



CHAPTER 17

FENSTER

Eight.”

“What are you talking about?” said Gupta.

“The countdown,” I answered.

“What?” Gupta asked.

“Today’s—uh—Thursday the 21st. And the 29th when we have the dinner date at nine with Rudy is a Friday. It’s just about three so that’s eight days and six hours. If the 29th is zero in the countdown, then today is eight. Is that clear?”

“How could you be thinking about that at a time like this? We’re here to meet a dangerous gangster to get Mindy back—it’s a life and death thing.”

“And we have eight days to do it in. Hey—at least I left it at whole numbers.”

“Okay,” said Gupta impatiently. “Look—we’ve already blown enough time getting here.”

“You needed clean clothes. We had to clean up and eat.”

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We're here."

"Okay. I think I could be hanging from a cliff and need your concentrated attention to save me, and you'd be trying to compute the speed I'd be traveling when I hit."

"Multitasking."

"Ok. I'll humor you. We've got eight days. Now let's go."

We looked at each other, opened the doors to the Porsche, stepped out, closed the doors, tucked in our shirts, and walked up to a gatehouse gulping. The massive wrought iron gate was closed. Fancy metalwork at the top was in the form of a horse's head with mane. A high brick wall ran in each direction from the gate and what looked to be two strands of electrified wire ran along the top. I counted three security cameras.

A man in the gatehouse put down a newspaper and looked up at us with suspicion.

"You got an appointment?"

"No," said Gupta. "But we've got business."

"You gotta make an appointment first."

"Is Mr. Fenster in?" I asked.

"Gotta have an appointment."

"Tell him we're acquaintances of Rudy and Mindy and we come in peace," I said.

Gupta leaned over and whispered, "Come in peace? That's American Indian movie talk not gangster movie talk."

The man looked at us long and steady and told us to take a walk back to the car where he could see us and to wait there.

A few moments later he called us back as the gate swung open slowly with a creaking sound.

"Wait inside," he said.

"Try a little WD40 on that gate," said Gupta.

A golf cart with plaid awning roof pulled up and we got in. There was another serious guy inside. The cart zipped along an asphalt drive, no house in sight, a row of what are

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surely a variety of Eucalyptus on the left and a high hedge on the right.

“To the theater,” said Gupta. “And step on it. The show’s about to begin.”

No response.

“We’re even. I compute—you wisecrack,” I said.

“Do these guys remind you of cops?” Gupta spoke softly toward my ear. “So friggin’ serious and they look at you like you’re guilty of something. I’ve got a cousin in New Orleans who’s a cop and even he relates to me like that.”

“And those guys have a higher crime rate than anyone,” I added.

“Well, almost anyone,” Gupta countered.

“Whose is higher?”

“Gangsters.”

The cart rolled around a circular drive to the entrance of a large colonial style beachfront house. There was a polished old red roadster parked in front—like something from the twenties. Gupta and I looked at it and each other. Two sinister seeming men stood by the front door, one short and the other tall. I said hi and they paid no attention. We were met and escorted inside by an elderly gray haired man with wisps of stringy hair on his eyebrows and ears. He introduced himself as Stan. As we went in Gupta said a big obvious “Hi!” with a wide waving gesture to the sinister men. He stopped like a statue when they didn’t respond. I told him to come on. Inside he asked Stan, who had already displayed some social grace, if these are Mr. Fenster’s goons. Stan said not to mind the “Twins,” that they keep quiet.

“Like the Queen’s guard?” asked Gupta.

“Like the Coldstream Guard, yes,” said Stan. He sounded English.

“The Twins, eh? Goony Twins,” Gupta said.

“In case you need to identify them,” explained Stan, “the short one is Halffoot and the tall one is called Shorts.”

“Why Halffoot?” Gupta asked.

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“He had an accident and lost part of his left foot,” Stan said.

“What sort of accident?”

Stan shrugged and ushered us into a spacious library with a log fire flittering in a stone fireplace.

