again.

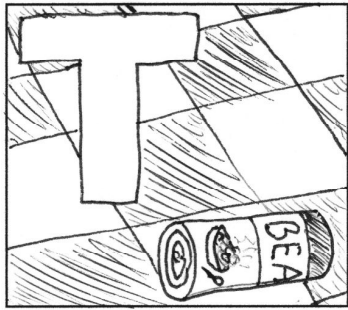


ut into the storm they went. All about them they could hear the fury of nature howling, the sound of tree branches cracking under the weight of the snow, the sound of roofs and walls creaking, complaining of the stress of the weather. It was a bitter night to be outside. They headed in the direction they believed the supermarket to be. Foot by foot they measured their progress, every inch was a battle. At last they found a wall. Was this

the supermarket? They followed it around to a doorway and stumbled in.

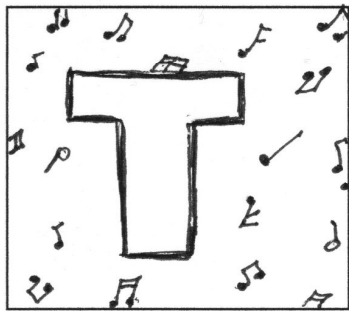


It was! Maple and Agus offered praises to the Providence that had guided them safely a block down the street in the worst blizzard of history, praying that they should be so lucky as to make it back home again—wait! What was that sound?



Two store Clerks whizzed by on a grocery cart, one standing balanced on the handle, the other standing in the basket itself. They seemed startled by the presence of two customers. The one standing on the handle lost his balance and the whole cart toppled over into a display of canned beans, burying the two hapless Clerks. Canned beans rolled for dozens of feet in every direction along the checkered linoleum floor. When the last can of beans came to a stop, the Clerks gradually

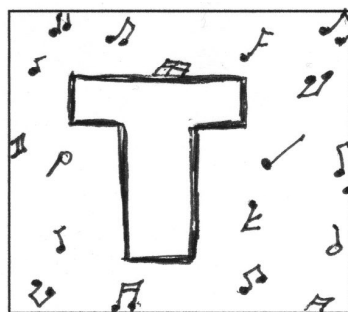
began to move again. The one who had been riding on the front let out a loud moan as he uncovered himself. They struggled to their feet, brushed themselves off and greeted Maple and Agus, “hello, there! Sorry, we didn’t expect any customers...we haven’t seen anyone for a week, not since the storm started. Can we help you? Would you like some hot coffee to warm up?”



he offer was a nice one, but Maple preferred hot chocolate. “Oh, sure! We can certainly do that. But I’m afraid we’re all out of milk. Do you mind your hot chocolate made from water, or would you like something else? You can have anything you want. The Owner of the store called us on Day One and said we could help ourselves to anything in the store—you know, to eat and live and stuff. He didn’t say anything about half-frozen customers, but I’m sure he would have if he took a moment to think about it.”



hey began to walk to the office of the store, where the two Clerks had set up camp. “Would you believe that our manager up and left as soon as the snow started getting bad and the Owner actually felt sorry for us? We were sure we’d be forced to buy all our food from the store. I can’t believe it. Anything we want to eat in the whole store.” The first Clerk put his hand on the other Clerk’s shoulder, “yeah! And on top of it all, we’ve been getting overtime pay the whole week!” “And on top of that, we’ve had no customers, no shipments...nothing to do but practice cart surfing.”



hey walked past a room with scorch marks. “Oh, don’t mind that. That was just from when we, uh, *turned off* the Muzak.” The other Clerk explained, “yeah, the thing kept playing the same holiday music over and over again on the store’s sound system...until we, uh,

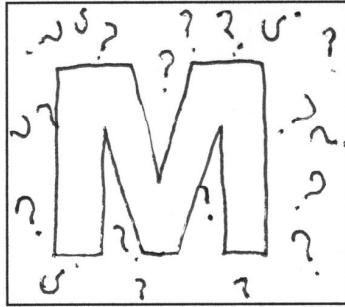
*fixed* it.” Maple and Agus nodded appreciatively, “we thought it sounded quieter in here. It’s nice.” Maple and Agus had to wait until the Clerks stopped laughing before continuing to where the snacks and drinks were. Clearly, the time alone in the store was beginning to drive the Clerks a little mad. They went to the manager’s office and found the desk with quite a spread of food and drink. Everything you could possibly want to eat was there—except for milk. “I know, Ma’am,” said one of the Clerks after reading Maple’s expression. We wish we had some milk to give you, but the shipment didn’t come before the storm started, and there is certainly *no* way any shipment is going to get through *this* blizzard.”



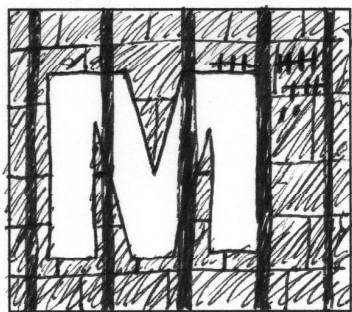
ere was no milk whatsoever in the store. Winter had won. Maple was desperate, “there’s no milk *anywhere* in this store? Not even soy milk?” The Clerks looked unnerved. “Man, you are desperate, aren’t you?” The one

asked the other, “can’t we tell her about The Door? I mean, they’re ready to drink *soy* milk, man.” “No, no, no! Hush, fool!” the other slapped the one upside the head. “Manager says ‘don’t tell *anyone* about the door!’” Both Clerks smiled large smiles. “Good thing for you, Ma’am, the manager ain’t here!”

## Chapter 4

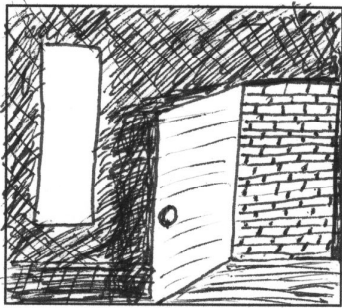


apple and Agus were sure that the Clerks were crazy and began to look for any way to get back home—hopefully with at least a few items on their grocery list. “Dude, they think we’re crazy,” said one Clerk to the other. “Dude, we are crazy,” said the other to the one. “No, no, no! They think we’re crazy about The Door!” “Dude, we *are* crazy about The Door! It’s a wonderful thing!” The first Clerk slapped himself upside the head. “No, dude! Never...never mind. They’ll just have to see The Door. No one believes about The Door until they’ve seen it.”



apple’s sortie had gone terribly wrong. Now they were taken prisoner by crazed grocery store Clerks, being taken to see The Door, whatever that was. “I’m sorry,” she whispered to Agus. Agus quietly told her not

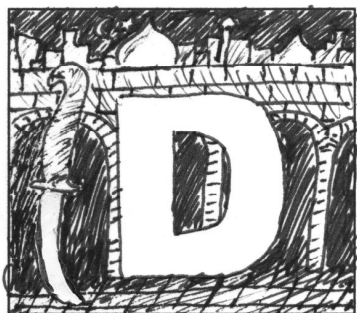
to worry, everything would be fine. At last, they arrived at the back of the grocery store, and went into the back room. They went into the dairy cooler. It was empty, of course, but Maple still looked around hopefully. Though she was looking hard, she didn't see it until one of the Clerks pointed it out.



