



## CHAPTER 14

### GLITTERATI

I was feeling amorous. Hadn't glanced at a woman yet and felt that mutual zing that can lead to excited communication developing further. I walked the streets, my glances zeroing in on the females. This is the urge that propagates the race—and we humans don't just get it for a few weeks in the spring. Three drinks watching part of a soccer game lowered my standards—yellow light previews accepted. Little care about consequences. Still nothing two-way. I retreated to the Internet café to sink my lonely desire in cyberspace. Techo was there. We nodded. He suggests which computer I should use, keeping me clear of any that are slow or acting up. He pointed at a Mac. I'm mainly an inferior PC guy but online I can't tell the difference. Checked my email. Lots of spam. What am I gonna do about that? One of them hooks me in. A WA dating site. How'd they know I was here? Ah them cookies. Complete with photos—nothing risqué but in moments I

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was salivating. Love these Aussie women. One in particular grabbed my fantasy. Buxom, not too young, which means less trouble, pleasant smile, that hungry look. Yum yum. I shot off a brief response to her and hit the jackpot. She was online. Soon we were one-lining it back and forth. Nothing dirty. She's divorced, forty-nine, works in a government office, likes to dance—that's bad—I'm a terrible dancer. In an hour we're sitting in a pub talking. She's nice. My whole body is tingling. Her whole body is sending inviting messages. Green light. My imagination was tying ribbons around the evening. My breath was getting short—I was literally panting. We kept drinking. Then I noticed something. Her personality started to change. Yellow light. Soon she was a different person. The softness was gone. She had a twitch and a distant stare. Bad reaction to alcohol. Maybe allergic. She needs a friend, not a lover. She was becoming both irritated and irritating and, most important, unattractive to me. Red light, flashing red light. She had flipped my switch to off. Boohoo. The bad vibes were palpable. I said I had to go. She looked confused. I asked for her phone number. I could see a desperation in the recesses of her eyes. Back at the hostel I tore the page out of my notebook and flushed it away—even though I'm a stickler about only putting toilet paper in toilets.

Standing at an observation point in King's Park looking out over the skyline of Perth. Waiting for Gupta whom I hadn't seen in a few days. It was mild for August, a warm winter day with occasional cool gusts from the river below. If in the sun, I took off my flannel shirt, if in the shade, re-donned it over the tee shirt. August down there is the equivalent of February in the Northern Hemisphere. Perth is 31 degrees latitude and on the ocean, comparable to San Diego, which could be just about like this in February. It does remind me of places in Southern California except for the colorful parrots that seem like they should be in tropics—I see them all around WA—them and what I thought were crows, but which a local wo-

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man informs me are Australian ravens. She said you can tell by their distinctive call. There were some of these ravens walking right up to me as I was talking to her. I was on a newly mowed lawn near the upside-down trees. That's what her children called them. She said they are boabs—the trees, not her children.

I entered the recently opened Lottery Federation Walkway and made a wish Francine wins one of their drawings. The walkway feeds into the pedestrian skyway at treetop level from which I gazed at the rows of dots moving against each other on the freeways and streets below—like an Aboriginal painting in motion. A cruise ship from Freo slid along the Swan River's estuary toward the Narrows Bridge that connects a southern peninsula with the Perth side. I wished to walk along that river to Freo. Sailboats were out but most wait for warmer days. I saw jet skis far enough away that their motors were barely audible. Admired an old brick building down by the river bank, the Swan Brewery according to the legend on a map on a stand beneath glass. I was standing there in the breeze thus when some young people came up to me. They looked college age.

“Excuse me sir,” one said shyly.

“Yes.”

“Are you enjoying your visit to the park?”

“Yes I am.”

“And may I ask...”

“First,” I interrupted, “where are you from?”

“South Korea.”

“Oh. Where in South Korea?”

“We're all from Pusan.”

“I like Pusan.”

“You do? You know Pusan?”

I told them a few places I remembered in the south of South Korea and said every word of Korean I could remember, which took a few seconds. People love to hear that you know and appreciate anything about where they're from. So now they're all grinning broadly.

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“Where are you from?”

“America.” I hate to say that because there are so many countries in the two American continents, but that’s what everyone says.

“We want to go to America.”

“All together?” They laugh.

“What are you doing in Australia?” one asks me.

“I’m wandering around.”

Smiling. Time for the big question. “Do you go to church?”

“Do I go to church?” I responded forcefully hand pressing on chest.

