



CHAPTER 15

CRAWLIN'

A good hundred people were on their feet yelling. Mindy was one of them. It was a tense moment in the game of footy being played between Perth and Freo. The patrons of the downtown Perth pub seemed to be evenly divided between the two teams, which, along with the closeness of the competition, made for a dynamic evening. Gupta and I were enjoying the game, the crowd, and Mindy's lively participation. We were also enjoying the fish and chips and the Guinness Stout of which we each consumed four pints—a gallon between us. Wow.

I've watched many American football games, mostly cheering for the Forty-niners. In the States I can just say football for American football, but not anywhere else. Everywhere else football means what we call soccer. In WA I saw footy which is Australian rules football, soccer, rugby, and an American football game on Satellite. Soccer is meditative and

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flowing with precious few scores. It impresses and somewhat puzzles me it's so dominant worldwide. Rugby is wild and rugged with no etymological connection to that word. The head-butting of rugby should stop immediately if only for my sake—I worry terribly they're going to break their necks. Footy is full on, as they say, and fun. American football seems, by comparison, a mite heady. The players seem to spend most of their time talking and waiting around. Those other games don't stop much and I got used to that. But regardless of what people say, I hold that American football is the most violent and dangerous. Aussies and Brits who've experienced it know that. But American football is so brutal and bruising I think a change of rules must be made. I explained my suggested modifications after the footy match was over. It was close and exciting but I didn't know who won.

"I love these games," I said. "I like to watch them for inspiration. I think that's why I used to watch American football—for fun but also for inspiration."

"Inspiring like smashing your head into a wall," said Gupta.

"No, really. When I'm on some project like a book or something, I feel like those guys getting up off the field to keep giving it their all, play after play. Don't give up—keep smashing on. Something like that. But I've come to think it's time for a change."

"Like?"

"Like American football must eliminate the huddle," I said.

"How will they know what to do?"

"They do no-huddle now."

"But not all the time."

"They'll adjust."

"But the players are so exhausted that they've got to rest," said Gupta.

"They can still put in a hundred percent. They'll just be staggering like boxers and therefore those goliaths won't be able to charge into each other at the same high speeds."

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You know what those quarterbacks have got coming at them? It's murder. Concussions are standard."

"Some of those linemen do seem to have the lust to kill."

"Of course. So the rules have to be changed to channel this aggression with less damage to the pros, the collegians, the kids in school. But even with no huddles at all I still think it would be too brutal, so I've got another change in mind—a soft rubbery field. The traditional grass fields are too hard but Astroturf is murder."

"I don't know if America is ready for your vision of American football yet," said Gupta.

"That won't stop me. Did that stop Socrates? Marx? Martin Luther King?"

"Good analogies."

"Now you've got your no-huddle game and your soft rubbery field. There's one more addition."

"Suits of armor?"

"Close."

"I give up."

"Thick foam uniforms. That would do it."

"I get the image of what football would look like if it were played on the moon."

"Yes—that's right."

"Wouldn't it be boring?"

"Why? It would be easier to follow and the most skilled team would still win. The players would live longer, not lying awake at night in pain for the rest of their lives and football stadiums would be less like Roman coliseums."

"OK. That's your plan. Now you want to hear mine?"

"You have a plan for American football?"

"No. For the Perth Mint."

"A better way to strike the coins?"

"A better way to distribute the gold."

Then Gupta got off on his plan. How to rob the Perth Mint. He said when the man picked the gold ingot out of the water and put it on the ledge, we'd set off a smoke bomb that

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would trigger the fire alarm and send people rushing out the emergency exit that had just been pointed out to them. Just then he'd spray the man's face with a wasabi mixture, open his coat up unleashing a mechanical arm that would spring out, grab the ingot and retract it to his bosom where he'd cover it with his coat before anyone could notice. I'd spray the Plexiglas container with something that froze it, smash it with a hammer and grab that gold brick. Then we'd walk out with the others and disappear into the street.

"Whataya think?"

"Foolproof," I said.

Mindy and I had only nodded hello and yelled unintelligible comments at each other in the din of the game. Now that the place had calmed down she asked what I'd been up to since she last waved goodbye squinting through a hangover in Freo. I ran through a list of highlights. She said I'd seen more of Freo and Perth than her.

That's common to hear. I remember I had a friend I'd see at tennis tournaments when I was a kid. He lived in San Antonio just a couple of blocks from the Alamo and had never been inside. Like people in New York City who haven't been to the Statue of Liberty.

I told her I wanted to get out of the city more. Like on the way to Freo Francine had taken me to a regional park where we had a leisurely walk by crowds of flowering plants, crossed wooden bridges over a rocky creek, sat for a spell to see the sun slink down behind a distant hill.

"Sounds delightful," said Mindy.