I looked around. It was an eye-ful, had a traditional atmosphere with dark wood, paintings and photos and memorabilia on the walls, Persian rugs, overstuffed chairs. The most noticeable item was a large stuffed crocodile.

“Do many Australians have stuffed crocodiles?” I asked.

“Oh no.”

“What’s that about?”

“It’s just an old friend,” Stan said.

“And there’s a soccer ball,” Gupta said reaching up.

“Better leave it,” said Stan. “It’s his prize wog ball,” which he explained is what a soccer ball is called when it’s used for rugby instead of a proper footy.

So many books. “Doesn’t he live in Melbourne? Is this his *country* home? This is his *second* library?”

“He has more time to read and relax here,” Stan said and asked us what refreshment we’d like. We agreed on hot tea with milk. He told us to feel free to look around in the library, pointed to a door that leads to a WC, and said firmly to stay within those bounds.

Gupta adjusted his bifocals, picked up a magazine, and settled back in one of two overstuffed chairs on either side of an intricately carved jade chess set on a low table.

I snooped around with the books. Tons of literature I could see. A lot of old stuff. I picked out a book with a leather cover.

“Oh, it’s Thomas Hardy. *Far from the Madding Crowd*.”

“Isn’t that maddening?”

“Maybe to some sexists. It was feminist for the times I believe. He was a foe of Victorianism, a defender of the working class.”

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“No you idiot. Maddening instead of madding.”

“Obviously an error. I’ll send him a note about it. Oh yes—my high school English teacher said he was a fatalist. As I remember, he tied everything together so completely it was ridiculous. But it’s not a bad way to tell a story. Life’s not that way though. It’s full of loose ends.”

“You’re proof of that.”

One area was packed with all the big names in Western philosophy like Socrates and Kant. There was a set of the Great Books. Being there made me want to read them all at once till I remembered that whenever I’d tried to actually read that much I never got very far. Just couldn’t keep my interest up. It was such a relief to find Zen when I was young and realize I didn’t have to read all that stuff. Zen’s not anti-intellectual but it did give me something beyond words to work with.

Speak of the devil, I was surprised to find some books on Eastern thought—the *Upanishads* and *Bhagavad-Gita*, Zoroastrianism, Sufism, and Buddhism, lots of Buddhism—some old sutras from the Pali, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, *the Life of Milarepa*, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* by Trungpa and Trungpa’s *Shambhala: Sacred Path of the Warrior*. And there was Zen—translations by Blofield, Tanahashi, Taigen Dan Leighton, the Cleary brothers. Next to them were books by Van der Wetering, Pirsig, and Ken Wilber.

“Wow! Hey Gupta, he has Tazi John’s book, *The Light Inside the Dark!*”

“I’ve read one of these books,” Gupta said coming over and picking it out of the shelf. “*Manual of Zen Buddhism* by D.T. Suzuki. I thought at first that it was about an Hispanic guy who became a Zen master.”

“Wow,” I said, “*On Bear’s Head*, a compilation of Philip Whalen’s poetry. He became a priest in my lineage. I took Frannie with me to visit him at a hospice a couple of years before he died. While I talked to Philip she held the hand of a sad old Japanese man in the next bed.”

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There were many books on Chinese and Japanese martial arts. Several others by D.T. Suzuki. I told Gupta D.T. Suzuki wrote something like fifty books in English and about the same number in Japanese about Zen and Mahayana Buddhism and about Jodo Shin Buddhism. Especially as he got older he felt the self-power of Zen needed to be tempered with the other-power of Shin. Some Japanese had told me Shin was like Christianity in that you ask Amida Buddha to save you. It was said to be praying Buddhism—please help me. Then Shinran came along and made Jodo Shin, grateful Buddhism—thanks I'm already saved, already enlightened. D.T. Suzuki's last words, last public words anyway, were "Thank you, thank you." I said I like that approach and sometimes I say "thank you," as a mantra.

