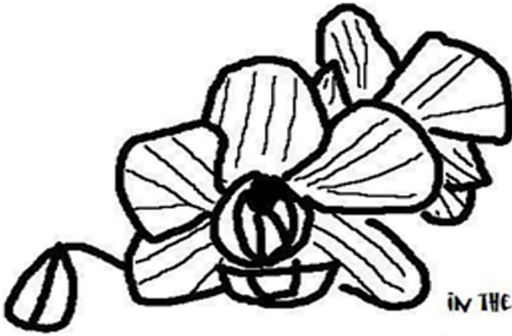




PART ONE
WANDERING AROUND



IN THE LION CITY ORCHID GARDEN

CHAPTER 1

LION CITY

I was dying to see Francine. She and I had been great friends for a time in America. We were just pals, as she'd say, but we both got a little teary in the remembering after she'd gone back. When we first met she said she felt like we had been in a past life together. We just stared at each other. But not gooey. She had come over to take care of Mark, the severely brain damaged son of close friends of mine. I'd seen him grow up. He'd painted my back door and done some research for me in Japan. But he'd had a terrible blow to his brain stem in an auto accident that killed his best friend. They'd given Clay and me a ride to the local Fourth of July fireworks show just a week or so before.

Francine lived in Perth, the capital of Western Australia. While visiting out of town relatives, she'd seen a notice in their church weekly of an American family seeking a caretaker for their severely impaired son. That's what she did—take

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care of intellectually challenged people, as she called it. She looked at that notice and said, "I'm going to America!"

I met her a couple of days after she arrived in California and she spent almost every minute of her painfully little time off with me. I lived walking distance from where she worked. I also spent a lot of time with her at my friends' home. They were old Zen friends, the father an Englishman who'd been one of the first Westerners to live in a Japanese Zen monastery, the mother from Japan. Soon after we met, Francine took out her scrapbook to show me photos and mementos. The following quote was on the first page:

Whatever you would do or dream to do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it.

When she first came to my house, I showed her the same quote scribbled on a piece of paper taped on the wall above my computer. I get sent a lot of smarmy, feel-good crap homilies in emails but some ring true to me or, as in this case, are actually inspiring. It's a quote attributed to Goethe but I researched it online and would say it is more of a quote from one of his liberal translators. Anyway, I believe it, so I don't care where it came from. As far as I'm concerned, I said it.

I was touched by Francine's selflessness and kindness, the care with which she looked after my gangly young friend who'd lost so much of the connection between his brain and body and speech. She fed him, changed his diapers, bathed him, talked sweetly to him. He loved her. She made him laugh. I could make him laugh too—just make fun of his father or say something about sex or marijuana. He was good natured and knew everything that was going on—he just had no way to respond except laughing, grunting, kicking. I know it sounds hard to believe, but even though he could understand what we were saying, he could not clearly, consistently answer yes/no questions. He was cut off in so many ways.

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Francine was around for six months. The last two weeks of February we traveled in the Southwest—lowly humble Death Valley, always amazing Grand Canyon, magical Bryce Canyon in knee deep snow. Behind the facades of Las Vegas she placed our one bet, after a long distance consultation with her father on his lucky numbers. Lost five dollars. Then she flew off and Mark, his family, Clay, and our boxer Lola missed her. And I missed her and she me. One would call the other now and then to say hello and hear what's up. But she was gone.

Two and a half years passed. It was August, 2003. I was in Singapore, the hub of a half-year trip to Asia. It's one of the cheapest places to buy air tickets. Francine had a month of vacation coming up and we'd planned to meet there and go on to Thailand, but she called before I left and said her mom's melanoma had taken a nasty turn. She couldn't leave. I would go to Australia for a month instead. She assured me I wouldn't be in the way. Maybe I shouldn't have gone, shouldn't have bothered her at such a difficult time. I've noticed Australians don't like to say no. And Texans don't like to hear it. But I thought she really wanted me to come so the first thing I did in Singapore was to get a ticket to Perth—with the Student Travel Association. I'm always a student—and their prices are among the lowest.

John Tarrant, a Zen teacher and writer from Tasmania whose barn I had moved into upon selling my home, gave me a phone number for Ross Bolleter, a Zen relative of his and musician of note in Perth. So I had two people to look up in that remote spot.

But first, Singapore. I'd been there a decade before for a few days with one year old Clay and his mom—on our way to Bali. Singapore is a good city for walking—day or night—safe and civilized as can be. Easy to ask directions, English being the lingua Franca. It's just one degree north of the equator and full of lush green growth. But the people don't have that laid back tropical vibe—maybe because the ocean

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winds keep the weather somewhat mild—almost always between 73 to 87 degrees Fahrenheit. There's high humidity—I spent my days wiping the sweat from my face with a cloth handkerchief, making me feel like a desperate character in a Bogart movie.