“Yes,” the tallest one said as they all stepped back.

“Are you spies?” I look around.

“No.”

“Okay. So, do I go to church?”

“Yes.”

“That’s a secret,” I said.

“Why a secret?” the same young guy asked as giggles arose from his comrades.

“I can’t tell you because it’s a secret! And also because Jesus said to pray in a closet.”

They don’t know what to make of me.

“Do you believe in Jesus?”

“Depends on what you mean by Jesus.”

“Jesus of the Bible, the son of god.”

“You mean a male human being named Jesus?”

“Yes.”

“My Jesus has no gender nor species. He is bigger than that. In fact he’s so big he has no size. And no name and no gender and he’s so big you should be very careful saying anything about him because everything we say is small.”

They laughed and were intrigued. We talked for a while more about Jesus and they went away happy because I didn’t tell them to go away and I took their pamphlet.

Then Gupta walked up.

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"There you are Guppy."

"Davo."

"How goes it."

"It goes bad."

"Oh no. What?"

"Mindy broke up with me. Our love affair is over. She just wants to be friends."

"Oh I'm so sorry."

"It's not your fault. It's mine."

"I'm still sorry, I'm saddened."

"I told you she sounded different on the phone. I thought she was in trouble. It was me who was in trouble. I'm miserable."

"Ohhhh," I groan sympathetically.

"The brain's opiate receptors are treacherous when things don't go their way. I've been going through a lot of anguish. Can't get rid of it. What a crash. I just walk around and stare and can't forget her and even if I do there's this painful feeling and here I am in Australia alone and all I can think to do is leave."

"Don't leave. You still have me."

"Great." He kicked at the ground. "Your song's wrong. That Zen master's wrong."

"About?"

"Every day's not a good day. Today's not a good day."

"That's absolute—the god realm. This is relative—the people realm. Relative days can be bad."

"Just my luck."

"What can I do?" I asked.

"Nothing. I've been trying to meditate. Concentrating on the top chakra. Everything hurts. My third eye hurts."

"Takes time. It'll pass."

"Meanwhile time's slowed down."

"I know—the worse things are, the slower they pass."

"What do you do when you meditate?" he asked.

"When I meditate? Just follow my breath—or count the exhalations—or feel my feet as I walk and I say 'thank

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you' a lot or I just watch what's going on, just be there—that's the main one."

"I think I'll try following my breath. Need a change—maybe sneak up on the pain. I feel like I'm getting beaten up."

"Well, at least you're not turning to drugs and alcohol."

"That's a great idea. Let's go get a drink."

"Okay. But let's walk in the park some more first."

We walked. He talked.

"I've been blind. There've been all sorts of signs I refused to see." He laughed. "I'm so stupid. Really. It's been obvious she was losing interest. Yesterday when I got home we started to make out—I started it of course—and then she broke away and I followed her around and finally she said she didn't want to have a physical relationship with me anymore."

"Bad."

"Then she said she hadn't stayed out the night before last because she'd been too drunk to drive—it was because she'd been making love with an old boyfriend."

"That's terrible. What did you do?"

"I just stood there. Tried not to whimper. Then she said she was going over to his place again. I went to bed and slept for twelve hours—till I couldn't sleep anymore. She called this morning and told me not to be mad and that she still loved me and wanted me to stay there. And she still wants to go to the beach tomorrow with you and me and Frannie. She returned right before I left. I said stupid things like how I felt unattractive. She laughed and said baloney, said she'd had her heart broken plenty and it was just part of the game and we can still be friends and have fun. I guess I'll try. But I refused to meet the guy she was with. She wanted to bring him over. Can you believe that? I said I'd leave. We agreed to meet tonight at a pub in town to watch a game and then I can go back and sleep on her couch."

"Which rhymes with ouch."

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“Righto.”

“What game?”

“Fremantle versus Perth. Australian rules football. Come join us.”

“Sure.”

“Good—I need you there. Starts at six.” He looked down digging his right shoe into the dirt and pushing it around. “She should love me,” he said. “We really have a unique relationship. I never felt with anyone like I do with her. Not in a long time anyway. The strangest thing happened when I was leaving. Her neighbor and she were talking and the neighbor had a tabloid and she read Mindy her horoscope and it said her true love was near but she was in denial about it. I couldn’t have paid that woman to make up anything better. But it didn’t help.”

