



CHAPTER 18

STEEL METAPHORS

Over a dinner of poached fish, baked potato, asparagus, and French bread, Fenster said he'd put some feelers out for Mindy. Maybe tomorrow he'd know something. "You have your rooms already. There's a pool out back and a spa. They're popular in America. There's no closing time. Go jump in the waves. There's a putting green. Enjoy yourselves. Library's open too."

Okay. We accepted. Didn't have much choice.

"If she's been the victim of foul play," he said, "I might be able to help you get her back—as long as she's intact. But I know this young woman and she's quite capable of running off on her own—even of making it look like she was taken—just for the sport of it."

"Mr. Fenster," I begin.

"Please, call me Bobby."

"Bobby, if you can help us to get Mindy back it would

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mean so much to us and to others. We care about her and we know that Rudy cares about her a great deal. We also know that you and Rudy do not care about each other these days, but we'd like to see you put an end to your animosity. A lot of people would be happier and healthier and, I'm sure, wealthier if that happened. One way to accomplish this would be to help free Mindy who is innocent, a family member. She's not involved with business. If she's someone's prisoner please help us to set her free. If she's just playing around, having fun, then help us to find that out. I appeal to you as a man of wisdom and compassion."

He kept an eye on me and nodded seriously. I couldn't believe these words were coming out of my mouth and I was talking gangster business with a gangster. Where did it come from? I guess from the gangster movies I'd seen plus a slight Aussie twist. I was informed by Al Pacino and Frannie.

It was just the three of us in a big dining room at one end of a long table. Stan served heavenly cabernet. The talk turned to wine, which helped to soften the vibes between Gupta and Bobby. Eventually Gupta said he was wiped out and declined dessert and amontillado. He begged off to go to bed. Fenster suggested a little after dinner music first, assuring Gupta it would put him in a state of mind conducive to deep, peaceful sleep.

He asked Gupta if he's ever listened to Joan Sutherland. Gupta said he knows her name and thinks so. I said I'd heard her live. My mother's been on the opera board in Fort Worth forever and she took me to Dallas when I was fifteen to hear Joan Sutherland—before she was famous—Ms. Sutherland, not my mother. I was used to sleeping through the first half of the operas and just spacing out the rest, but Joan Sutherland kept me wide awake. It was indeed memorable. Fenster gasped softly and said that was her American debut.

Gupta said, "Oh—I thought she was a folk singer," which elicited a contemptuous scowl from Fenster.

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“Her last American performance was in Dallas as well,” Fenster said. “You didn’t happen to make that did you?”

“No, but my mother did. I was in Japan.”

“You obviously come from good stock.”

Gupta rolled his eyes.

Fenster opened a cabinet and picked up a CD. “Here she is in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, which set her career in motion.” Soon Joan Sutherland’s rich, expressive voice filled the room. He listened shaking his head reverently for a few moments. “Listen to this woman—she’s a genius. She had a natural gift greater than anyone else who’s ever lived or who will ever live—a divine gift.” Joan Sutherland continued singing and Fenster leaned back and listened. Then he sat up and said, “I’ve got a magnificent Doberman named Mars. He loves Joan Sutherland. He comes over and I play it for him and he sits and listens to her. Hear that voice! Every time you hear it, it’s like it was being sung for the first time. She is the best. She’s the greatest there ever was and that ever will be.”

Gupta was starting to nod and not in agreement. Finally Joan Sutherland came to a stopping point. Fenster let Gupta go to his room. Fenster urged him to sleep as long as he wanted. Gupta said goodnight to Fenster coldly and then neutrally to me, looking deeply into me with eyes that telegraphed to find out what I could.

I found out a lot—but not about Mindy. As Fenster and I sipped sherry, he told me about himself, being terribly forthcoming. Let’s see. He came from New Zealand when he was sixteen. He’d escaped poverty and an abusive immigrant German father. He started off running bets to get by and then got into selling stolen goods. Naturally he came to be known as Fenster the Fence, his first moniker. He saved enough to get a strip joint in Melbourne by the time he was in his early twenties. Then he bought a funeral home. “That opened up a lot of possibilities for me,” he said with a note of fondness in his voice, “And I ended up with a little chain of funeral homes...with...” he paused with a distant gaze and a

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slight smile of pleasure, “with crematoriums.” He turned to me. “Cremation is best, don’t you think?”

