



## FREEDIUM

“What we have now is freedium,” Mr. Plebold said. He may have been old but he had a loud, clear voice. “I made that word up, Rick. It means medium freedom.”

He elbowed me in the ribs and we both chuckled, but the tattooed man across the bus’s aisle didn’t share our amusement. He looked up from his smartphone and gave us a dagger glare.

Mr. P didn’t see it. He said, “The country’s going to hell in a . . .”

“Excuse me,” I interrupted. “I was thinking about a story you told yesterday, Mr. Plebold. The one about your uncle.”

“Uncle Henny?”

“Yes sir. Would you mind telling about him and the chicken lips again?”

“Not at all,” he smiled, and he launched into his tale.

I glanced at Dagger Eyes. He’d gone back to scrolling on his phone, so, trouble averted. It was a good thing I’d noticed him. He was a natural-born snitch if I’d ever seen one. No doubt he would jump at a chance to report someone for badmouthing the government.

“Henny used Grade-A chicken lips,” Mr. Plebold said as I looked around the bus. The two of us and the driver were the only ones not staring at phones. Mine was in my pocket and Mr. P didn’t have one because he’s blind. That’s why I was with him, to act as his eyes. I earn my living as a travel companion.

I’d been working as a companion for about five years, ever since I dropped out of college. I

got the idea for the job from an old movie that was set on an ocean liner. One of the characters was an aristocratic Englishwoman who employed a girl to help her with deck chairs and teatime and such. The movie was a murder mystery and it turned out that the companion was the killer. Aside from that she was a model employee. She was always tidying up, and after she confessed to the murder she jumped overboard, so there wouldn't be a messy trial.

I thought back on our trip while Mr. Plebold told how Uncle Henny marinated his chicken lips. We'd left San Marcos a week before and made a big circuit that took us north, then east, then south again. Mr. P wanted to visit his sister in Texarkana and a cousin in Louisiana before the weather turned hot.

His sister had an irritating way of speaking. She used bookish phrases like, "Bob lamented," and "Bob exclaimed." One time she said, "Bob ejaculated," and I told her she ought to be careful, that people might misunderstand what she meant. She said, "You're right. They might think Bob was talking again." She winked one of her lizard-skin eyelids at me and I locked my bedroom door that night. The next day Mr. P and I moved on to visit the cousin.

I-35 was a concrete riverbed with vehicles flooding down it in a fummy roar. I saw the San Marcos city limits sign zip past and then we exited. We slowed and began winding toward the bus station. I'd left my car there. After we disembarked I would give Mr. Plebold a ride home and collect the rest of my pay.

In the distance I saw the hilly green campus of the state college. Old brick and stone buildings were mixed with newer concrete designs.

The school used to be a sleepy little teacher's college, where students learned how to guide

children through the mysteries of fractions and the ABCs. Now it's a hive of Marxism and radical feminism. There was a patch of red hanging beneath a window of the castle-looking building they call Old Main. As we got closer I saw that the patch was a Soviet flag. It seemed fitting to display the thing at Lyndon Johnson's alma mater. He'd taken a few classes there long before he became president. Johnson was a leftist, and some of his social programs are still doing damage today. Especially to black Americans. The worst of the programs pay black women to drive their men out of the home. The resultant lack of paternal supervision has led to astronomical levels of black-on-black violence in our big cities. But the federal government no longer tracks all of those crimes. Reporting them to the FBI used to be mandatory, but Joe Biden made it voluntary, and Democrat-run cities stopped forwarding their figures. So with fewer crimes being used to calculate the national statistics, leftists are now able to claim that America's streets have gotten safer.

My mind had drifted but Mr. Plebold brought me back with another elbow to the ribs.

"Freedium, Rick. That's what the communists in Washington have given us. Bunch of traitors."

I looked across the aisle. Dagger Eyes glared at Mr. P, then returned to his phone and began thumbing a text message. No doubt he was notifying the "politically correct" San Marcos authorities. In an hour Mr. Plebold could be locked in a room with the thought police, trying to explain why he'd criticized the government. I needed to do something, so I took a pen and notebook from my pocket and began to doodle.

The bus's brakes hissed as we pulled into the station. We came to a stop and people got to

their feet. I said, "Excuse me" to Mr. Plebold and squeezed past him into the aisle. And then I dropped into Dagger Eyes' lap. I wallowed around with him for a minute, all arms and legs, before I extricated myself and begged his pardon. He shrugged the incident off and went back to glaring at Mr. P.

People pushed forward. I helped Mr. Plebold to his feet and we joined the crush. Dagger Eyes was a ways back.

As I'd expected, two security guards were questioning the departing passengers. When Mr. Plebold and I stepped off the bus I nudged him aside, so the guards would have to talk to me. One of them asked if I had criticized the government during my trip.

"No, sir. But you should talk to the guy behind us. The one with the tattoos."

I led Mr. Plebold over to the cargo bay at the side of the bus. The diesel engine was still running, so I couldn't hear Dagger Eyes talking to the guards. But I watched as they questioned him, and at first he looked surprised, then he shook his head, and then he got mad and wagged a finger in their faces.

Big mistake. They searched him and found a couple of pages from my notebook. I'd stuffed them in a pocket when I was in his lap. One page was doodled full of hearts and swastikas, and the other had a pig's face with the word COP written on the forehead.

I heard Dagger Eyes yelling above the sound of the engine as they led him away. I felt bad for what I'd done, but it was a comfort to know that he was getting a valuable lesson in freedium.