It was a door. “It looks like any door you’d expect to see in a cooler, doesn’t it? It’s not. Watch.” He opened it. Warm, tropical air poured out of the opening. Strange, beautiful sounds and smells followed, and, looking through it, Maple saw amazing brickwork across what appeared to be an alley. Maple and Agus were dumbfounded. “We’re not supposed to keep it open a long time because the warm air spoils the dairy,” explained the Clerk. *So that’s why we can never get fresh milk or eggs here,* thought Maple. “Where’s it go?” Agus asked. “A back alley in Damascus—and don’t even think about asking us how it works, we

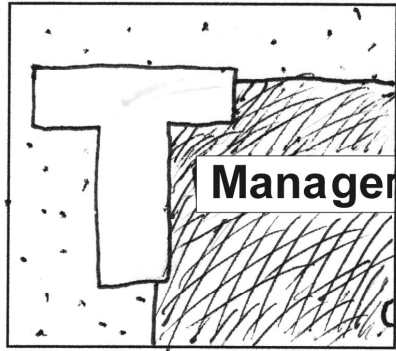
don't know. No one knows. One day, the Manager was going to restock the milk and noticed that there was a door here—he was pretty sure it wasn't there before. He opened it up, and stepped through. Downtown Damascus. If it's daytime here, it's usually night there...it's really Damascus. Open up the door, you're there. Just like that. We've been using it for the last week to step outside of this store." The Clerk leaned close to Agus, "staying in here all day would drive a person crazy, you know what I mean, man?" The other Clerk smiled and pointed outside of The Door. "There's a vendor at the market down that street to your right that sells excellent milk, yogurt and cheese. Go on, it's on us!" The Clerk handed Maple a giant wad of Syrian paper money and a sack of Syrian coins. "And don't get sappy on us. We're glad to help. You both seem like decent people—you're always polite whenever you shop here. Besides, all this money doesn't cost much: the exchange rate is great. You can get a billion of whatever these Syrians use for money for just a few

American dollars.” The other Clerk nodded in agreement. “And besides, it’s not on us. It’s on our manager! In his rush to abandon us to the storm, he left his wallet in the men’s room.” The two Clerks laughed for a good long time, saying the words “men’s room exchange rate” repeatedly.



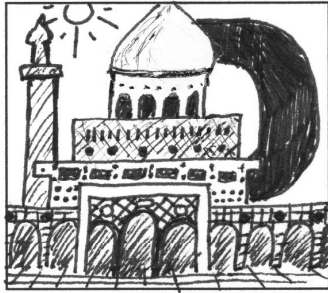
umbfounded, completely astonished, Maple eventually got out the words to ask, “but what if the door closes while we’re on the other side?” “Easy!” explained the other Clerk. “You just push on this door and, unless it’s blocked by a crate or something (which, considering the lack of stuff in this backroom, you will admit is unlikely!), you get through just fine. One time I was out getting something in Damascus when that jerk of a manager closed the door on me—this was before we knew you could just open the door from the other side—because it was heating up the cooler. He was standing right there with me as I left for Damascus, and as

soon as I'm out the door, 'slam!' He leaves me in Damascus in the middle of the night. We found out that day also that if you knock, whoever is on this side hears you just fine."

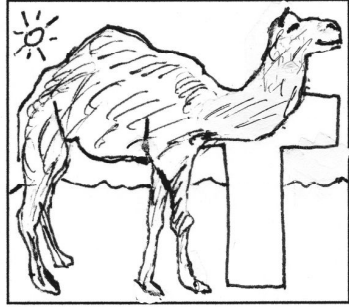


he situation seemed promising. "Have you ever had any problems with the door?" Agus asked. "Well...come to think of it...there was a small problem when a criminal in Damascus got the wrong address for a drug delivery and knocked on this door. Can you imagine his surprise? Just imagine our manager's surprise when we led the Syrian drug dealer to his office and the drug dealer wanted paid!" the Clerks burst into laughter again. Agus shrugged at Maple, Maple raised her eyebrows. They asked each other, "why not?" Here was an adventure they could not turn down. They went through the door.

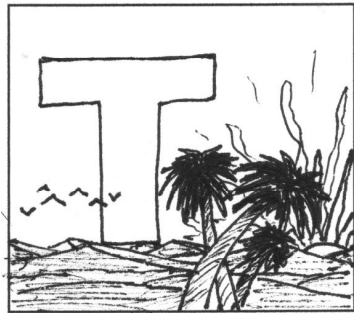
## Chapter 5



amascus! The smells of the desert and of the spices, the smells of one of the oldest cities in the world at market time. The sounds of people coming and going, of earning money, saving money, of buying things, trading things, of debatable prices, of debatable politics, of debatable shopkeepers. Chickens, camels, horses, cars. Brickwork two thousand years old, bread baked fresh today. Damascus, city of humanity, outpost of Mesopotamia. The Door really worked. Maple and Agus looked back at the door and smiled at the Clerks, who smiled and said they'd leave the door open for them. Maple said it was too hot for all their winter clothing. They walked back to the door and asked the Clerks if they could keep their jackets in the cooler. "Yeah, of course, dude!" Maple and Agus giggled as they took off their jackets and snow pants, throwing away their gloves. The whole thing was incredible.

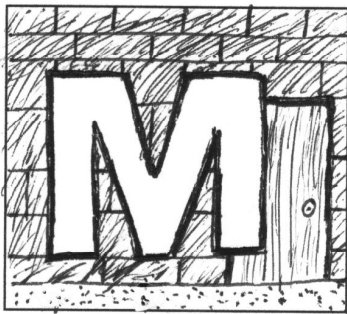


hey headed out the door a second time. Maple and Agus divided up the wad of Syrian money between them. They headed to the right and found the dairy vendor exactly where he should have been. Mmmm! What milk, what yogurt, what cheese! Neither Maple nor Agus had ever tasted anything so fresh! They perused the other vendors, and bought more than they had gone to the store for.



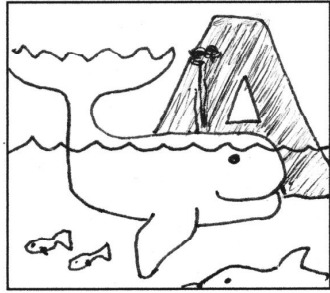
hey then decided it was time to go home. This was not the tropical jungle paradise that had kept Maple's hopes during the long Colorado winter, but it was close enough. Taking a long breath in of the Damascus air and wishing they could spend more time there, they went back to The Door. It was closed? They tried to open it. Nothing happened—it was locked. The handle wouldn't even turn! They knocked loudly. At last, a perturbed

Syrian shopkeeper answered. Behind him, Maple and Agus saw only the backroom of a shop. Agus almost threw up, but managed to apologize for bothering him and turned to face Maple, who had sat down under the stress.



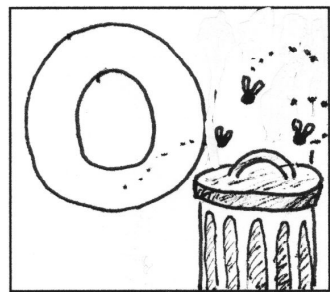
Maple and Agus sat together for a minute before Maple had collected herself. They needed a plan. They needed to get out of Damascus and back to America. They had no idea how to do this: they had no passport, only the wad of Syrian money (worth only who knew how little) and the little bit of American dollars they brought with them to the store. They were lost in Damascus.