“It’s actually what I’m used to—though considering the number of people on earth, air pollution, and global warming, maybe a simple burial with the loved one wrapped in a sheet with a tree planted on top would be more environmentally sound. There’s an English society promoting that.”

“Nonsense,” he scoffed. “Didn’t Buddha say monks shouldn’t break the earth? Better to increase the intensity and thoroughness of the incineration—scrubbers on the stacks and so forth.”

“That would be good,” I said.

I assumed he has dipped his beak more recently into illicit avenues of income enhancement, but he only mentioned legit stuff, relegating all illegal activities to his youth. He said he’d invested some in the Aussie and New Zealand film industries and in one Hollywood film, *The Usual Suspects*, on the condition that a prominent character be named after him.

Recently, he revealed, leaning over and whispering, he has gotten deeper into the flesh business with porno sites on the Internet. “Whatever can be done out there,” he said, leaning back and making a sweeping gesture, “can be done better in a computer. But I still got the strip joint in Melbourne. If you come there you’d like it. It’s got class.”

He kept drinking. Me too. We were off the amontillado and onto the Irish whiskey. That was good. I can only drink so much sweet stuff like sherry, even the good stuff.

He said it wasn’t the martial arts that got him interested in Buddhism. It was an Aussie woman named Robina who had become a Tibetan Buddhist nun. “Not just a nun—more like one of their teachers. She wears the purple robes and shaved her head.”

“Maybe a Rimpoche,” I said.

“Yeah, that’s it.” He said she has a program for working with prisoners in Australia and with men on death row in countries like America that have the death penalty. He knows

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someone Robina ordained in an Australian prison. But he didn't want to get further into that and brushed it off saying everyone had a friend who'd gotten into trouble—like he was a normal law abiding citizen. That was her picture with the Dali Lama by the Buddhist altar. He'd heard her speak in Melbourne and said he has a movie on her made by her son. It tells about how she went from being a tough street kid in Melbourne to becoming a Black Panther in New York City, then an angry man-hating feminist, and then a student of a Tibetan lama in New York, and finally a Buddhist nun and teacher. Now she travels all over the world for her prison project.

"She's celibate," he said. She used to be wild. She told a story about some guys wanting to rape her and she just pulled off her panties, lay down in their car, and asked who's first? And that scared 'em off. Then somehow he got into talking about the pure quality of the vaginas of celibate nuns and segued into the smell of Joan Sutherland's nether regions, which he was sure were atomized with heavenly perfume.

He guided me to a walk-in closet, and what had he collected in there but costumes Sutherland had worn in different operas. With a creepy smile he invited me to smell the crotch area of a petticoat. I felt obligated to do so and said it had a delightful aroma though I exaggerated to please him. Then he had me feel the material of one dress and inspect the layered ruffles of another. He seemed hypnotized by the texture and I remembered Aldous Huxley's comments on the feel and gaze of folds of cloth leading to transcendent states of mind.

He, Fenster—not Huxley—took me into a room with a number of computers, scanners, printers, and such. On the walls were expansive landscape and seascape paintings. There was a young guy working away. "This is Sid," Bobby said, "from Sydney." If that's so, why isn't it Syd? I said hi. Sid turned around and smiled. There was a five count Rubric's cube on his desk. Fenster said Sid runs the porn sights with Mel from Melbourne where they're headquartered.

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“But it doesn’t matter where they are physically located,” he said, “they’re still always working together.”

“With Cy,” Sid said, “from Cyberspace.”

“Sid’s my boy,” said Fenster. “He’s added a whole new dimension to my life in the realms of both business and leisure.”

He had Sid show me some games he’d created. I’ve not been into computer games since the Ms. Pac-Man days, but I was happy to see what Sid was up to. We went into an adjoining room with a wide screen, very wide—like ten feet. There were comfortable purple corduroy seats with keyboards, earphones, joysticks, steering wheels, and mice awaiting the sitter. Fenster said the room’s for movies or games or even working on the sites. Sid put up an image on the screen with many little jagged pieces, a jigsaw puzzle. He had me try it for a minute, moving the pieces with a mouse, and then I saw “auto-solve,” hit that, and watched it piece itself together with a surprise unfolding as it did so—a delectable young lady immodestly attired—only toenail polish. He showed me games that worked with moving objects and revealed videos that lead to coital sequences to the extent to which one could solve some problems. Fenster said the next step would be in the area of inter-active virtual reality. He said in Melbourne he had a lab where technicians were working on a suit within a surrounding sensory cocoon that would give one the sensation that the virtual object of desire was actually touching one and touching in any way one can be touched.

