



CHAPTER 11

ROTTNEST

The first British seafarers who came to this island..." I read from a brochure.

"Thought these little beasties were rats," inserted Frannie.

"So it's called Rottnest—close enough for wenchin' poms," I concluded.

"Ferdinkum," she concurred.

Quokkas! Quokkas in their natural environs. They were all over and mulling around us with no concern. They've marsupial pouches in front, the women anyway, big feet, and they look like little wallabies, which I had yet to see in the natural. A quokka mother with a baby in the pouch sat nearby—hoping for some food I bet—but we're not to feed them. They are slow and helpless and have survived because there are no predators that can get to them on this island—except from the sky. You can't bring cats or dogs. It's quokka kingdom.

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“They’re so *cute*,” said Mindy.

“Like fluffy little round balls,” said Gupta.

“Some boys were arrested for playing soccer with one,” said Frannie.

“That’s terrible,” Mindy moaned.

“No kidding,” said Gupta, “to show soccer such disrespect!”

Mindy takes a swing. Gupta grabs her.

“You’ve got to close your tent up or they’ll get in. They *are* rodents,” I said. “The ranger warned me.”

There was an eerie wail.

“And she said that the peacocks come around and leave their droppings everywhere. But they’re so gorgeous and regal it’s permitted.”

We’d met in Fremantle and taken a morning ferry to Rottnest Island where no visitor cars are allowed. Frannie got me a senior citizen’s ticket. I think she cheated. I was 58. I enjoyed getting a senior discount for the first time, but it did change my nickname for the cruise from Davo to Gramps.

“I had Rottnest in mind to go to when I arrived,” I said. Tazi John had told me it was one of his favorite spots in WA. “And now here I am and, how nice, here *we* are, the four of us together again for two days. The girls from Perth and... and we’re the...”

“The boys with girth,” said Mindy.

“Ouch,” said Gupta. “That hurts.”

“It’s cute,” I said. “Like quokkas. We’ve but a tad extra. What’s to hurt?”

“To be put in the same category as you. I’m not *that* girthy.”

“Well, neither am I,” I insisted.

Tents up and secured, we rented bikes and rode around the perimeter, watched the churning sea bash up onto rugged rocks to create rivulets and waterfalls that would fade to a trickle till the next big wave came in. We also waved—from a

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cliff at a school of migrating whales. There was clear blue and turquoise water and a secluded beach where we picnicked.

Periodically Gupta and Mindy would share her peace pipe. She'd take a big drag, hold it, and blow it into his mouth. Sometimes he'd blow it back into hers. Quite economical. Gupta tried to get me to join them but since Frannie didn't I didn't. Frannie says she gets higher not getting high than getting high. I agreed but said I thought that some entheogen use served an important initiatory purpose—helped one to wake up to higher states of consciousness. My readings have indicated they were traditionally and universally used that way and have only been prohibited by the state in recent times.

"The war on drugs, entheogens anyway, is the modern carryover of the Inquisition," I said. "They are nature's gift to show us there's more to life than what we think."

"The mushrooms sure showed me that," said Mindy.

"Indeed," agreed Gupta.

"And I've appreciated the few ecstasy trips I've had too," I said.

Gupta said the mushrooms were ecstatic enough and he'd heard ecstasy could kill you. I said that people die on just about everything and that I thought the death rate around ecstasy was less than say, that for aspirin. He was also worried about the long term effects of ecstasy. I said I don't worry about that at all. He asked if it made holes in your brain as he'd seen on MTV. I said I thought most of the hype against ecstasy, including the stuff about holes in the brain, was pure malarkey, drug war lies. I said I thought it best for rare, careful use within a serious affectionate relationship and told him there are lots of therapists who have wanted to use it for couples therapy.

"But," I added, "to me E's a drug that is best the first time. It doesn't work to take it much. And I don't want to do it anymore. I've also heard it said to never take ecstasy with someone whom you wouldn't want to marry."

"I think that's true for mushrooms too," he said.