## Chapter 6



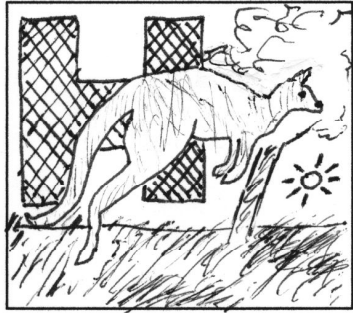
s the were sitting in the alley discussing their lack of plans, an old man came up to them, “Mind if I sit down?” he asked them in a heavy accent.

Without waiting for a reply, he sat down next to Agus. “You seem to be nice Americans. An American once saved my life and I swore I would look after any Americans that came my way.” He smiled, and extended his hand. “You look like you need some looking after. I am Ishmael Al-Hazid.” Agus shook his hand, and introduced himself and Maple to Mr. Hazid—but Mr. Hazid corrected him. “No, you are too polite. Call me Ishmael.”



ver some mint tea at a public square, politely paid for by Ishmael, Agus, Maple and Ishmael talked about all sorts of things. Ismael introduced himself. He grew up in Arab Jerusalem, and then left for Europe to find his fortune. He

ended up Sweden, working on a science vessel that studied whales (for some reason, they hired him on the spot—something about him having the honest name of a scientist and a sailor). At first, things were wonderful. They studied whales, sailing through all the seas; he learned a lot very quickly. He was steadily promoted every year until he was Captain of one of the science vessels. Then the funding evaporated, and the crew was forced out of business. However, he'd made enough to be comfortable and went to Paris to retire. Paris had other ideas. One week into his early retirement, there was a nationwide strike of Garbage Collectors. The streets filled with garbage. The nation stank. The police responded by arresting the Garbage Collectors. He was wrongfully thought a Garbage Collector and taken to jail. They wouldn't hear he wasn't a Garbage Collector! Off he went—they took away his visa and deported him to what they thought was his country of origin (at least, it was the country of origin for the one James Cook whose visa he had stolen to get into Europe).



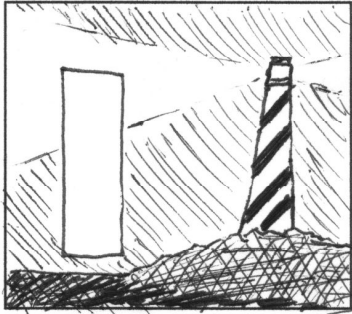
e found himself in Australia, friendless and penniless. He worked on a tourist boat (under his own name—it was a good sailor’s name, too!) and earned enough to return home. But he had no passport, and couldn’t get one because he wasn’t supposed to be in Australia. He devised a plan: he bought a boat and would sail back home! But he had little luck: while he was traveling, he was overcome by some pirates near the Horn of Africa (he would never go that way again: better to go up the Iranian coast!). Well, the pirates were at the point of executing him and taking his boat when the American Navy approached. Ah, the American Navy! Such beautiful ships! The Americans were hunting pirates...he was saved (so he thought). The Americans called to the pirates to surrender themselves. When no immediate response was had, the Americans started shelling his boat! They thought that he was one of the pirates!



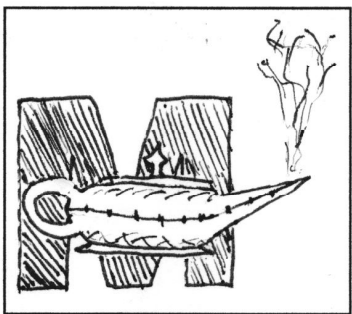
uckily, the true pirates fled to their boats and began attacking the Americans, leaving him and his little boat out of the battle. All the pirates were sunk that day, and he was taken aboard the American ship. He was about to be turned over to the Ethiopian government for being a suspected smuggler when he confessed his whole story to the Captain. God bless America and Americans! The Captain believed his story—said that her great grandfather had a similar adventure while trying to get back home to China. These things happened all the time. They did not release him to his boat, but they took him all the way up the coast to Israel. Just before they were about to dock, she told him to jump overboard—otherwise she'd have to turn him into the Israeli Police. So he dived overboard. She allowed him to escape while not being court-martialed herself: an error in delivering a prisoner is easier to forgive than aiding that prisoner in his escape! He swore

to her before she let him go that he would always look after Americans wherever he was.

## Chapter 7

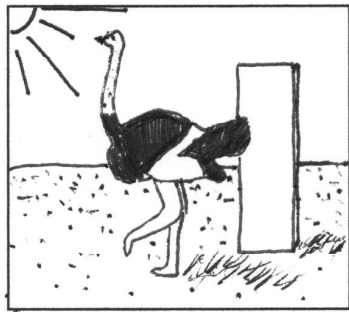


Ishmael, by the grace of God and the United States Navy, had been brought back home...but the city of Jerusalem had changed while he was gone. The government was persecuting Arabs and Muslims, so he decided to go to Damascus, far away from the sea. That was his story. How did a nice American couple get to looking like they needed so much looking out for in Damascus?

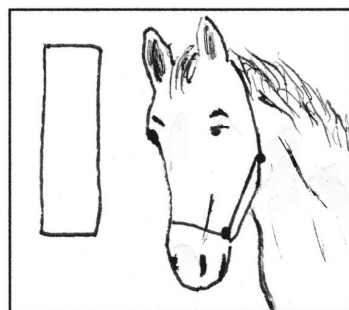


Maple and Agus hesitated, “we’ll tell you the story, but you probably won’t believe it.” Maple told the whole thing from start to finish. Ishmael studied them to see if he could tell if at least they believed their own story. Ishmael shrugged, “you warned me I wouldn’t believe it, and I admit it is a hard story to believe. It’s better than mine, that’s

for sure. I guess that such things happen all the time, though. Why, I heard stories more outrageous than that from my own mother when I was growing up. All your story lacks is a genie!” *Or a passport, a ticket home, or some other happy ending,* thought Maple.

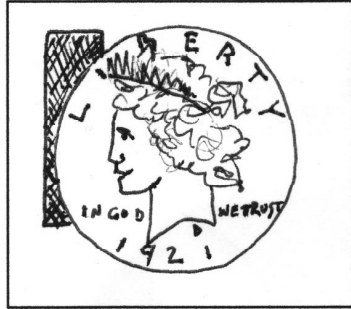


shmael finished his tea in a gulp. “I will tell you what I will do for you. I have a friend who I once did a great favor for. He can get anything to anywhere in the world. He will be your genie. Come, I’ll introduce you to him. The greatest smuggler of our time! His name, at least the name he told me, is Henric. You’ll love him.”