“Actually I got this idea first from an old James Bond film,” he said. “There’s a lot of others working on it all over the world. It’s gonna get so good your brain won’t know the difference.”

Good lord, that’s just what I don’t need, I thought. Sounds like a trip you might never come back from.

They showed me puzzles that got more and more complicated—word jumbles, sliding block, and Rubric, which I’d heard of and new names such as tanedra, plainim, and

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chain-reaction. I told them I can't do them—it's just not in me. I have friends who've been into puzzles. There's a guy at Zen Center who can solve the word jumbles in the newspaper almost as fast as the answers can be said. I'd be sitting there with cobwebs between the paper and me. Fenster asked if I play chess and I said I don't like to—just not my trip. I used to play bridge but I'm too scatterbrained for it. But I read bridge. I try to read a bridge column every day. More if I can. Why don't I play it then he wanted to know? I get confused and it's stressful. Do you ask people who read detective novels why they aren't detectives? And why would somebody watch porno instead of being with a real live person?

"A lot of people are frustrated," he said. "It's not as easy as finding a bridge partner. And we're making it closer to the real thing every day."

"You're doing this because you care," I said. He ignored it.

"You liked that book on mazes and labyrinths in the library," said Fenster. Hey, I didn't tell him that. "Show David some of our cyber mazes."

Sid showed me a selection of mazes on the screen and I agreed to try one in the form of a traditional hedge. I chose intermediate difficulty because I didn't want it to take too long. It was fairly extensive and complicated, constructed so one couldn't see inside except where one was—not like looking down on a rat's maze. Using Gupta's method I bore to the right with my joystick and, sure enough, got through it fairly quickly.

"Well done," said Fenster.

"A wall follower," said Sid. "That's the best way for simple mazes."

"A wall follower?" I thought I was going to amaze them and they immediately had a box to put it in. "Simple maze? What other kinds of mazes are there?"

"Many," said Sid. "That was a two dimensional maze." He brought up a graphic of a three dimensional maze. It was like the 2D but with different levels. "You can wall follow this

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too if you treat up as northeast and down as southwest. And then you can get into higher dimensions and hyper-dimensions and there are a lot of other factors, which come into play in conceptual mazes.”

Good lord. I felt like a kindergartener visiting a college—not that I’ve ever let that hold me back. Asked them if they knew of the Maze near Perth. Sid had heard of it but Fenster hadn’t. I told him when we get Mindy back and I have time to mess around again I’ll take him there. Ha ha. Sure. I told them about a project Gupta had in mind to build a maze with hedges in planters on wheels so the maze can be reordered at will.

“Hey, that’d be good,” said Fenster. “You could let someone go in and then close it off. Nothing would work. Wall followers would go crazy. Keep that in mind, Sid.”

Back in the library Fenster poured Irish whiskey and we talked. He was getting a little sloshed, a little slosheder I should say, and started lecturing me who was getting sloshedest. “The only type of Buddhism that really works is the way of the warrior, the samurai kind,” he said. “It’s real. It’s about life and death. We’ve got enemies and we’ve got friends. We’re good to our friends and we pull our swords when we meet our enemies. We’ve just got to learn how to do it without anger. We’ve got to be clear about it. These people that go meditate in temples all the time think they’re getting all enlightened. Let’s see how enlightened they are when I cut their heads off.”

Uh oh—there’s that idea again.

He went on and on and started to repeat himself. He put down Buddhist priests as phony hypocrites and said they should be whacked. “They build empires so they can sit around and do nothing, get soft. It would be alright if they made samurais out of their students but they don’t. They make weakling devotees out of them.”

I asked him if he’s had any actual experience with any Buddhists this impression is based on and he said he’s met a

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few and can tell by what he's read in books. He told me how lucky I am to have run into him, that I could have gone my whole life wandering about in sissy Buddhism like a chicken with my head cut off—just can't seem to shake that metaphor. But now he's going to enlighten me as to what's really real about Buddhism—the ability to fight and kill (and maim I guess) without reaping bad karma. And who should be his idol in all this? The man whom he calls “the first samurai and a great Buddhist?” None other than the warrior mounted on a horse in a painting on the back wall of the library. He asked if I know who it is.