"Thank you to what?" Gupta asked.

"Just thank you," I said. "No subject, no object."

"What's the 'you' in 'thank you' stand for?"

"I don't know. Maybe I should just say 'thanks.'"

"Yeah, that's what your book's called. You're just advertising."

"Buy it now," I said.

"Maybe you should say 'thank Gupta.'"

"Yes, thank you."

"You're welcome. Hey—I'm going to go around chanting, 'You're welcome.'"

"I don't see Suzuki Roshi's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*," I mumbled.

"That was your teacher?"

"Right—Shunryu Suzuki. When people would get them confused, people who didn't know Suzuki in Japan is like Smith in America, he'd say D.T. was the big Suzuki and he was the little one."

"And then there's the Suzuki violin method," Gupta said. "He's the middle sized one."

"Hey Gupta. Here's an obscure one you'll appreciate—Leonard Koren's *Wabi-sabi: for Artists, Designers, Poets, and*

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Philosophers. Remember—wabi sabi—sadness and loneliness—sort of.”

“Oh yeah. Wasabi, the restaurant—WA sadness—the disappointed ravens—it all fits together. God man, I’d forgotten I was unhappy until you just reminded me.”

“He says a lot of good things about wabi-sabi. Here—Japanese don’t define it—they feel it—it’s central to their culture—it could be called the ‘Zen of things’. I want to stay here. I want to reread this.”

He can’t possibly have read all these books—not and be a crook. But I guess that’s not true. After reviewing in a flash all the Buddhists I’ve known, I am reminded you get a wide sampling of the human animal there.

I find a book on mazes and labyrinths and take it over to an easy chair under a floor lamp. “I’ll look at pictures while you read cartoons,” I said, noting Gupta was into a *New Yorker*.

The door opened. It’s our tea. And shortbread! Thank you Stan. We sit and sip and chew. I thumb through the mazes and labyrinths.

After a while another door opened, one that was hidden by books. A man stepped into the room. He’s thin, bald on top, and older than I’d imagined though I don’t know why I’d imagined—maybe seventy. He walked up to us and said, “I’m Bobby Fenster. Welcome. Call me Bobby.”

We introduced ourselves. He inquired about us straightaway. How was your trip? Fine. Do you need to rest? No. From America? Yes. Where? Gupta answered first.

“New Orleans? It’s not bad for America,” said Fenster. He said he was there once—in a hurricane.

I told him I was too, that I danced in it with my girlfriend. When Gupta said he’s in real estate, Fenster asked him about the market in New Orleans. Gupta said his job involves mortgages nationwide. Phone work. Mainly entails looking at formulas and credit ratings and hunting around for lenders who’ll take his clients on. But, he said he keeps

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up somewhat with New Orleans real estate. He thinks it's a market to be careful with though. He suggested to reverse the usual advice. When asked by Fenster what the usual advice is, he said, "Buy low, sell high."

"And why would that not apply in the Big Easy?" Fenster asked.

"In New Orleans you want to buy high and sell low," he said. Fenster looked perplexed.

"He's talking about elevation," I said. "Sea level and levies. There's a Randy Newman song about it."

"I don't know who that is, but it sounds like good advice," said Fenster smiling.

He asked where I live and I said north of San Francisco.

"San Francisco? Worst god damn place in America! It's over-rated. The people there are bums."

I told him that's why I live north of it and made a mental note not to invite him over.

He launched into a monologue on how San Francisco is where they killed Phar Lap. Phar Lap, Phar Lap, where'd I heard that I wondered—till he went on, saying, "Greatest athlete in the history of Australia." Oh yes, Phar Lap was the Australian race horse whose stuffed body had been stolen from the Melbourne museum—by Fenster according to Samo. Fenster had a lot to say about this animal. Phar Lap, the wonder horse, the prize of Australia. Phar Lap, whose name means 'lightning' in Thai, had won 37 of the 51 races of his career. Then he died mysteriously—in San Francisco. Fenster was convinced Phar Lap was done in by Mafia. As he went on praising Phar Lap and cursing San Francisco, I noticed a photo and painting of the horse on the wall near a framed headline of his American victory.