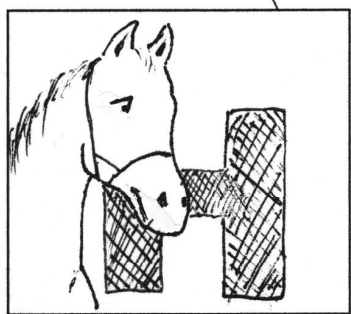
shmael took them through the labyrinthine streets of Damascus to a large yellow house. Ten Arab horses were tied in the courtyard, saddled and ready to ride. After introducing themselves to the doorman, Ishmael, Maple

and Agus were admitted. They were taken to a bright, comfortable room that had windows open to the cool courtyard. They were served refreshments (fresh milk, tea and dates), and at last Henric, a tall, dark Ethiopian, came into the room. He embraced Ishmael and shook hands with Maple and Agus. Ishmael explained the situation to Henric by saying that, whether or not he believed the story of his friends, it was a good one to hear, well worth the time it took to tell and probably worth quite a bit of money. Maple and Agus then told the story again. “So you need to get back home? Ah, it is difficult these days to get an American back into America without passports. You have a most peculiar government: the hardest things to get across your border are the very things that belong across the border. But, with the will of God, there is a way.” He smiled. “And, when you don’t have the will of God, money helps! It could be very expensive to get you back home. How much money do you have?”



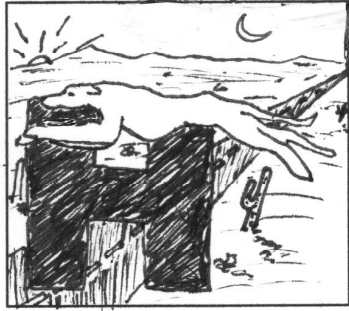
shmael shook his head. “Whatever they cannot pay, I will pay. These are my friends, Henric!” Henric raised his eyebrows and told

Maple and Agus that they were fortunate to have a friend like Ishmael. “But I still must know about how much money we are working with.” Agus and Maple sighed. They had no idea, in fact—but it didn’t matter. They reached deep into their pockets and produced first their meager American dollars, and then the wad of Syrian money and then the Syrian coins.

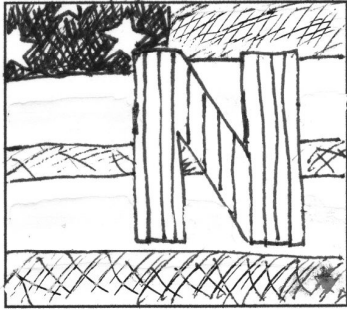


enric’s eyes opened wide and he laughed a booming laugh, “by God, that is quite a fortune! Magic doors and treasure!” He got up and jiggled. He slapped Ishmael on the shoulder hard. “I say, I like this bedtime story better and better, Ishmael!” Ishmael was too stunned for words. Henric composed himself. “Well, allow me to make a few

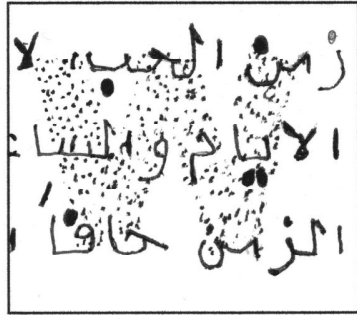
plans. I will leave you here for a few minutes. Please, do not hesitate to ask anything of my servants: you are my guests, and friends of Ishmael. Though Henric took more than a half hour, Maple, Agus and Ishmael spent it in nervous silence. At last, Henric emerged from a different door than he left and smiled. "Praise God, I do not need even a fourth of your treasure, even after my immodest fee. Even better, I can get you home within two months." *Two months!* Maple's mind turned to the poor toads, both of whom would be starved by then. They could last a month without food...but not two! "Is there any way we can get home sooner?" she asked. "My, you are in a rush! How mysterious. Well, if money is not an objection, we can double the cost and get you home in three weeks...but that is as fast as is possible for this genie," Henric confessed. There was no thought or discussion. It was a deal. Home in three weeks! Henric shook their hands across the table. "Excellent! You will leave tomorrow morning at sunrise."



enric shared the itinerary with them. They would pay for each stage as they achieved it. Henric would take his fee for arranging the matter now, and he advised Maple and Agus to never, if at all possible, pay before they safely arrived at their destination or received their tickets. They would travel by horse to a small port on the coast of Turkey, and from there take a ferry to Greece (by “ferry,” he meant a smuggler’s gunboat). They would then ride their horses into Athens, and take Eurorail to Bordeaux (yes, even smugglers used Eurorail). A passenger ship (smuggler boat) would take them across the ocean to their own shores. They would then be able to then take a Greyhound Bus or rent a car to drive back home (yes, smugglers used Greyhound all the time)...depending on how low of a profile they wanted to keep once they arrived. That would leave them with two and a half million American dollars to spare—before lodging and food.

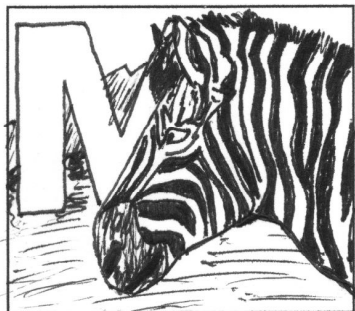


either Maple nor Agus were trying to disguise their surprise at the number, “two and a half million.” Both were very surprised to hear about their new fortune. But they were both so tired that it seemed to Henric and Ishmael that they knew all along how much money they had and were simply smiling out of satisfaction with the plan. The suspicions of Henric and Ishmael were confirmed when, out of the gratitude for their help, Maple and Agus gave to Ishmael and Henric each a quarter million dollars. Ishmael, smiling, laughed and slapped Henric on the back: “what do I keep telling you about Americans? Are they not the most greatest, generous and magnificent people in the world? Money does not corrupt them with greed or vice, they know friendship is the true treasure in life: see these two millionaires! They spend money like it were someone else’s fortune.” Henric nodded, “it is a good lesson for us all.”



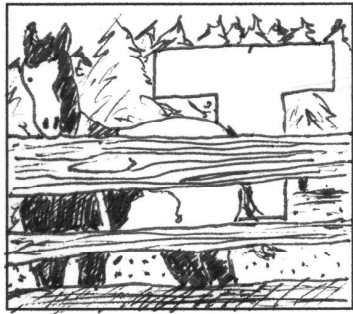
With his new fortune, Ishmael insisted on treating them to a wonderful last day and night in Damascus. Since it was lunchtime, they ate in the finest restaurant of the town, tasting the best hummus and pita in the world. That afternoon, they spent watching camels and horses race. The evening was spent, after a dinner at Ishmael's house that couldn't be beat, with Ishmael and his wife at a small theater where they saw the matinee show of Shakespeare's *Midsummer's Night Dream* performed in Arabic. At last, Maple and Agus, tired from a long, weird day, anticipating a long, weird trip back home to begin early the next morning, begged to be excused by Ishmael and his wife. A tearful and bittersweet goodbye was extended when Ishmael insisted on taking them to the best hotel in town—and paying for their room.