I stayed in Little India the first night, the funkier part of town, got up in the early dark to go hang out in a Hindu temple—sitting on the floor and watching the ceremonies and devotees go to this altar or that statue. Lots of flowers, incense, dabs of paint on faces, clanging, chanting. Then to coffee, pastry, and newspaper at a sidewalk table by a busy intersection as the city got going for the day. Walking on past store fronts, to museums, a vast Chinatown with Buddhist temples and shopping streets, Muslim areas with mosques to admire for their restrained aesthetics and lack of idolatry.

At the modern art museum an elderly Chinese man struck up a chat. He inquired as to where I was staying and what I was paying and found me a much better deal in a low end Chinese hotel—a real bed and my own bath. He paid the bus fare for us to go to my fairly grubby hotel in Little India and insisted on carrying the extra bag on the way back. I offered to take him to dinner with me but he declined. He said his retirement allowance, publicly assisted housing, and government medical insurance covered him pretty well. Finally he settled on ten dollars Singapore to dine on later. As he walked off I figured that to be about five American dollars and sixty-eight cents.

I loved the new spot. I'd walk around the city in the day and hang out in the evenings with working class men of Malay, Indian, Bangladeshi, Indonesian, Mid-eastern, and Chinese descent. I'd chat with the Philippine bar girls who had rooms in the hotel, would eat food from stalls representing a variety of cuisines, drink beer, coffee, and bum cigarettes. A popular dancehall for youths was across the narrow street. Almost everyone in Singapore is conservatively dressed—lots of well-to-do folks fashionably attired—so it was a treat one late afternoon to see a dozen punk kids with

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purple and Mohawk hair, piercings, and torn jeans come running out of the alley and under our awning to sit till the predictable daily downpour passed. A young guy from Ohio who was going on to me about Australian versus Indonesian girlfriends and Singapore prostitutes, ran to get his camera.

So there I was in Lion City where there were never any such felines—a case of mistaken identity or hyperbole. But there was grand foliage everywhere overflowing in this sultry metropolis. In the Botanic Gardens are stately, looming trees, tropical vegetation galore, spacious lawns surrounded by flora I soared through and lost myself within. I entered an interior garden devoted solely to orchids. Walking among varied forms of the sturdy flower was in turns fascinating, dreamy, lovely, humorous, frightening. It was while being mesmerized thus that I met an unanticipated traveling companion. That's what happens when you travel—the unforeseen, and new friends.

“Ah, so many members of this family of perennial herbs. God awful beautiful huh?” A guy next to me, the only other person in this area of the garden, gave me a start. He looked like a local but, having opened his mouth, he was definitely American.

“Oh hi. Yes,” I said coming out of my trance. “Yeah, really. Wow.” We ‘mericans sure know how to describe subtle feelings.

“Look,” he said pointing, “these are brown terrestrials.”

“I can't believe they're flowers. But the ones under that tree clearly are. They're so purple.”

“Look at these rare leafless orchids.” He turned around. “I love these fragrant cymbidiums too. And did you smell those awful white ones over by that gate?”

“Yeah—like rotting meat. Did you see the cool-house for orchids from mountain areas? I want to go there.”

“It's not open yet. Where you from?” he said.

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“North of San Francisco—Texas originally. Hmm. You sound like the East Coast but then there’s a little South in there.”

“New Orleans.”

“Oh, wow. Yeah. Yeah. I used to live there for a while—in ‘64. City people sounded a little like New York—it’s really a distinctly different part of the South. Started going there in ‘63 cause my sister went to school at Sophie Newcomb. Love it. Great city. Whatcha doin’ here?”

“Going to Australia for August.”

“Me too. Where to?”

He was on his way to Melbourne where he had a distant uncle related to his mother though she’d never met him, a businessman it seemed. He said he was planning to start his trip there because he didn’t have anyone else to look up. He’d just received a message at his hotel that this relative, Uncle Rudy, was flying into Singapore and he should go to the hotel within the airport and meet him there tonight late. He was surprised when he got the message because he hadn’t mentioned in correspondence where he was going to be staying in Singapore.

His name was Jackie Gupta—told me to call him Gupta. His father was from Calcutta and his mother was Irish though she’d come to America as a baby. He was thirty and into real estate—writing up mortgages all over the country from a cubicle walking distance from the French Quarter. That’s a place I’ve stayed up all night a number of times. As we ambled out of that heavenly garden toward the street, I dropped all the Louisiana place names and drunken anecdotes I could think of. Once had a great old girlfriend there I still love a bunch. Worked in a pork bar-b-que stand for seventy-five cents an hour. We walked the few miles back to the center of town.

“My father was a realtor,” I said. “You enjoy real estate?”

“Pays better than teaching high school biology.”

