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The Mountaineer's Dance

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The
Mountaineer's Dance



Sondra Wolferman

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CHAPTER EIGHT

The weekend exodus from Manhattan was at its most frantic when Freddie turned his cab onto Madison Avenue and spotted the doorman in front of the Carlyle Hotel flapping his arms like wings to signal an airport call. Behind the doorman stood a smartly dressed couple with two small children, surrounded by a matching set of powder blue luggage. Hoping for a run to LaGuardia (so he could end his shift in Queens only minutes away from his garage in Flushing), Freddie battled his way across three lanes of gridlocked traffic to get to the fare before it was swept up by another taxi. Only then did he see the *Air France* luggage tags attached to the suitcases. *Air France* meant they were going to JFK, not LaGuardia, and the only thing worse than a trip to JFK during rush hour was a trip to JFK with a carload of French tourists. The French, most cabbies agreed, were the world's worst tippers, when they tipped at all, and were often snooty and demanding to boot.

With nerves already frazzled after a nine-hour shift in the late summer heat with no AC, Freddie decided it wasn't worth the aggravation and swerved away to avoid picking up the fare. Unfortunately he was hemmed in by bumper-to-bumper traffic, which gave the doorman--who was well-versed in the art of dealing with finicky cab drivers--an opportunity to simply reach out and grab the door handle as Freddie rolled past him in the heavy traffic, forcing the cab to a halt. A bellhop tossed a powder blue vanity case into the back seat of the cab, and then it was too late to refuse the call.

Freddie got out of the car to help load the bags into the compact trunk of his Dodge Neon, while the foursome stood by murmuring their displeasure at the size and condition of his cab. The mother, a petite, dark-haired woman whose unsmiling face

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was frozen into a mask of disdain, complained to the doorman in heavily accented English. “*Can’t you get us a bigger taxi?*” she demanded. “*This car is too small!*”

Really? Freddie chuckled to himself. *Aren’t you from the land of the Peugeot and the Citroen?*

The maroon-clad doorman, a rotund man with bushy eyebrows and crafty eyes, responded to the woman’s request by flinging the last of the bags into the trunk and slamming down the lid. “You’re lucky to get any cab at all this time of day!” he grunted before turning his attention to another hotel guest.

Freddie slid in behind the wheel and waited for his passengers to get on board. The Frenchman, rakishly handsome in a form-fitting white shirt and dark trousers, climbed into the front passenger seat next to Freddie, while his wife climbed into the back with the two children, sniffing the air inside the cab as if she smelled a dead skunk. Freddie resented the implication. Although he worked for a fleet, he had his own steady cab which he kept scrupulously clean and well-maintained. The ashtrays were emptied regularly, trash bags provided front and rear at Freddie’s own expense, and a lemon-scented air-freshener hung from the rear-view mirror to deflect the mélange of smells a New York City taxicab collects over the course of a day--everything from toxic dime-store colognes to the rank aftermath of stogies left smoldering in the ashtrays by CEOs in a hurry to get to a business meeting.

Freddie retaliated by brusquely waving away the pungent smoke of the unfiltered *Gauloise* that dangled from the Frenchman’s lip, then started his engine and pulled away from the curb. The cab inched eastward in bumper-to-bumper traffic toward the Queensborough Bridge--which was generally the most direct route to JFK during the evening rush hour--while the passengers fumed and fretted about the delay.

“Mon Dieu!”

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"Quel horreur!"

"Can't you go any faster, Monsieur?"

Freddie's hands tightened on the steering wheel. Short of airlifting them across the East River by helicopter there wasn't a thing he could do, but he resisted the impulse to cut them off with a rude reply.

"What time is your flight, Sir?" he asked, quite civilly, of the Frenchman sitting next to him.

"Seven o'clock," was the curt reply.

Freddie sneered inwardly, for even if they crawled all the way to the airport they would make it with time to spare, but he didn't bother to reassure them. *They won't tip me anyway*, he reasoned, *so let them sweat*.

Finally they reached the foot of the bridge in Queens where traffic began to move more smoothly through the low-rent district of convenience stores, topless bars, and *bodegas* in Sunnyside, and it was there the children in the back seat spotted the garish green neon sign of a storefront eatery called *KNISH NOSH*.

"Qu'est ce que c'est, Knish Nosh...?" they wondered aloud at the Yiddish words and the strange fare in the restaurant's window

Notwithstanding his bad temper, Freddie was barely able to suppress a smile. As a New Yorker he took certain things for granted and it never occurred to him that someone might not know what a *knish* was. Those deep-fried pockets of dough filled with mashed potatoes and slathered with mustard stood alongside pizza, gyros, and bagels as the Fab Four of New York's street corner ethnic fare.

The reprieve was short-lived as they hit another snag in the traffic and slowed to a crawl. The mother let out a sigh of exasperation. *"Il fait comme ca pour se gagner quelques sous de plus!"*

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Freddie was no scholar--he had graduated from high school by the skin of his teeth--but he *had* taken the obligatory two years of foreign language classes, which in his case happened to be French. Granted, he had sat in the back of the classroom, clueless, while the unintelligible mutterings of the hot French teacher swirled around his dormant brain, and yet...to Freddie's own amazement, he actually comprehended the Frenchwoman's remark which, roughly translated, meant, *He is doing this on purpose to earn a few extra pennies for himself!*

It wasn't so much the remark itself that enraged him--he had heard worse--but rather, the woman's blithe assumption that a lowly public servant such as himself couldn't *possibly* have any grasp of a foreign language, and so it was okay for her to talk about him as if he wasn't even there! Unfortunately the amazing recall that allowed him to comprehend the remark failed him when it came to formulating a response. Any attempt on his part to respond to the accusation in French would be laughable, at best. *Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt!*

With the cab stuck in stalled traffic, and his goodwill at an end, Freddie fought the impulse to pull over, remove their bags from the trunk, and put his passengers out on the street--a dangerous over-reaction that would surely result in a stiff penalty from the Taxi and Limousine Commission, and quite possibly the loss of his hack license as well.

The peppery aroma of potatoes cooked in hot grease--a combination that might ordinarily have turned his stomach--wafted Freddie's way from the KNISH NOSH restaurant just beyond the curb to his right. Seized with a sudden inspiration, Freddie maneuvered his cab over to the curb and parked in front of the restaurant. The Frenchman glanced nervously at his wristwatch and glared at Freddie with contempt, while his wife muttered something to the effect that the driver was

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complètement fou! Then they sat in stupefied silence while Freddie got out of the cab and sauntered into the snack bar. Glancing backward he saw their bewildered faces watching him from the cab, and he could only imagine their outraged comments. He ordered five knishes with all the trimmings.

Freddie carried the goodies out to the car in a paper sack and slid in behind the wheel. A warm greasy smell filled the car as he helped himself to a *knish*, and then offered the bag to his passenger in the adjoining seat. "*Voilà les knishes!*" he announced in what he hoped was an intelligible sequence of French words. The Frenchman shrank from the bag as if it were dog poop and stared morosely through the windshield.

Undaunted, Freddie turned toward the back seat and extended the bag of knishes through the partition, whereupon the children, no longer able to contain themselves for the sake of pleasing their parents, reached forward greedily and tore into the bag. "*Ici! Donnez les moi!*" And finally their mother, succumbing to her children's excitement, reached into the bag and daintily sampled the contents.

Then the impossible happened. She smiled!

Freddie threw the car into gear, pulled away from the curb, and proceeded to the airport without further incident.

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