Fenster asked what I do there and before I could answer, Gupta said I kill horses for the Mafia. That drew a not-funny glare that transformed to raised eyebrows when Gupta said I'm a writer. I corrected to say I have written some with lots of help from skilled editors who made up for my lack of

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ability—and killed my darlings. He asked me what I write about and I said I've done a few books that relate to Japanese Zen coming to the West. He didn't recognize the titles, asked me to send him the books. He was ready to give me money on the spot. I said I don't sell books, don't keep extra ones. He can order them online, better yet, order them from the local independent bookstore. This man was not all bad. He wants to buy my books.

Some people want me to give them a book even if they have no prior interest in the subject. They think I get train loads of them for free. An acquaintance who has a seat on the stock exchange asked me for a book and I said oh gee I don't have any—I'd have to go out and buy you one. He said good. I said, oh you don't want to buy one? And he said no, that he liked to get them as gifts from the authors. I said I understood and asked him for a stock certificate. He looked at me like, are you kidding? But I don't get mad when people do this because I must confess that before I had published a book, I asked writers to give me their books. I had a friend who was giving me lots of free advice on software use. He'd published a big expensive book on batch files for DOS and I got him to give me one. At some point I realized what a foul thing I'd done and have tried to make it up to him since then.

I told Fenster he might like reading one of the books of lectures by my teacher, Shunryu Suzuki.

"What did he teach?"

"Hard to say. He emphasized practice, what we do, over what we say."

"So what did he do then?" Fenster asked? "Sit on his butt?"

"Yeah, he did that. But mainly I'd say he was tough on himself—and lenient with others."

"Sounds like a chickenshit."

"You nailed him."

"So how do you like Australia?" Fenster asked us.

"It's great," said Gupta, "especially the women, especially one woman, one woman who..."

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“I love it,” I said interrupting him. “I think the people here are great.”

“I think that guru Rajneesh had the Aussies pegged pretty well,” said Fenster. “You know of him?”

“Sure. What’d he say?”

“That Aussies are friendly, nice, insipid, boring, bland, uninspired and uninspiring. They’ll put you to sleep when they open their mouths. All they want to do is drink and lie on the beach and stand around their barbies. The most useless, tedious, dull, dreary, monotonous, hopeless excuse for human beings on earth.”

“Well,” I said, “Rajneesh put every nationality down. It was like a running joke he used to encourage people to let go of their attachment to national identity.”

“He was spot on with Australia.”

“Goodness, that’s not very patriotic of you.”

“I’m from New Zealand.”

“So why are you here?”

“Business.”

“What about Phar Lap? He’s Australian.”

“He’s a kiwi as well.”

“Kiwi?” said Gupta.

“You don’t know much,” said Fenster.

“New Zealander,” I said.

“That’s not an important thing to know,” said Gupta.

“You don’t know what’s important,” said Fenster.

“Submit, Gupta,” I said to him to stop a potential quarrel.

Fenster asked if I’ve practiced Buddhism and I said I came to the San Francisco Zen Center when I was twenty-one and have been a sort of bumbling practitioner since then. Gupta had to add I’m an admitted failure. Fenster got out of me that I was ordained as a priest though I told him my robes are all in storage now. He laughed—kind of wickedly—as if he were trying to convey that he sees through me.

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"If there's time," he said, "I'll teach you what all that is really about."

"Oh good. Thank you," I said.