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We entered a large modern bookstore to look for something basic on Singapore. Found what we wanted and browsed around some more. I was surprised and pleased to see they had a couple of copies of a biography I'd written of my Zen teacher. I signed them at the desk. Gupta put on a pair of glasses and looked a copy over.

He said he'd been to the New Orleans Zen Center a few times. I've met the teacher there so we knew someone in common, sort of. He went there to try out *zazen*, Zen meditation. He decided to stick with practicing yoga most mornings. Yoga is about as old as anything in human culture and came from the land of his father, so he felt a strong connection to the tradition. But more than that he just liked the stretching, the limberness, and the healthy overall feeling the movements gave him. But he said he probably should meditate too. I pointed out that yoga *is* meditation, is *the* or one of the roots of all Asian meditation.

"Or maybe some ancient form of meditation is the origin of the yoga," he said.

"It's all pre-historic," I said. "We can only guess."

He returned to the book in his hands. "Also by... Ah. It says you've got another book. Zen Failure? An American Zen Failure in Japan? That's bizarre."

"That's the subtitle," I said.

"You failed huh?"

"Fraid so."

"I didn't know they graded you."

"An attempt at humor," I said.

"So you didn't fail?"

"Humor revealing the sad truth."

We came upon a lively, painted, contoured concrete skate board park nestled within the shade of trees. Admired local skating youth. A teenager was sitting on a bench strumming a guitar. We stood close by and listened. Gupta asked if he could play and the guy handed it to him. He went through a nifty riff.

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“Well done,” I said. “Where’d you get that?”

“It’s just a little improv.”

“You’re good. I play too. But not that well.”

“What d’you play?”

“I’ve played lots of stuff. But mainly my own songs.
Not much in recent years.”

“I write songs too. I’d like to hear.”

“You first,” I said.

He continued with the same chord progression and started singing.

*Travelin’ alone has a kick all its own
But sometimes round a bend
You happen to find an accomplice, like-minded mate
Co-conspirator, friend*

*I remember once in Marrakech
Got involved with a rambunctious princess
Had to save her from a gang of bandits and cutthroats
Her daddy gave me a bag of silver
Said I’d live to spend it if I took the river
Wavin’ bye to her from the stern of the royal rowboat*

*And I don’t know where I’m goin’
Don’t remember where I’ve been
But whatever way its blowin’
My sails are to the wind*

*Washed up on a Southseas shore
Friendly natives, pungent flora
They crowned me king and festivities began
I was eeny meeny mining for a paramour
Then the hon I wanted hinted I’ze to be the main course
Took a potty break and zipped off in a catamaran
(Thank you darling!)*

What the heck am I thinkin’

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*To get into all these fixes
Maybe shoulda stayed home drinkin'
With my homies down in Dixie*

*A guru by the Bay of Bengal
Hypnotized me when we mingled
Sent me walkin' up along the Ganges to her source
Must have passed it cause
I was lost and freezing in the snow
When a Yeti found me and led me below
To a yak who got me back on course*

*So where the heck am I at now
And what's gonna happen next
When things get cruddy will I have a buddy
Who pulls me out of a wreck*

*Travelin' alone has a kick all its own
But sometimes round a bend
You happen to find an accomplice, like-minded
Mate co-conspirator
Friend you can scramble round with
Friend, you can babble on to
Friend you can climb out of the rubble with
Friend, you can hobble on with
Friend, a travelin' friend*

“Good lord,” I said rather stunned. “Well done indeed.”

“Your turn,” he said handing me the guitar.

I looked at the kid who nodded. I strummed a C and sang.

Pocket song, so short, so true

“That’s it?” Gupta asked.

“It’s a pocket song,” I said.

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A friend of a friend, a guy named Mike from Texas, had driven me around the day before and shown me some of the sights. One place we stopped was near the skateboard park. It's not really a sightseeing sight but it's no secret. It's Lee Kuan Yew's home. He's the semi-retired strong man who'd run this place since the Japanese lost out. Humble digs for mister big. There was a guard station with one guard on hand—seemed rather minimal. Lee's popular—goes shopping with his family without bodyguards. My tour guide had read both of Lee's books and recommended them. Lee scoffs at American media interviewers who question him about Singapore's civil liberty shortcomings, executions for drugs or guns, caning of juvenile delinquents. Lee answers that Singapore prefers not to have the chaos and violence of American cities. People seem content, are not living in fear, and support their government. They have a high standard of living and drive more Mercedes per capita than anywhere else. They also pay more for cars than anywhere else—keeps the traffic down. Singapore is clean as heck, sort of square, comfortable, affluent. There's a legal red light district too. Lee says you can't stop it so why try? I wish he applied the same compassionate and realistic thinking to people's universal and insatiable desire to alter their body/mind chemically.