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We turned wheels inland to outstretched green hills and stopped at a sign that explained there had once been a camp for rounded-up Aborigines on this field. We pedaled further to a view of their graves. We came upon a cricket field being mowed and Frannie explained the rules of the game and it was so confusing I couldn't keep up. Gupta had learned about it from his father. Nearing the completion of our route, we crawled into a cave overlooking the mainland. Mindy brought out a pint of tequila, which we emptied as the ships sailed and motored by.

Frequently during the day we had come upon quokkas, always a treat. Back at camp I opened a bottle of red wine and watched the fearless little marsupials. One came under the picnic table and nudged my toes.

"Why haven't I ever heard of them?" I said. "We know all about koalas. School kids round the world should be as aware of quokkas as they are of koalas, and would if Teddy Roosevelt had known about them."

"Why do you say that?" Gupta asked.

"The origin of the teddy bear was that Roosevelt was taken with koalas."

"That's not right," he said.

"No, *you're* wrong," I said. "Think of teddy bears—they look just like koalas. I distinctly remember a grade school teacher of mine saying that. Fourth grade I think. Teddy bears are koalas."

"Nope," he said flatly.

"Sure they are. Frannie, Mindy—either of you know about teddy bears being modeled after koalas?"

"Sorry mate," said Frannie. Mindy shook her head.

"Face it," said Gupta. "You're poorly educated. Texas schools."

"Oh like Louisiana schools lead the nation?" I laughed.

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“At least they don’t teach us lies about koalas. It was an American bear cub that was the source of the teddy bear.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I can’t quite remember why. But I remember.”

“Well that’s not very convincing. Listen, Roosevelt went to Australia and became enamored with koalas and thus we have the teddy bear. Or maybe he saw one in a zoo.”

“Nope.”

“Okay. We’ve got to get to the bottom of this,” I said.

We went to the park headquarters not far from our campsite to seek clarification, each of us sure we were about to defeat the other in a battle of trivia. The woman in the gift shop knew nothing. There was no Internet café. Finally, a ranger took pity on us and let us use his computer to go on the Internet.

How embarrassing. Gupta was right. Roosevelt refused to kill a leashed black bear cub in Mississippi while on an unsuccessful hunting trip sponsored by the Illinois Central Railroad. Think of that. Since he hadn’t bagged any bears they brought him to a little one that was tied up and told him, here, you can kill this. Good lord. Anyway, he wouldn’t do it. This story made it into the Washington Post followed by a political cartoon everyone saw. Roosevelt became known for his compassion (not always relegated by him to humans in times of war) and the little bear became his symbol. An East Coast couple who marketed dolls asked if they could name a stuffed baby bear doll after him. Roosevelt gave them permission. In 1903 both German and American versions of the teddy bear came out. And they looked like bears. In later years they started to resemble koalas more.

“Okay,” I whispered, leaning back and looking through the door to make sure the ranger was occupied, “Let’s see what we can find out about ecstasy.”

“Clandestine research,” Gupta chuckled, wickedly rubbing his hands together.

I type in “ecstasy death” on Google and follow a link. “Here we are.”

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"I'd get holes in my brain. I know it," he said.

"Here—there are occasional deaths—like from heat-stroke—here a person who had asthma died after taking it and dancing all night and not drinking enough water. How's this? Same general death rate as going to dance parties to begin with—about one in 100,000."

"Maybe that's why Baptists are against dancing."

"Alcohol has a fifty times greater death rate than ecstasy."

"Well there are fifty times more people using it."

"No silly—death rate not death count. A person using alcohol has a fifty times greater chance of dying from it than a person using ecstasy. And here, look—tobacco is 200 times more likely. Poor smokers."

"That's cause there are more of them," he said.

"I'm gonna strangle you—why can't you get it that... oh, you're jerkin' my chain. Hey, look at this. Men who have taken ecstasy are 36% less likely to commit murder than those who haven't. And similar results for robbery and other crimes."

"They ought to arrest people who don't take it. Take ecstasy or go to jail. It's the law!" Gupta said in a deep soft voice.

"The only crime ecstasy users are more likely to commit is selling an illegal drug, like the libeled entheogens."

"Death's too good for 'em."

"Alexander Shulgin is the modern father of ecstasy. He lives in Berkeley,"

"Surprise."