“A Chinese or a Mongol warrior?” I guess.

“The great Mongol warrior—Genghis Khan.”

“Oh.”

He then delivered a lecture about the greatness of Genghis Khan. “When you hear the name of Genghis Khan,” he said, “you might have an image of a ruthless barbarian with hordes destroying all in their path through overwhelming numbers. Not so. He conquered with inferior numbers through superior tactics. He was a great genius. He grew up in chaos—the tribes were independent and always attacking each other. His brilliant idea was to change the game. Rather than hit and run it was unite or perish. Those who joined prospered. The Empire expanded and eventually spread into Russia, Eastern Europe, India, and China. Kahn developed a sophisticated legal code. Those who didn't want to go along with him met the sword. Khan's army would kill every living being—all the people and all the animals—the babies, the dogs, the ducks—in a merciless, orgiastic blood fest.”

Fenster especially enjoyed detailing these mass murder sprees and said sometimes at night he awoke and lay in bed looking out the window at the stars and could remember riding into battle, into massacres with Khan, wailing out their petrifying battle cry and holding high sharpened spikes that bore the severed heads of their victims. Entranced, with eyes rolling slightly back into his head, he spoke nostalgically of spending whole days severing heads, gathering them into

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great piles, and then affixing them to the poles to be used in the charge.

“You haven’t gotten to the ‘great Buddhist’ part,” I said. “Where does that come in?”

“Don’t you see?” he said. “This man transformed the world. Where there was chaos he brought order, where there was crime, he brought law. At the height of his empire it was said a virgin could walk without fear for eight thousand miles carrying a bag of gold.

“And it wasn’t just that. Khan also believed in freedom of religion. He stopped the Muslims from spreading their religion by the sword and he did this by being stronger. Where Khan ruled, Muslims, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Taoists, Zoroastrians, Hindus, you name it—they lived together in peace. None could tell the other what to believe or to do. He preferred Buddhism and kept a Buddhist monk at his side through all the years to advise him and sometimes, I admit, to hold him back.”

Fenster went on about Khan, action and non action, life and death, form and emptiness, and enlightenment, which he thought he knew quite well. He made an observation in the course of his rants I thought about, lying under warm covers after I managed to escape and get to bed. “One thing a good student and a good teacher have in common,” he said, “is they only deal in questions they both know the answer to. The answer comes first, then the question.” That’s something to think about. I don’t know. Hmm. Wonder where he picked that up?

So I’d met Fenster’s four heroes—two women and two men, yin and yang, each of them represented on his walls among the books. There was Genghis Khan—the sword of order, Robina—the compassionate, Joan Sutherland—the artist become one with the muse, and Phar Lap—the ideal athlete dying young. To him they walked on the earth and soared in the heavens, each demonstrating a noble form and power he fairly worshiped. I feared his expression of their inspiration. I feared his rationalizations of any position. I feared he was

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one capable of making great errors of judgment, arrogantly confusing form and emptiness, where one takes a teaching for spirit and tries to apply it to the world—and vice versa. His take on things made me shiver. It seemed he could confuse mass murder with wisdom, war with peace. I feared he might make the Mansonian mistake, the grand delusion of so many rulers, conquerors, revolutionaries, and do-gooders, the Blues Brothers' calling card which reads, "We're on a mission from god."

This concern of mine had come up more or less. I guess a drunken comment I made had put an end to the evening's lecture. I stand by the content. It was the lack of discretion that was drunken. Fenster had gone to the wall and taken down the sword. It was a fine looking specimen with a carved handle, a little shorter than some of the Japanese swords I'd seen. He held it up. "This is the sword that cuts through delusion. It's the two-sided sword of wisdom and compassion."

"No," I said, "the sword of wisdom and compassion you couldn't find in the material world if you looked forever. You're making the mistake that fundamentalists make, that movie makers make—taking the metaphors literally. It's Taliban Buddhism. The swordless sword of Buddhism cuts both ways—wisdom and compassion. That sword is just a sharp hunk of metal."

Fenster looked at me with rage in his eyes. "Someday you may find a hunk of metal cuts deeper than your insipid ideas," he growled. A menacing exhalation, then with finality, "Goodnight!" He departed the room by the doorway in the bookshelves, turned before disappearing and said, "And if you write about me, I'll... sue you!"