Two days before, I'd met a young hip local on a bus, a photographer who helped me figure out what to pay and where to get off. It was his stop too. He said Lee's okay and Singapore's okay but it's a little stifling for an artist. He preferred New York City and its dangers to the conformity of his home town. I went to dinner with him and a young couple and it cost more than I'd spent on food up to then, about \$35 and lots of meat. These well-educated young professionals had plenty of spending money and I figured I'd better stick with my lower class friends out front of the Chinese hotel and the cheap eateries that abounded where I'd spend a few dollars on a good meal.

As I'd use this currency, I'd calculate both US and Singapore dollars spent, not principally out of financial con-

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cerns—though I budget much more carefully when traveling than when at home—more so out of a curiosity, an amateurish enjoyment in playing with numbers.

Gupta and I had an early dinner outside at one of the upscale tourist eateries—a restaurant on Clark Quay. It wasn't too expensive either—there being so much competition. It was nestled among the many restaurants and night clubs on the bank of the Singapore River, a wharf once clogged with sampans and commerce, now clean and uncluttered. Sight-seeing boats passed under the bridges, beneath glistening skyscrapers and older well-lit brick and stone government buildings on the opposing bank. A cover band pounded out a Stones song while we savored shrimp, pasta, and salad. It started to drizzle and a motorized awning spread out over our heads.

My new friend and I were soon to be parted. Too bad. We really got along. I was to pick up a ticket to Perth the following day and fly out in two. He was off to Melbourne the next morning. He invited me to come with him to the airport to meet his uncle. Changi Airport is awesome and I didn't want to break up the flow of conversational tangents either—a little Buddhism here, Hinduism there, Islam and Christian asides, real estate, a dash of Bush bashing, American geography, psychoactive agents we've known and loved, and of course, Singapore and Singapore women, which we'd become experts on. They were lovely. I'd read in the paper, the well known Straights Times, that a study of Asian women found Singapore's to be the most sexually aggressive of Asia. Neither Gupta nor I had noticed that, but it was nice to speculate as these fine specimens of human evolution passed by or sat near. We paid attention to other things as well. He, being a biologist was always commenting on the surrounding tropical plants, birds, and insects. I liked all that but I would get distracted by artifacts. Like trains, airports, and coins.

“What are you doing?” Gupta asked me as we waited for the subway train.

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“Converting the fee to American dollars. Figuring out which way’s easiest—fractions or decimals.”

“It’s like half. Singapore dollar’s like half an American dollar.”

“No, it’s more like nine-sixteenths,” I said.

“Oh my god. You’re a fanatic,” he said looking at me askance.

In the sleek clean subway car on the way to the airport Gupta fell asleep, travel weary. There were no closed doors between cars so I could see way down through them. It was past rush hour and there were so few riders that everyone was seated. In the back of the caboose I had a clear shot of a long row of stainless steel poles for standing riders to hold to—shiny vertical pipes running down and down the middle through the cars for what seemed a hundred yards, waving with the bends of track back and forth, then the bars closing in accordion-like, severing the depth view as we rounded a bend till the queue of cars whipped and straightened to reveal that lengthy line of bright poles again, a pleasing example of unintentional industrial op art.

The people who run this place sure believe in rules. It’s well known there are huge and effective fines in Singapore for spitting, chewing gum, or littering. But one would be unlikely to receive such a penalty because you hardly ever see any police. People are just well-behaved. Japan’s like that.

There was a sign running along the wall above the windows, a row of images with circular red borders and red lines running diagonally through the center indicating the activities pictured are commuter no-no’s. No bicycles, no roller blades, no gum, no smoking, no kissing, no flammables, no durian. I laughed at that last one. I’ve seen that rule written down in other Southeast Asian countries—at the entrance to buses. Durian, the “king of the fruits,” is a wildly popular vile smelling melon—the Limburger of the fruit world, which is honored at the beginning of the park along the Singapore River by a large performing arts center, the

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Esplanade, which looks a lot like half a giant thorn-covered durian.

The subway rises to the surface revealing Singapore suburbs, high rises gleaming. I wondered if at that point I should call it a train instead of a subway. “What do you say when it’s both above and below ground?” I asked Gupta, but he was too groggy to care.

We pulled into the airport. Gupta yawned and stretched. The passage from the train led to a shiny, cavernous foyer. We gazed up at silver escalators that seemed to have no end.

“It’s the escalator to...” I paused.

“To a better place,” he said.

We glided up and up past daringly designed reflective metal and glass, then walked through vast sparkling spaces to a waterfall welcoming us to the Ambassador Transit Hotel. While Gupta went to the john, I checked out a brochure. There were spa, gym, and pool. Some rates were reasonable—for rooms with bath or shared bath by the hour or the six hour block. I’d wrongly assumed it was all super-expensive. When Gupta inquired at the desk about Rudy Dugan, heads turned, a phone was quickly lifted, and we were provided with an obsequiously polite escort to the Presidential Suite up top.