I told Fenster I've been admiring his books and the room in general. He asked if I've read a lot of them. I told him I'm not a good reader but I've read some of them and into more of them. He asked if I've noticed the altars. I hadn't noticed. He took me to an alcove with a foot high Buddha statue—Thai maybe—a candle, ashes in a cup for incense, dried flowers in a vase—smart, don't have to change them, and a photo of the Dalai Lama with what looked to me like a Western Tibetan nun. He suggested I light the candle and offer some incense so I did. I told him I don't even have an altar. He said I should have an Islamic alter then—they're empty—no icons. He had one, a beautiful little ornate tile alcove in the wall by the fireplace.

Fenster was interesting but odd and intimidating. While we talked he looked us in the eye—whichever one of us he was talking to—looked without blinking and stood close moving in on our space, smiling and saying strange things. Strange things like, "Do you think you can cut off someone's head without generating bad karma?"

Without hesitation I answered, "I don't know. I don't know anything about karma." I noticed a Japanese sword hanging on the wall behind him and added, "but I don't think that would be a very nice thing to do."

"Nice?" he responded with contempt. "Life isn't nice, it's real. Now tell me—If I cut off someone's head will I have bad karma?"

"I guess, but it depends on the circumstance, the moment. I don't really know."

"Sure you know. You're a writer. You write on Buddhism. You're a priest."

"That means nothing. None of that means anything. I don't know more than anyone else. Asking me about truth is like taking a blind deaf mute primitive from the jungle, put-

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ting him on a New York Subway, and asking him to explain what just happened.”

“Aren’t you being a little overly modest?”

“It’s worse than that,” said Gupta. “It would be like asking the blind, deaf mute primitive to then create a coffee table book on the New York Subway system complete with schematics on the cars, engines, track system, electrical system, essay on the history of transportation....”

“Belt up,” said Fenster interrupting him. Back to me. “Is karma like god’s judgment?”

“Well, I think that the actual truth behind the words is the same, but the Hindus and Buddhists don’t use that metaphor—karma doesn’t indicate judgment, especially from an outside being or force. It’s cause and effect, balancing.”

“I didn’t think you knew anything about truth.”

“I don’t.”

“Yeah, he doesn’t,” Gupta said.

“Zip it.”

“Look—you’re demanding an answer so I’m doing my best even though I don’t know.”

“If I kill someone will I be killed in a later life?”

“That’s a mechanical way of looking at it. That’s for simplistic stories. To me the way it works is a mystery. There’s nothing predictable—but as Dogen says—you know Dogen?”

“The Japanese master?”

“Yes.”

“Not really.”

“You’ve got a book of translations from the Shobogenzo up there.”

“He’s difficult—profound, poetic. I’ve never read more than a paragraph at a time of that book.”

“Dogen says that you might see people who do bad things prospering and people who are virtuous suffering, but not to worry, that karma is as inescapable as one’s shadow. See—he didn’t try to specify how it works. It’s life—it flows like water, blows like air. To think we know how it works is

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just arrogance.”

“So I can cut off someone’s head?”

“Better to stay on the safe side. What about giving them a hat instead?”

“What if they’re spreading malicious rumors about me? What if they’re breaking the rules of the Buddha, the precepts? What if they’re trying to take what’s mine? What if they’re trying to kill me? What if they kill my friend, my dearest friend?” he said with his teeth gritting.

Wow. “Well,” I said, “those do sound like issues you’d have to deal with. But do you think decapitation is the wisest course of action?”

“Didn’t the samurai learn how to swing their swords through people with no thought and therefore no karma?”

“I was never into the whole martial arts thing,” I said. “Maybe theoretically what you say’s true. Maybe some people can do that. I don’t know. It’s not my life. It’s like asking me about deep sea diving.”

“It’s my favorite part of Oriental thought.”

“Deep sea diving?” said Gupta.

He paid no attention and went on. “You haven’t read the Art of War?”

“I’ve read it, but I don’t remember anything I can think of. Anyway, I’m a wimp. I didn’t go into the army. I helped people to stay out instead. I don’t hunt. I never liked contact sports. I’ve never been in a fight. I believe in surrender. All the men in my family have been like this.”