"It was great except the park closed at sunset and her car was locked inside the gate. I had to take some of the fence apart so we could drive around it over an area newly planted with darling little purple flowers. I felt like the biker whom in '66 I saw purposely destroy a wide beautifully designed bed in front of the Conservatory of Flowers in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. He just drove up off the street onto the lawn full of picnickers and Sunday strollers and

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plowed into the exquisite display of beauty, skidded around gouging the crap out of it in front of a horrified throng of people who had been enjoying a lovely spring day.”

“That’s so destructive and immature,” said Mindy.

“Sounds great,” said Gupta.

“Yeah. It was impressive,” I agreed, “but bad.”

So we got to making another list of parks and places out from the city. Gupta had a brochure with a map that helped. Mindy said she’d be happy to drive us wherever we wanted. We already had the plan to go to the beach the next day.

“It’s winter,” she said, “but the ocean temperature here only varies by two degrees year-round. Burns Beach is just a short ways to the north. We could go further up to Two Rocks. There’s transplanted koala up there.”

“From where?” I asked.

“Eastern Australia.”

I wondered if they say E-A there but, before I could bring it up, Mindy asked if I knew what koala meant. I didn’t.

“No water’ in Aborigine. They get all their water from a particular type of Eucalyptus leaf.”

“Oh, like teddy bears,” I said.

Gupta chortled.

Mindy got us back on topic, suggesting Araluen Botanic Park south of Perth and John Forrest National Park to the east, which I thought would rightly be called John Forrest National Forest. There was a contemplative Catholic monastery I wanted to visit and a Vipassana Center. Vipassana is insight meditation as practiced by the early Buddhists. The center was probably connected to a teacher from Thailand or Burma. She said we could look at a map tomorrow and figure it all out. I asked about how we’d three fit in her Porsche and she said she’d get the SUV.

“Whose is that?”

“It’s really my uncle’s but he leaves it here. I’ll make a call to hold it. Ah heck,” she said, “left me mobile in the car. No matter. Now it’s time for pub-crawlin’!”

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“Oh—oh,” Gupta said. “What is that?”

“We’ll go from pub to pub,” said Mindy, “and get so pissed we’ll have to start crawlin’ to get to the next one.”

Walking over to Northbridge, Mindy pointed to her car. “There she is. Good. Now you don’t have to depend on me to remember. And here are the keys so you don’t have to wrestle them from me. And we can always take a taxi home and get ‘er tomorrow.”

At the hostel I get a sports coat from my room. Mindy said I might need it to get into some of the clubs.

“You know what surprises me about the youth hostels where I’ve been?” said Gupta as we walked out.

“No, what does surprise you about the youth hostels where you’ve been, Gupta?” I said.

“I always expect them to be full of angry kids, but there are people of all ages and they are generally good-natured.”

“Death is too good for you,” I sneered at him.

I let them go into the first joint without me so I could do my email before the night got crazier. I sent Kelly and Clay a rambling missive on what was happening including a bit about the Mint tour and Gupta’s plan to rob it. Told Clay to go to his atlas or the Internet to locate all these places Mindy had mentioned. I doubted he’d actually do it—maybe when I get back we’ll do it together. Kelly had a comment on my mega-ticklish problem. He said he’d had a similar extreme reaction and had been cured by getting grabbed all the time doing martial arts. The type he practiced was bruising. I pictured my body being flung about like a Raggedy Andy doll and thought I’d continue investigating Affect Psychology.

I was talking to Techo when Mindy and Gupta came in to get me. I asked him to come with us and he agreed. He’s the strong silent type not to mention a little freaky looking and it always surprises me when he’s friendly and open.

“Glad you’re on our side,” said Gupta sizing Techo up as we walked out. “Looks like rain,” he added.

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“Good,” said Mindy. “I want to get soaked.”

We went up to a noisy crowded place, Gupta snapping his fingers saying “It’s happening, baby.” But it happened they wouldn’t let Techo in because he had a tee shirt on. My long sleeve shirt with collar passed their dress code so he got in by wearing my sports coat. The place was crammed with people drinking, dancing, talking and a constant thump, thump, thump of a bass drum. Techo’s head started bobbing to the beat.

“Techo does techno,” Gupta said in a radio tone.

There was an Aboriginal woman passed out on the floor by the bar. The staff didn’t do anything about it. Nor customers. People just went around or stepped over her. Sad.

Mindy met a couple she knew and we all huddled together and talked loudly to be heard above the din. The male half of this couple commented on all the sexy women. I concurred. The woman with him said there were a lot of attractive men around too. “Like him,” she said looking at Techo who smiled. Ah—there—he can smile.

“Yeah,” her guy said, “Isn’t it a shame that the more sex a man gets the heartier a fellow he’s regarded, whereas if a woman is aggressively promiscuous people call her a slut.”

“What’s the problem with that?” Mindy asked.