I didn’t feel jealous of him anymore. Whoops. I hadn’t realized—just a little tiny bit jealous. I could see it as it went away. I was reminded of how romantic love is like a drug—unstable, undependable, emotionally risky—it can actually break your heart and kill you. Still legal though.

“You could do social work with those worse off to take your mind off your suffering. But that may be impractical right now. I bet the next best thing for you would be to keep moving,” I said. “It’s early but not early enough to take the walk to Freo.”

“Walk to Freo? That’s a long way.”

“Well, I want to do it. Come with me.”

“Maybe,” he said.

“Anyway, today let’s take the Historic Walk. I’ve got the map right here. First we can go down there to the Swan Bells Tower—see it?”

“Yeah. Okay. That sounds good. I’ve been there with Mindy. It’s great.”

“If you’ve been there, we could go to the museum by the train station. I could go back there. There’s so much to see. I spent as much time watching them fix the roof as I did the displays.”





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*A free man, a free man I'm  
Free—free, a free man, a free man baby*

*Free like the fluid, washin' in my spine  
Free like the blood that flows inside my veins  
Free like the oxygen I'm drinkin' all the time  
Free like the freedom of the saint or the insane*

*Free man—a free man baby  
Free man—don't mean maybe  
Free man—freely playin'  
Free man—I be sayin'  
Free man—free man baby  
Free man—free man baby*

“You owe me five farthings say the bells of St Martins,” Gupta recited bravely. It’s from an old nursery rhyme he knew as a kid and here we are with those bells, which, along with some others specially cast for the occasion, were given to the city of Perth to commemorate Australia’s two hundredth birthday.

“That’s an awfully nice birthday gift,” he said. “And some of them are so huge. I wonder how the parishioners of St. Martin-in-the-fields in London feel without their bells? I guess they still have god—or at least an idea of god.”

“I guess they got some new ones. Ask the tour guide.”

Before we could the bells started to ring. They’re a marvel not only to hear but to watch.

The Swan Bells Tower is a striking building. It looks like an America’s Cup type sail boat with huge stainless steel sails blowing full in the wind, a hundred foot glass spire housing the bells, rising off the deck. Like Daniel and his Malay wife had indicated, there was opposition to spending all the money to build it but I regard that as short-sighted. This building and these bells begin, continue, and augment a tradition, fertilizing their culture, creating such an interesting addition to the city that makes one’s impression and experience more rich and positive. And it’s fun. So much in our

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impression of a city or a building is in a few touches—Gaudi understood—add a flourish here, color there, some material to a wall, a rounded balcony—and it's warm and interesting and without, it can be depressing and boring.

The Swan Bells Tower can be considered a musical instrument, one of the largest in the world. The bells are hung for “change ringing,” an old English method—no tunes, no random ringing. They swing them round to strike them in sets. A brochure we picked up on the way out read, “There are countless methods, each of which has a name, such as 'Plain Bob', 'Little Bob', 'Grandsire', 'Stedman', 'Cambridge Surprise' and so on, with the second part of the name indicating how many bells are being rung. 'Minimus' uses four bells, 'doubles' five, 'minor' six, 'triples' seven, 'major' eight, 'caters' nine, 'royal' ten, 'cinques' eleven and 'maximus' twelve. Hence 'Plain Bob Major' is rung on eight bells, and 'Plain Bob Maximus' on twelve.”

“I've been meditating as we walk and I'm still miserable,” Gupta mumbled as we stood way up on the observation platform.

“Give up then. You could jump.”

“Might just get paralyzed. I'll keep trying.”

“Oh—I know.”

“What?”

“Affect psychology.”

“What's that?”

“I don't really know, but I met a Zen teacher named Ian and a guy who sits with him named Samo who practice it. Samo helped me with that extreme reaction I have to being poked in the ribs.” Gupta immediately made a threatening move. “Don't do it!” I called out. “Let's see. Disappointment is one of the affects. But I can't remember anything else like what you're supposed to do. Try just looking at it.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“We might get that drink. After all, you've given meditation a couple of hours. Obviously doesn't work.”

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“At least not when practiced while walking and talking with you.”

“OK. Then try—the Walking Tour!” I said pulling the brochure out.

“Do you think it’s because I’m a little overweight?”

“Probably so. How about a meat pie and the walking tour?”

“The Aussie hamburger. Sounds perfect. I think this time I’ll get koala.”

“Or quokka. Then we’ll do the whole thing in order and number one is—here it is, straight down—Barrack Street for a few blocks—the Town Hall Center—built in 1870...hmm...by convicts.”