## Chapter 8



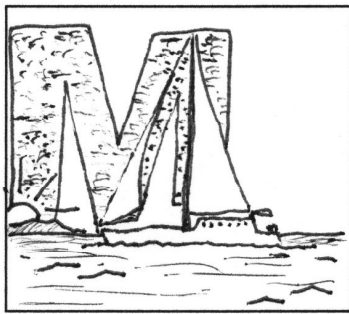
apple and Agus arrived at the house of Henric at dawn. Upon arriving, they saw again the fine Arab horses and wondered if they might get to ride them. They would soon find out: Henric was there to greet them. He gave to them maps and names of people they could ask help from along the way, the names of good hotels and good restaurants...and, with a sweeping gesture at those fine Arabs, their pick of any two horses they wanted to ride and keep. His family had bred them for thousands of years: long ago, when the Queen of Sheba visited Jerusalem, his family—nobility of the Queen—acquired some of the Arab horses. One day, they found that a herd of zebras had somehow impregnated all of the Arab mares! Foals were born and, through patience and the will of God, they improved the new breed by crossing it with the native Zebras and the Arabs equally until the Zebra half was tame and the Arab half

was invigorated by the fresh and wild blood of Africa. He saw Maple appreciating the horses yesterday, and explained that it is the good custom of the land they were in to give to the guest whatever they liked best. This courtesy prevented the guest from succumbing to the sin of desire...though after the largess Maple and Agus demonstrated yesterday, he doubted that their souls were endangered much: even money had no sway over their hearts and their love of friendship.



he goodbye with Henric was a tearful one, and Maple and Agus thanked him for the mighty gift, explaining that they would, with his good will, improve the American horses with his family's stock. Henric shook his head, and laughed. "You Americans are so ambitious! Your country is large and filled with horses. Two horses will not begin to make much of a difference. But I will make a deal with you. For the chance at improving your already great country and for your love of these

horses, I will send to you fifty more if you send to me an equal amount of your wild Mustangs. I seek to improve the breed of my ancestors, and I know of no better rival to the Arab than the Mustang.” The deal was made and kept.

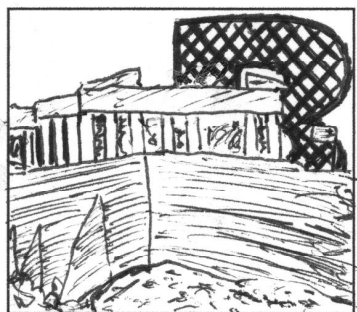


Maple and Agus quickly found themselves far from Damascus along an old Roman road that stretched from horizon to horizon, stretching for an eternity of time. They were completely alone under the desert sky. The horses they were riding never seemed to tire of running. They had packed fresh nuts, fruit and milk from the Damascus market for them to eat and brought good grain for their horses. Maple, Agus and their horses picniced on the side of the road whenever they grew hungry. They still had a little left by the time they reached the Turkish coast, and so, because they arrived with some time to spare, they and their horses found a nice tree and deep grass along the shores of the

Mediterranean, picniced and then napped until dark. Shortly after the fourth star appeared, a sailboat—not much bigger than a large yacht—sailed close, flying the Greek flag. Four sailors could be seen on board, armed to the teeth with guns, knives, grenades and swords. After exchanging the passwords, the sailors complimented them on their horses, and then introduced themselves by their *nomes de guerre*: Groucho, Harpo, Chico and Zeppo. Only one of them had a Greek accent, the others sounded Italian or French...one (Harpo) didn't speak at all. They apologized for not having brought the gunboat as Henric suggested, but they thought that the silence of the sailboat would be more desirable than heavy ammunition. Maple and Agus thanked them for their consideration (the Marx Brothers' idea did seem more wise than a noisy gunboat) and then introduced themselves. Maple and Agus were then brought, with their horses, onto the sailboat.



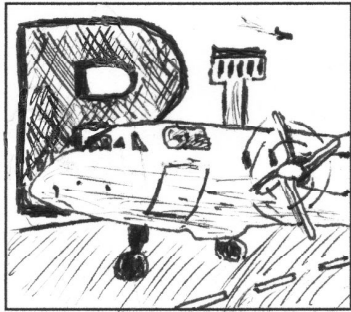
here was plenty of time for the people to chat and the horses to sleep while the boat sailed to Greece. There was talk of food (the Marx Brothers, upon learning that Maple and Agus's food was running low, assured them they'd find wonderful food at the markets in Athens), of history, of all the varied thoughts a midnight journey over the moonlight Mediterranean brought to mind.



y dawn, Maple and Agus found themselves able to watch the sunrise over the Greek coast. They were put ashore along a deserted stretch of land and by lunchtime they were riding into downtown Athens, looking for some of the better food the sailors had promised them would be there. The sailors had not lied. There were most of the delicious things to eat in the world: Athens was still a crossroads of civilization and trade. They were a day ahead of schedule (thanks

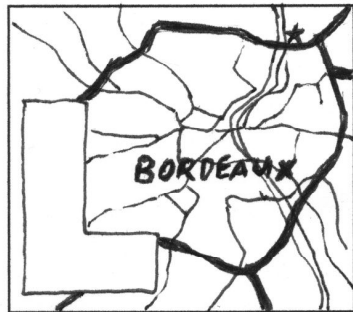
to the speed of the Greek sailboat) and decided they could afford the time to do some sightseeing...as long as they were in the neighborhood on good horses.

## Chapter 9

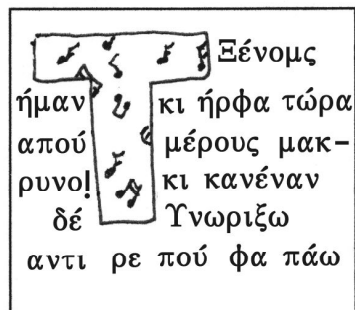


y the next evening, after a long day of sightseeing, they were tired. Not having found a hotel that accepted large pets (such as horses), they went to the port and arranged shipping for their horses back to Colorado. Difficulties were overcome by a willingness of Maple and Agus to pay bribes. At last, everything was settled: the horses would be sent ahead by airplane and delivered (with some money to buy their food and instructions to secure some temporary boarding) to some unwitting friends of Maple and Agus. They purchased their train tickets. Because the trains were fast and they could afford the time to, Maple and Agus decided to take the journey in stages, stopping along the way for sightseeing, eating delicious foods, and living the life of globetrotting millionaires. Their train left before dawn, and they saw the sun rise over Athens as they left. Following the new steel roads of the new

European Empire, they made their way North. They saw beautiful hills and rivers, fields full of fat cattle and many little villages that were largely unchanged by the thousands of years that had passed since they were first built. At last, relaxed and much refreshed by the unexpected vacation, they arrived on the shores of the Atlantic in Bordeaux.

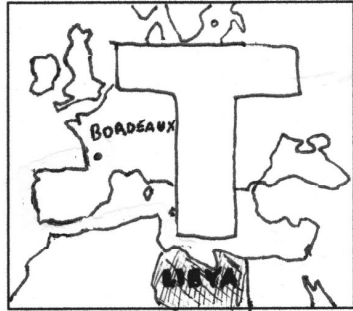


Leaving Bordeaux was not so tricky as arriving from Bordeaux at a destination: wherever they went, they'd be required to provide a passport. And how would they explain their two million dollars in cash? They would, of course, need to be smuggled in. Looking at the papers Henric had given them, and saw, under a heading titled "Bordeaux," *Quai Numa Sensine, Pierre H. or Norm F. Gilcrest*. Where was the Quai Numa Sensine? They hailed a taxi and told the driver to take them there.



hey were left on the curb after paying the driver. They didn't know what to do now. They walked North along the river, talking and thinking, when they heard familiar voices singing loudly in Greek. They approached and found the Marx Brothers that took them from Turkey to Athens! Agus shouted out a great big, "hello!" Startled, the sailors looked up and saw Maple and Agus, and loudly complained that if they had only known Maple and Agus were going to Bordeaux, they would have taken them there and earned a better fee! Maple and Agus sat down next to Harpo and laughed. "You should complain to Henric! He told us to take Eurorail." The sailors nodded knowingly "yes, we are sorry. Henric had asked us whether we could take you all the way, but we had, at the time, a prior commitment." Agus slapped Groucho on the back, "don't be too sorry! There's still plenty of time to earn more money. We're not done traveling yet! How much would it

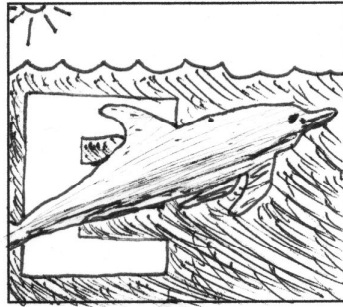
cost to take two passengers without passports to the United States?” The sailors smiled, and offered them some warm hot chocolate while they talked business.