"Says it should be called 'empathy'. Hang on. Better not to take it more than once every four months—that's from the *Complete Book of Ecstasy*. Here we are—holes in the brain is... bogus. Told you! Oh—unless you get shot in the head by the cops for using it. Oh oh—here's an estimate of two deaths per 100,000 users. That's double what the other site said."

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Gupta coughed self-consciously and I could hear the sound of the ranger's approaching footsteps. Quickly I closed the Netscape window. "Which is why quokkas are destined to become the international mascot for world peace," I turned around. "Oh, hello. And thank you so much."

"Find what you were looking for?"

"Yep."

When we got back to camp I had to tell the gals Gupta was right about the koalas and I was wrong. Through the evening he squeezed that little victory for every bit of glory he could. Frannie and Mindy ganged up with him and rubbed it in. Eventually, I've found, as Rimbaud, that everything we are taught is false.

"Maybe we could get your President Bush to come here and see the quokkas," Mindy said, "and then we could call them Georgie bears."

"And then people would come from the four corners of the globe to club them to death—cute or not," said Gupta.

As twilight gleamed through our little campground we listened to the curious crows, which Gupta called the disappointed crows. They had a distinctive call of four or so high and ascending notes he said sounded like Mindy about to have an orgasm and then, after a pause, a descending call resembling a plane going down—a sad finish after a hopeful beginning. This was the constant background music to our trip. They go "ah ah ah ah" ascending and then "ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh" descending. Gupta imitated them with uncanny precision.

We put bangers and veggies on the grill at our campsite. It wasn't actually barbie as in bar-b-que season yet but we did it anyway. It was the only barbie I had down under, but I got the impression from all of the nostalgic comments I heard while there that almost everyone on that continent stands around the barbie with piles of meat and drinks beer in stubbies in warmer months.

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“Somewhat like a lot of folks from Texas—not my family though,” I said.

“That’s why you’re three bangers short of a barbie,” said Frannie turning a banger over.

“Huh?” I said.

“Dropkick,” said Mindy.

“I don’t get it.”

“Exactly,” said Gupta. “You’re hopeless.”

“But cute,” said Mindy.

“Oh, I get it. Teach me more,” I said.

“Don’t bother the babbler,” said Frannie.

“I thought I was the babbler,” I said.

“No—you’re the wanker.”

“That means ‘masturbator’” said Gupta proudly.

“I’m the babbler,” said Frannie, “babblin’ brook rhymes with cook.”

With our dinner of barbied Australian groceries, we drank another bottle of wine and then Gupta got out Frannie’s guitar that he’d put new strings on back in Fremantle and sang a song suggestive of a healthy appetite.

—chorus

*I lap it up babe—lap it up babe—lap it up
I lap it up babe—lap it up babe—lap it up
Lap it up babe—lap it up babe—lap it up
I lap it up babe—lap it up babe—lap it up
Oh oh—oh oh—so good*

*Like a kitty with the milk
Like his doggie on his toes
Like the spider with her silk
Like an elephant with its nose*

(chorus)

*Like the chillens with their cones
Like a Shop Vac with a spill*

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Like vultures on dem bones
Like a bee in a daffodil

(chorus)

“My turn,” I said.

“Can you do something shorter?” asked Gupta.

“Sure. How about Nano Tune?”

“Sounds short.”

“It is. Here goes.” I picked up the guitar and stretched my arms out in front of me and hunched my shoulders repeatedly like Norton on the Honeymooners used to do, which drove Ralph nuts, and continued till it drove Gupta nuts.

“Okay, okay, I got it,” he said. “Someday—powie! To the moon!”

“Good for you,” I said.

“Are you gonna play the song?” asked Mindy. “Or is this part of it?”

“Okay, here goes.”

Nano tune

“Well, go on,” said Mindy.

“That was it,” I said. “It’s my shortest work—at one second.”

Frannie fell asleep but the remaining three of us continued to party. We opened another bottle of wine and then, after more songs and yap, another, and then we went to the bar not far away and had a couple of drinks each while watching cricket on the telly, which still made no sense to me—the cricket, not the telly—but excited everyone else in the room. Gupta was staring at Mindy more than the telly. He wrote a poem for Mindy, on a napkin.