“Weren’t they all convicts?”

“Just our friends.”

“Do we have to go inside every place?”

“As we choose—mainly just walk by I think. Except for number...number...nineteen—the Perth Mint. Let’s do that last. There are twenty-three in all. Ah—I see the theme of the tour is the discovery of gold nearby in 1892. It’s like San Francisco—built on gold—just forty-three years later.”

Off we went.

“Any English here take a good look at something you’ve never seen before,” said the Mint tour guide. It was an Olympic gold medal. That seemed a little mean. The Brits must have won *some*. They mainly do specialty coins—the Mint, not the Brits—the type Mai was interested in buying—commemoratives. There’s all sorts of gold around—in the shop and on display. Silver too. They made a one kilo silver coin once, maybe the heaviest ever. There’s a copy of the Hand of Fate Nugget, which weighed four hundred kilos. It was bought by the Golden Nugget in Las Vegas. There’s a contraption at the Mint with which you can put something on a coin. The guide suggested, “This is your inheritance. Love, Mom and Dad.” Our group followed him to the next room.

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“Did you hear that Gupta? The guide says there are ten to twenty million dollars worth of gold here at any given time.”

“I’d be satisfied with just a fraction of that. Doesn’t seem like there’s a lot of security either.”

“Oh yeah. I guess they forgot about that.”

The symbol of the Perth Mint is the black swan. The Mint is a handsome two story building made from limestone brought over from Rottneest Island. It was opened in 1899. The grounds in front are well tended though the roses were not in bloom. There’s a room with a reconstructed 19th century miner’s camp with life-size reddish brown dusty figures of the prospectors who made the big find. There are some scraggly short trees without any leaves that look more like dead gray branches stuck in the simulated reddish brown dusty ground.

“It’s amazing they found this gold in the outback at a place with a brick wall and barred windows right next to it,” Gupta noted. He further surveyed the scene. “Looks too dirty and difficult. I think I’d have let all the thousands of guys go for the gold like sperm rushing to the ovum—and stayed behind here in Perth and dealt in real estate.”

We walked by bulletproof plate glass windows behind which employees spend their days putting gold, silver, and platinum through a workout. All we see now is gold. It does glitter. We follow it mesmerized as they cast it, roll it into strips, and anneal it, which the guide explains is a heating and cooling process to make the metal more malleable. It’s re-rolled and then blank coins are punched. Excess metal is removed by an abrasive belt. We watched as the coins were weighed and sorted to determine which blanks are too fat, which are too skinny, and which are just right. Then there’s the rimming in which the blanks are rolled between moving and stationary plates to achieve a milled edge. Then the coins are squished into their final form by huge presses. Time for a bath—the acid washing.

“That would wake one up,” said Gupta.

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The spray lacquering reduces tarnishing, then the coins are closely looked at by the demanding eyes of Mint inspectors.

We watched a parade of gold coins-to-be go by on a belt.

“Someday this will all be mine,” said Gupta.

“You like,” I said, “me like.”

He asked the guide if there had ever been any robberies. No, but there had been one shot fired in the history of the place. A guard got himself in the foot.

The last part of the tour was called the Pour and was held in the original Melthouse, now a room at the far end of the Mint. We sat on mini-bleachers behind a wooden fence as in a courtroom. There, while keeping up a snappy banter, an employee melted a gold brick and made a new one out of it. He started off the demonstration by saying, if the fire alarm sounds, go out the emergency exit at the far end of the room opposite the entrance. We all looked that way. He stood before a brick wall while behind us was more bullet proof glass and a view of the busy workers and their gleaming coins.

Our latest guide informed us the gloves he donned were, like his shirt, made of one hundred percent wool, not one hundred percent effective. “I have to get into and out of the furnace quickly or they’ll catch on fire,” he said. He put on an apron of wool on the inside and reflective Kevlar on the outside—same as bulletproof vests. It looked like foil. Then he pulled a mask over his face—like what welder’s wear.

“Gold melts at 1063 degrees centigrade,” he said. “It takes one minute to get the gold from the furnace to the cast iron table.” While he waited for that minute to conclude, he passed on more tidbits about this process. “There are lifting tongues and pouring tongues. These are lifting tongues,” and he picked up the crucible. He said it takes thirty seconds for the gold to go from liquid to solid. “Already it’s gone down to 1200.”

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The gold looked like melting butter. There was a momentary green glow. Gupta was transfixed. The guide changed to ordinary leather gloves.