“It’s not right. Women just trying to enjoy life, shouldn’t be called a slut.”

“I’m a slut. I don’t care. I’ll shag anybody. I like being a slut. Call me a slut.”

That left him tongue tied. Gupta looked down as she went on like this. It was painful. Finally he leaned over to her and whispered sotto voce, “You won’t either. It’s not true. I know.”

She whispered back, “Don’t be hurt. I do love you. Here.” And she gave him a big kiss and, as she did, her eyes got wide. I looked in the direction she was facing and saw her mysterious Aboriginal shadow staring our way.

“Oh no,” she said, Pulling away from Gupta.

“Was it that bad?” he said.

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“Not you—him,” she said, pointing with her eyes.

“Damnit,” said Gupta “I’m gonna...”

“Let’s get out of here,” Mindy said pulling him in the other direction. He grunted in anger but gave in to her.

It was raining outside. “Follow me,” she said to us and darted down the street and into a busy pub and through to the rear, to the alley and into another back door through a kitchen where Chinese cooks watched us blankly.

“Sorry Mr. Wong,” she said to a man in a suit standing just inside the dining room of the fancy place.

“That’s fine Mindy. Hurry back,” he said as Gupta, Techo, and I followed her out onto the next street then into a jazz club where we took a booth in a dark corner on a second floor balcony. A waitress came over and we ordered, panting. Mindy, Gupta, and I downed shots of tequila. Techo drank a Coke and smoked cigarettes. I bummed one then I bummed another.

Gupta, now somewhat tipsy, told Techo about his plan to rob the Perth Mint and asked if Techo could add some of his computer skills to the job, possibly jamming the burglar alarm. Techo got a kick out of it.

Mindy said she needed to get some fresh air so we took a walk—out the back again and down the sidewalk into a residential neighborhood. We wandered around the streets in a gentle rain until we were back in a commercial zone. We were cold and wet but no one complained. I could see the lights of the entertainment district a few blocks ahead of us.

“We’re not doing much crawling but we’re sure staggering a lot,” I said.

“Let’s smoke a cone,” Mindy said, as she sat down in a darkened store-front and lit her pipe. We joined her. She was going on about how much she loved being out in the rain, out on the streets.

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"I wanna stay here. Why do I live in a house?" she asked in a distant rapid slightly crazed voice. "I want to sleep here! This is good enough. This is all I need. Think I'll move here. Don't need more than this. You guys can go on and leave me here."

"Adrian Quist," said Techo.

"Rhymes with pissed," I noted. "I'm quite Quisted myself."

"Me too," said Gupta with his tongue hanging out. We sat in the cubby and smoked.

"I'm going to walk all the way home," Mindy said jumping up and spinning around. "I'm going to dance all the way home! You take a cab home. I'll go by myself." She went on like that musically and quirkily spinning around and dancing down the street.

We three stood up slowly, keeping our eyes on her.

"She's going the right direction," I said.

Mindy started singing out.

*I'm a I'm a slut—I'm a I'm a slut
There—I like the sound—as I'm spinning round
La la la la la La la la la la
How I prance and strut—tell ya tell ya what
I'm a I'm a slut—I'm a I'm a slut*

"How tragic," Gupta said, watching her spin down the street, "I've been in anguish over a lost treasure that, should I acquire, would still not be something I could possess."

*I'm a I'm a slut—I'm a I'm a slut
Dancing round the street—on my slutty feet
La la la la la La la la la la
But I'm not for sale—mine is free love tail
I'm a I'm a slut—I'm a I'm a slut*

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“Look at her—no one can possess her. She’s a free spirit. But still I cannot let go.”

*I’m a I’m a slut—I’m a I’m a slut
Free from your constructs—free from all the shuck
La la la la la La la la la la
Hey there boys! Guess what? You’re not the only ones!
I’m a I’m a slut—I’m a I’m a slut*

Her voice echoed through the shadowy canyon of dark buildings.

Mindy was blithely singing and twirling through the intersection. An occasional car was passing. We stood on the glistening asphalt, her rapt and ambling audience.

*La la la la la La la la la la
I’m a I’m a slut—I’m a I’m a slut
La la la la la La la la la la
I’m a I’m a slut—I’m a I’m a slut*

Suddenly, there was the sound of an engine roaring in approach. A long black automobile sped up from the side street on the right and screeched to a stop between Mindy and us. It hovered there. We couldn’t see what was happening. Its engine gunned. Then it blasted off wheels spinning and shot straight ahead down the cross street out of sight.

The three of us stood silently, numbed, peering intently down the black, wet street toward the lights of Northbridge. Something was terribly wrong, terribly songless. Mindy wasn’t in the picture. Mindy was not to be seen or heard. Mindy was in that vehicle speeding off into the distance. Mindy had been taken away.