Mindy Mindy,
Terrifically

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*Splendifically
Wonderful
Blunderful
Under the sunderful
And the moonderoon
Your image in a spoon
As precious as
The galaxies
There in the skydaroo.
I lovely you.
Whoopta
Gupta*

She kissed his cheek. We got another bottle of wine for Ron and walked out into the darkness.

Back in the tent we woke Frannie up by sitting around her drinking and talking loudly. I ruminated on Descartes' famous attempt to prove his own existence.

"I think therefore I am," I said. "Hmm. Let me think about that."

"How about I think therefore I think," said Gupta.

"We are on the same lave-wength," I said.

"How about I think therefore we need another drink?" he said drinking out of the bottle and passing it.

"Or how about, I drink, therefore I drink," I said taking a swig.

"Or, I think therefore there's an assumption of a self thinking," slurred Gupta.

"Good. Profound as heck. So I think I think I think I think," I double slurred.

"But that's just what you think."

"How about I don't think therefore I am not?" said Mindy.

"That's Buddhism," I said. "Or a slice of it. Katagiri said that. Eggscellent."

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“Sorry, I don’t know him,” she said taking her turn at the bottle.

“It’s the thought that counts,” said Gupta.

“You think?” I asked.

“Did you say something?” mumbled Frannie half asleep.

After more of Ron’s booze, Gupta started rambling on emotionally about what a great time he was having with us and how he loved Frannie and me, which he demonstrated with gushy hugs. Then he turned his slobbery attention to Mindy and declared how he loved Mindy as Romeo loved Juliet, as Anthony loved Cleopatra. I suggested he find role models with more life-affirming conclusions. He gazed at Mindy and went on about how much he loved her and how wonderful she was and how he’d do anything for her while Mindy slumped over and fell asleep on my sleeping bag lying next to Frannie. After an episode outside the tent in which my stomach reversed the usual order of things, I ended up next to Gupta in his tent, him telling me how much he loved Mindy and how wonderful she was and how he’d do anything for her as I slumped over and fell asleep.

The next morning, after Gupta regurgitated for a while, the four of us sat around barbie heat and drank coffee Frannie brewed. Gupta, Mindy, and I strained to piece together how the evening went, especially how it ended. Mindy remembered enough to tell Gupta he couldn’t tell her how wonderful she was and all that for a while.

Taking the tent down was a lot harder than putting it up, not the usual order of difficulty. Depending on Frannie’s superior non-poisoned state of mind and able supervision, we managed somehow with pounding heads to pack up and return our bikes. We then had nothing to lean on and had to crawl to the dock behind Frannie who was in revolting good spirits. As we rode the ferry to Fremantle I stared blankly at the waves. Gupta was nodding out. It was Mindy’s turn to throw up. Once on shore Frannie went out shopping for

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mask material while we three drank a gallon of water, downed vitamins, and took detox naps in a room I got at the hostel.

Somewhat rejuvenated from slumber, Gupta and I made coffee downstairs in the hostel kitchen and swore never to drink again.

“Hey,” I said, “I’d forgotten all about that guy who was tailing Mindy—or maybe both of you. Ever see him again?”

He peered right at me. “Ever see him again? Every time I turn around he’s there, darting around a corner—I think.”

“I didn’t see him in Margaret River or Rottneest.”

“I didn’t either but he’s there. He’s here—or not far.”

“He’s made you a little paranoid.”

“I don’t know how much he’s around. Maybe he only goes so far from Perth. It’s disconcerting. I never had a tail before.”

Wearily waving goodbye and muttering “Call me later,” Gupta followed Mindy out to her car and they drove off to Perth. As they drove off I saw another car take off with a dark man at the wheel. I wondered if he was their Aboriginal tail. It happened so quickly I couldn’t tell.

Francine returned. She hugged me and said we’d get together in a week. She left me with her guitar.

“Thanks for all the redecorating. You’ve been my Apollo,” she said.

“Thanks for having me and showing me around,” I responded uncreatively.

That was it. She was off to visit her mom and pop and to spend some time alone. I too was alone—with throbbing head—in Freo.