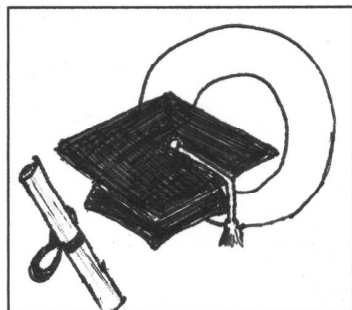
heir fee to America was quite affordable, but there was only one problem. They only had their small river boat in Bordeaux and a small sailboat anchored in the bay. To get across the Atlantic safely, they would need their larger boat, and that was in a secret harbor off Libya. It would be a week before they could return to Bordeaux with the larger boat and set off for America. Did Maple and Agus want to wait for them to get the boat? Alternatively, they could come to Libya and leave directly: this would save a few days. Maple and Agus exchanged glances, and Maple asked whether or not Pierre H. or Norm F. Gilcrest were in Bordeaux. Chico shook his head, “I’m sorry, they just left yesterday!” The Marks brothers offered to refer them to some other smugglers they

knew, but Maple and Agus were not keen on trusting their luck to strangers: the Marx Brothers had been referred to them by Henric, and had already once taken them safely to a destination. It was then quickly settled. Maple and Agus would go with them to Libya.

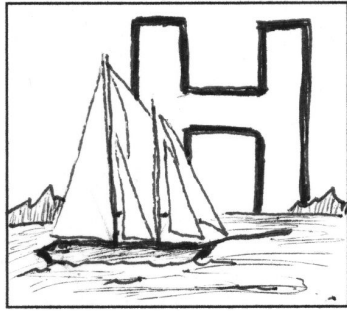
## Chapter 10



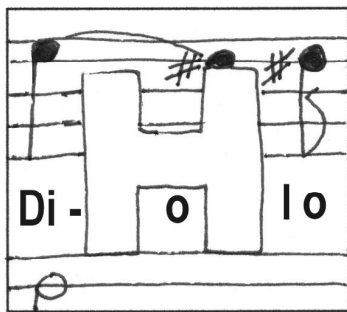
ven with frequent stops along the way, even with the delay caused by their trip to Libya, Maple and Agus were still running almost on time and so they were able to fully enjoy their trip around Iberia and through the Western Mediterranean. Few things can put someone in a better mood than being on time. For those who are lucky enough to run on schedule, the world seems a predictable and kindly place. The truly fortunate are those who recognize that it is impossible to run either ahead or behind schedule, that everything happens exactly when it ought to: these people understand that everything always works out for the best. After all their adventures thus far, it should be already clear that Maple and Agus were of the second sort of people. Nothing could go wrong for them that was not easily fixed; nothing could go right for them that was not easily made even more joyful.



n their trip around Spain, Maple and Agus had more time to talk with the Marx Brothers, and discussions would arise out of whatever they were passing by. Maple and Agus learned quite a lot and were entertained the entire journey. Groucho, who it turned out had two Doctorates from the University of Athens in History and Geography (with a Masters in Economics from the University of Moscow), was an excellent tour guide. What Groucho didn't know, Chico usually did: he had a Doctorate in Archeology and a Masters in Geology from the University of Rome. And while Maple, Agus, Groucho and Chico talked, Zeppo sang song after song of beautiful music (he was a part-time opera singer and Professor of Musicology at the University of Paris). Harpo didn't say much, but Groucho explained he was the Principal of the School for the Deaf and Dumb of Seville and was, himself mute.

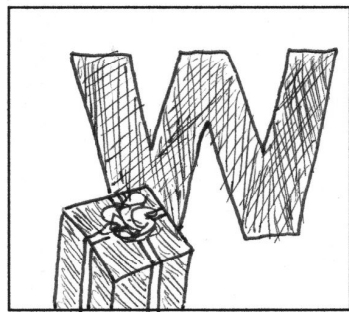


How did the Marx Brothers become smugglers? Well, smuggling was actually only their part-time occupation. Don't misunderstand—they were the best in the business, and had been practicing the art for decades. They usually taught at their schools, but during breaks in the semester, to earn a little extra money and for the love of the adventure, they were smugglers. All of them—except Zeppo—were currently on their winter break between semesters (Zeppo was on sabbatical).



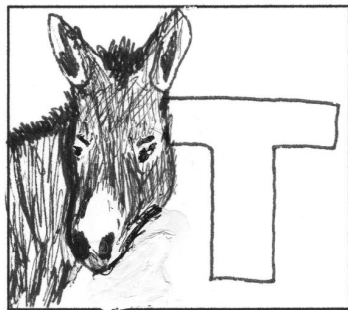
Harpo and Zeppo had met when the University of Paris decided to work with Harpo's school to introduce the deaf and dumb to music and rhythm. They hit it off, and began to develop a unified curriculum. Well, their program got to be famous and they were soon asked to speak at a conference at the University of Rome. Chico happened to be there because his wife was an avid fan of

Zeppo's opera career and couldn't turn down the opportunity to meet him. The three became quick friends. Chico knew Groucho from when they had grown up together in Milan. Groucho, though, didn't meet Harpo or Zeppo until Chico invited everyone to see and ride on his new boat. It was quite a boat...and quite a trip. The eight people (all four "brothers" had brought their wives) were going to go to Corsica for some weekend fun.



Well, Corsica was fun, but as they were leaving, a distraught man approached them at the dock. Chico smiled when he remembered the story, "He said to us, just like I'm saying to you, 'please help me, stranger! I must get this box to Italy, and the man I hired to take it there for me, uh...no longer sails.' We talk about it and he says that if we deliver it to the address he gives us, we get paid 25,000 American dollars. Well, how can we say no to that? We take the box and get the money. It's good money, and,

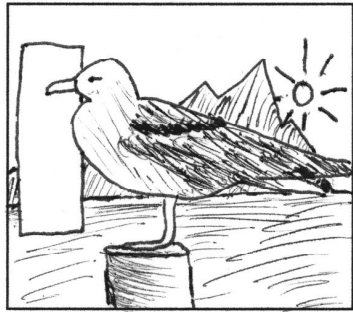
while not an honest living, helps make life a little more comfortable.” Before they knew it, the four friends became known to the smuggling world as the Marx Brothers. Zeppo stopped singing for a moment, smiled and laughed with Chico. “It’s as much fun as teaching, and pays much better. And, if we ever run into the Police—which we don’t, because we’re quite a measure smarter than the average smuggler!—we have ample excuse to be having mysterious packages or people on board: we’re respectable Professors and Principals! It is, as you Americans say, ‘perfectly legitimate!’” But why the Greek flag? Groucho took the cigar out of his mouth, “I would not sail under any other.”



things were going smoothly and wonderfully. Upon learning that Maple and Agus were interested in the history and geography of the Mediterranean, the Marx brothers offered, for an additional and affordable fee, to give them an official tour. Who could pass that

up? So they stopped at interesting ports and saw amazing things. Their inland treks would fill a book. And yet, even with the small delays of their guided tour of the Mediterranean, they arrived quickly at Libya.