“Now it’s 800 degrees and has become solid.”

He passed it around below our noses on a paddle and said to look out—if it falls on you it’ll set your skin on fire. Everyone pushed back an inch. He picked the brick up. It lit his glove. He put the brick into water creating steam. He said they’ve made the same bar thirty-six times a week for eight years. The gold bar had gone cold. He picked it up and said he couldn’t pass it around. It’s worth a hundred and ten thousand dollars Australian.

“About seventy thousand US,” whispered Gupta.

“Hmm. Or,” I’m cogitating, “seventy one thousand five hundred. Or, if we carry it one more decimal point...”

“Shut up.”

“Yes sir.”

“Look,” Gupta said, “There’s the opening. That thing’s just sitting there and it’s cooled off. Hmm. They wouldn’t miss it. We just have to distract him for a few seconds.”

The tour was over. Gupta and I went through a hall to a small display room. In the middle of the room there was an ingot in Plexiglas one could reach in and try to lift. It was 400 ounces of refined gold—11.36 kilos—size of a brick. With effort I barely lifted it. Gupta had a better time of it.

“What are you writing now?” he asked.

“There —May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1945—just three months and sixteen days after I was born.”

“What do mean?”

“That 1063 centigrade converts to 1945.4 Fahrenheit.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“The melting point of gold is 1063 centigrade which converts to 1945.4 Fahrenheit. I can remember that because 1945 is the year I was born and May 25<sup>th</sup> I figure is point four into the year.”

“That’s not important. What’s important is extracting

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this brick.”

We tried to figure out how to get it out.

“Freeze the Plexiglas then hit it with a hammer,” said Gupta.

“You’re working all this out to the last detail,” I said.

“Hey, could I borrow your pen and notebook,” he said.

“Why?” I asked.

“I want to go through that pour tour again and take notes. The next one starts pretty soon..”

“Okay. It was fun.”

And it was fun again.

“Dinner time,” said Gupta.

There’s a restaurant across from the Mint. We stood on the corner and read the sign. It said “Japanese take-away” on one side, “Hot and Cold” on the other, and “Wasabi” in the middle.

“Strange,” I said. “Why would a Japanese restaurant advertise wasabi?”

“That’s the super-hot green stuff you mix soy sauce with, right?” said Gupta.

“Right. They call it Japanese horse radish but it’s made from an herb.”

“First time I tried it I thought it was avocado dip and put a big glob on a cracker. Thought I was gonna die,” he said.

“That is a trip. I did the same thing once. What I remember is that all my tear ducts opened and my nose ran. It instantly made my face into a cascade. Quite cleansing. There was a guy on Jackass who snorted it. I think that would be going a tad far.”

“Maybe we could distract the guard at the Mint with a wasabi spray in his eyes—and then grab the gold brick.”

“Good idea. Oh, I see,” I said looking at the sign. “Wasabi is the name of the restaurant.”

We sat down at a table with sighs of relief. We’d been walking and standing all day. But now things had slowed

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down and there was nothing to distract him. Gupta had time to remember his fate.

“You look sad again,” I said.

“Nobody likes me, everybody hates me, I’m gonna eat some ... wasabi.”

“Time for that drink,” I said. “How about sake to drown your sorrows.”

“Sake and then... suicide by wasabi.”

I thought about that word—wasabi. I played with it. “Wasabi. Wa sabi. Wabi-sabi.”

“Wabi-sabi?” he said.

“That’s a key Japanese concept of beauty, which incorporates loneliness and sadness, impermanence. Sabishi is sad. Wabishi is lonely and, I think, a sense of—of can’t be comforted.”

“Wasabi means that?”

“No—I’m just looking at the word and taking it apart. It’s reminding me of wabi-sabi and how those words are appropriate now you’re sitting here sad and lonely and since I am a compassionate person who feels your pain I too am sad and lonely in a sort of beautiful way. Wabi-sabi.”

“Wabi-sabi,” he repeated, “the unobtainability of the object of desire?”

“Something like that I guess.”

“The sweet sadness of life and the bitter fruit of loss?”

“You’ve got it. And there’s another reading on wasabi I just got. WA as in Western Australia. Wa-sabi—the sadness of Western Australia. The sadness of WA. The sadness of wandering around. There—in the distance can you hear the call of the disappointed ravens of WA, of wasabi.”

With mutual melancholy we silently sipped sake while waiting for sushi and wasabi.