“You don’t believe in defending yourself or your country?”

“I believe in defending all beings. I’ve done a bit of environmental and peace work. I went into a monastery instead of the army. I think that helps to defend the country too.”

“In what way?”

“In ways I’m still learning but I’d say one thing is by not turning to violence, and another is learning not to live by lies.”

“Who tells lies?”

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“We lie to ourselves.”

“Who? Me?”

Samo’s admonition to be careful what I said came back to me. “I can’t speak for others. I don’t know what’s happening in their minds. I can only say that I lie.”

“You lie? You’re a liar? You’re lying to me? You’re not a man of your word?”

“You’re getting the relative and absolute mixed up.”

“So you don’t lie?”

“I try to tell the truth but whatever I say about the absolute I fear is not true.”

“So who lies about the absolute?”

Throwing Samo to the winds, “How about everyone including you and me.”

“I thought you only knew about yourself.”

“It’s a hunch.”

He laughed. Relief. It’s exhausting to talk to him.

We beat around the Buddhist BS bush for a while longer. Gupta was obviously getting impatient. Finally Fenster said, “So you know Rudy?”

“Yes, we know Rudy,” answered Gupta. “I thought you’d never ask. And we know Mindy. And we want to know where Mindy is.”

“Where Mindy is?” Fenster asked. “Is she lost?”

“She’s been kidnapped,” he said, “And we want her back right now!” He was speaking too strongly.

I barged in. “We thought that you might be able to help us find her.”

“Why did you think that? How could I help?”

“By letting her go,” said Gupta.

“What on earth makes you think *I* have her?”

“Who else?”

“You’re from America. Your friend gets lost and you come here. Why here? Why me? Who told you what?”

“Looked it up on the Internet,” said Gupta.

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“A Buddhist friend who’s worked with missing people suggested we come here,” I said. “He said you were an old friend of the family and might be able to help.”

“That’s true,” Fenster said. “I am an old friend of the family.”

“So where’s Mindy?” said Gupta.

“Let me look into it for you. Maybe I can find out.”

Fenster noted it was getting toward sunset and said we could meet again at dinner, assuring Gupta he would make some calls and see what he could find out about Mindy. This seemed to satisfy Gupta for the time being. Fenster had Stan show us to our rooms.

“Have a Captain Cook,” said Stan pushing the curtain aside. I knew what he meant and walked over. The sky and ocean were sharing stunning layers of marvelous reds and yellows. He asked if I wished to do email, opened a cabinet revealing a keyboard and large flat screen monitor. He added that when it’s turned on it’s automatically online. Dinner would be in forty minutes and he’d call for us.

Gupta came over. “He’s like Dracula,” he said.

“Who? Stan? I think he’s nice.”

“No, you idiot! Fenster! He looks like Dracula and that’s a Dracula door he came into the library through. The guy gives me the creeps.”

“Good taste though,” I said.

“A well-appointed room,” Gupta nodded. “Top drawer.”

I opened the top drawer of the bureau. “A sweater. Good call.”

Gupta walked to the window. I went online and was pleased to see Kelly had already sent me a new email telling about a mushroom foray he was organizing. I bragged to Gupta about how Kelly is an amateur mycologist and was pleased Gupta did not make the usual comment about getting high. That’s what people think of when I mention Kelly’s into mushrooms—psychedelics—that or getting poisoned. Actually, I was the same way until Kelly became a mushroom hunter and I

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learned there was a whole world of people out there utterly fascinated with mushrooms who are into them for more than getting high or poisoned. They're like birders—pure, not anthropomorphic or greedy in their passion. I brought Kelly and Clay up to date with one small omission—not getting into the kidnapping and gangster thing. That left the weather and... let's see... I told them some of the slang I'd learned and how a lot of it bounces off rhymes—like “have a Captain Cook look.”

Gupta sat at the window watching the ocean and sky further marbleize and darken.