## Chapter 11



It is said that the three continents of the Old World got their names from three sisters, Europa, Libya and Asia. These three sisters never wanted to live very far from each other, and wanted their children to know each other and be friends. Yet, even though the children of the three sisters more than lived up to their mothers' expectations by traveling to see each other often, even though the children of the three sisters had multiplied and filled the world with their laughter, there are still places to go in the Old World where you can be perfectly alone. The surging tides of humanity have not yet reached every corner of the globe, and there, where no other person exists to exert authority, is where true liberty—that birthright of the children of the three sisters (and the hope of smugglers)—can be found. The shore of Libya where they landed was not much unlike the shore where the Marx Brothers

had picked Maple and Agus up in Turkey, or dropped them off in Greece. How many isolated shores were there in the world, where a smuggler could operate freely?



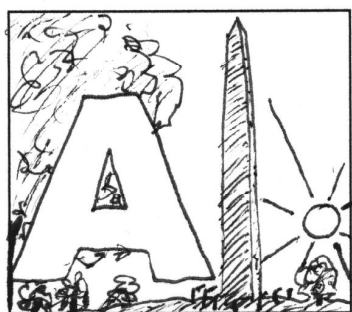
In this African shore, the Marx Brothers had built a dock, and at the dock was a beautiful ship. The ship looked to be a very large yacht, even larger than the one used to bring Maple, Agus and their two horses to Greece. On board were enough provisions to last many months. Zeppo explained they used this boat for long distance trips, and had even sailed around the world in it. It was wonderful to travel by sail when you were a smuggler: sails ran silent, and though they couldn't outrun Navies or Coast Guards, no one suspected a yacht as being a smuggler's ship. Maple and Agus were shown to their cabin: a comfortable room designed for passengers that might not want to be found. It was below deck and accessed by a secret door in the ship's kitchen. As they were

preparing to set off, Chico called his wife on his satellite phone and told her that he and his “brothers” were going to be out at sea a little longer than originally planned, and wouldn’t she tell the other wives? Did she or her friends want them to pick anything up while they were gone? Yes? Where? How much? Alright. Chico hung up after saying a loving goodbye and happily announced to the others that there would be more business after their trip to the United States!



It was learned that Maple and Agus had won cooking competitions in America and published cookbooks. None of the Marx brothers had ever taken the time to learn how to cook well, and, consequently, came to dread the monotonous and bad food of longer voyages. In an instant, the Marx Brothers offered to not charge Maple or Agus for their tour of the Mediterranean if they would teach the Marx Brothers how to cook. It was an easy deal to make. They docked in Gibraltar and

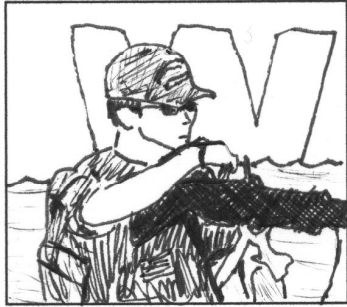
stocked the kitchen with all the necessary supplies. In less than a week, they were across the Atlantic and the Marx Brothers knew how to make everything from bread to soup, from pastries to sauces. Together, the four “brothers” now had the means of forming a restaurant: Chico was an excellent sauce man, Groucho was now good at baking all sorts of breads and pastas, Harpo could make any dessert or pastry and Zeppo’s soups couldn’t be beat. The Marx Brothers kicked around the idea of using some of their retirement money to start a restaurant—it would keep them busy and active, and would not be nearly so dangerous or illegal as sailing around the world smuggling things and people.



t last, they approached the United States. The Marx Brothers offered Maple and Agus their choice of where to be dropped off. The safest destination was just north of Orlando, Florida, but they could be dropped off near

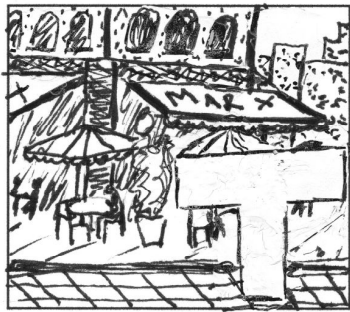
any major city they liked. While assuring the Marx Brothers that they trusted them utterly, Maple and Agus instructed them to take them to whatever place was the safest—even if it was Orlando. Chico nodded, “it is never wise to tempt God.” The other Marx Brothers nodded, and said they were glad to be working with such prudent passengers—usually, they were forced to undertake dangerous drop-offs or pick-ups. Once, they were required to sail up the Potomac River into Washington D.C. to pick up a passenger! And more than once, they actually had to go up the Hudson for a drop-off in New York (New Yorkers were the worst people to deal with—everything must be convenient to them and they don’t even usually tip!). To prepare for the final leg, Harpo, while Groucho grimaced, raised the United States flag above the Greek (as a disguise) and set a course for Orlando. They usually didn’t allow the Greek flag to fly lower than any other...but Americans were so proud of their colors that they might raise the suspicion or anger of the United States Coast

Guard if Old Glory was not higher than the Greek cross.



Within a half mile from the coast, a Coast Guard ship began to approach the Marx Brothers' yacht. Zeppo and Groucho quickly responded: while Zeppo shouted, "everybody start singing with me!" Groucho brought beer bottles to the deck. They sang loudly in English and offered bottles to the Coastguard as the patrol ship passed them by. After the Coast Guard was gone, Zeppo collected the beer and put it back in the refrigerator (the Marx Brothers only drank wine) and explained that it was easy enough to trick the Coast Guard into thinking that their yacht was on a pleasure cruise. "So many people love boating in the United States that it is hard to discern who is a smuggler if you make the least effort to blend in!" Chico shook his head, "some other smugglers are so sloppy. But we're glad: it makes our job easier and earns us better pay. If it is an

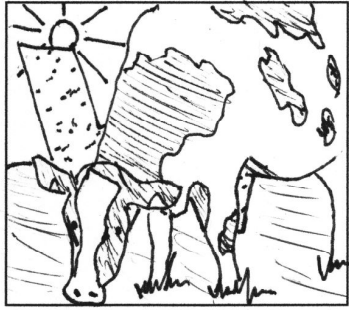
important shipment, they trust only the Marx Brothers to get it there safely. You must be good friends with Henric for him to ask us to take you anywhere. He knows our reputation and usually sends us only those whom he owes favors.



he boat was brought close enough to shore to allow Maple and Agus to wade onto shore. A bittersweet goodbye ensued, Agus promised to remember them if they needed anything brought over from Europe—or anywhere else. Chico gave him a business card. “The best way to get a hold of us is to send mail to me at the University: they’ll forward it to wherever I am.” Maple and Agus then paid their fare, and Maple tipped even more generously than any of the Marx Brothers could have hoped for. “This is for your restaurant,” Maple explained. “You’ve worked hard and earned it. Don’t risk your lives smuggling when you have so much talent in cooking!” Would you believe that

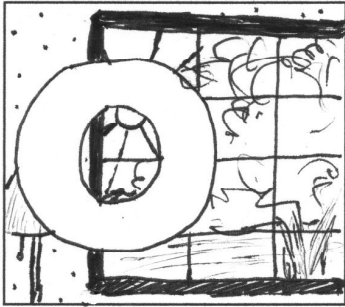
Maple and Agus got a Christmas card every year after that from the Marx Brothers with pictures and news from their restaurant? Would you believe that, when the Marx Brothers' restaurant was such a success that they incorporated and franchised it, they gave to Maple and Agus a 20% share in the profits? They were officially adopted as a part of the Marx family.

## Chapter 12



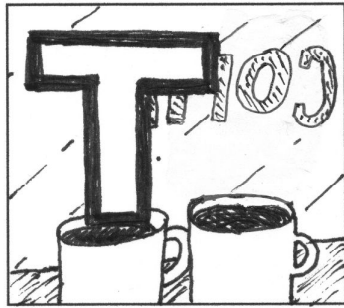
ell, Maple and Agus had gotten back to America safely. They walked a mile to Orlando, secured a hotel room, and fell asleep soundly. In the morning, they discussed how they would get home. They could take the Greyhound bus, they could rent a car, they could buy a car, or they could hitchhike. Never did Amtrak come into the discussion: Agus had had a bad experience on Amtrak once, and would not risk it again. The hassle of buying a car could take all day, and Greyhound would take longer than driving themselves, so they opted to rent a car. This way, they could also see the sights of America on their way home and still arrive before the Greyhound bus! So many things did they see and do that it would fill a book to describe all their adventures. They saw the Everglades and saw Graceland, they passed over the Mississippi River at Saint Louis and saw the Arch. But the best sight of all was of the

front door of their home and the trees that grew outside their windows.



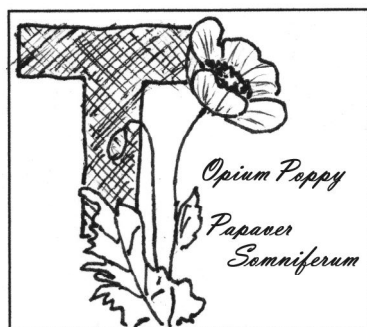
One of the first things they did when they got back was to see that the toads were alright. Luckily, though it had been three long weeks, the toads were not yet famished. Picking them up to inspect them, Maple and Agus saw they were still a healthy weight, and had plenty of energy. Sometimes toads go even longer than three weeks without eating when in the wild. The three short weeks without food would not be enough to harm the toads. Maple and Agus took out a bag of crickets they had picked up on the way home and began to feed the toads. Full and content, the toads went to sleep. The phone rang: it was the unwitting friend Maple and Agus had sent a herd of horses to. Maple told them that they would be by to pick up the horses the next day, and thanked them very much for all their help. The questions kept coming! Maple promised to explain

everything tomorrow, and quickly hung up the phone.



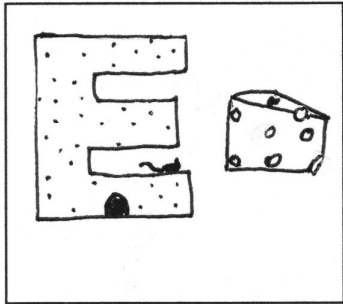
hen, after a half-hour nap, Maple and Agus, rested from their journey, went to the store to learn how they ended up abandoned in Damascus. Luckily, the snow was almost all melted and they traveled there quickly and with ease. They went to the customer service desk and asked to see those two Clerks. Fortunately, both happened to be working that day. When the Clerks saw Maple and Agus safe and sound, they were surprised and happy. “We were so worried about you two!” The two Clerks asked Maple and Agus to wait ten minutes until their shift was up: they owed Maple and Agus the full story of what happened. The time passed quickly (thanks, in part, to the Clerks leaving eight minutes early) and Maple and Agus offered to buy them a cup of coffee, tea or hot chocolate at the coffee house across the street. The four sat down and, even before

sipping the drinks, the two Clerks began their story by reminding Maple and Agus of the drug dealing Syrian who had gone through the door—the one they had brought to see their manager. Though a lot had happened since Agus had asked if anything had ever gone wrong with the door, it took very little effort to recall the story told to them in the dairy cooler. The Clerk leaned close and spoke in a low voice. “Yeah, well, he came back looking for our manager.”



he drug dealer was looking for the manager of the store because the manager had been regularly buying drugs from him for resale. Hashish, opium, khat...you name it, the Manager was dealing it. The profit the manager was making was outrageous, between the exchange rate and the quality of the Damascus drugs. *So that's why the manager had so much money in his wallet!* thought Maple. It was a long time before the Syrian was able to understand that the

Manager was not there. When the disappointed Syrian tried to go home, he found that he had closed the door behind him and now the door led not to Damascus, but to the Dairy's closet! "He just sat down against the wall and didn't say anything for a long time. He seemed very shocked."



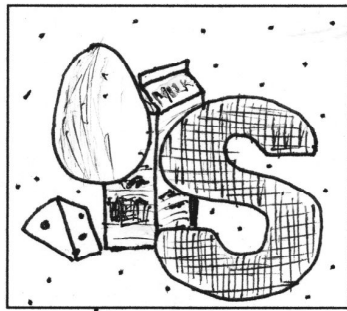
ventually, the snow melted and the Police came and arrested both the Syrian drug dealer and the drug dealing Manager—the Syrian had confessed to the Police in exchange for leniency and deportation back to Damascus. The Police had not believed a word about the door and presumed that the drugs had made both the Syrian and the Manager crazy. "The Owner of the store has been filling in for our former Manager (who is now in jail) and is having a heck of a time finding someone to take over the store for him." The other clerk shook his head, "yeah, like we couldn't manage the store." "Yeah, can you believe they don't promote from within?"

We asked the Owner to consider us and he says that he's looking to hire someone with 'managerial experience.' How are we supposed to get managerial experience unless we're hired as managers? We'd love a crack at running the store. We're sure we'd be good at it." The two Clerks finished their drinks and then eagerly asked Maple and Agus to tell them everything that happened. "How did you get back?"



Maple and Agus looked at each other and smiled. They told them everything, and offered to split with them the remaining 2 million dollars from the manager's wallet. The Clerks were speechless. Then they both started laughing - not the crazed laughter Maple and Agus had heard before, but genuinely happy laughter. After a brief discussion, the four friends were agreed. One of the clerks returned to the store to get a brown paper bag. They then, all together, walked down the street to the Police station

and reported finding 1.8 million dollars - in cash - on the sidewalk. The Police were skeptical, and after a long interview with several detectives, the Police congratulated them on their great luck, warned them against getting in trouble, gave them a receipt for the cash and told them that if nobody claimed it, they could have it legally in three months.



ix months later, the four friends rightfully could pay taxes on their 1.8 million dollar windfall. Life was better. The Clerks, with their half, were able to buy the store from the Owner. As Owner/Managers, they ran the store better than it ever had been before and treated their employees very well. And, because Damascus was no longer warming up the dairy cooler, Maple and Agus were able to get fresh milk and dairy forever after.

*The End*