



CHAPTER 20

SEEKING

So you turned pine needles and found these planted seeds. Congratulations. Now thrust through three blades above where one lives in leaf of glass and sneeze this which hales from the very first. If you can't swallow it, then think about what it is.

Gupta and I stared at the piece of paper. Nothing.

"Good lord," I said. "I guess the first one *was* easy."

"Where is that son of a..."

"Forget it man. We don't have any choice. Don't waste our time with anger. Okay?"

"OK. Let's go," he said.

Sid appeared just then with our wallets and keys.

I said good morning to him and he smiled. I asked where Stan was and he said Stan had a day off. The golf cart with plaid awning and serious driver was waiting.

To Find the Girl from Perth

“How’d you get this job?” I asked Sid.

“Met an associate of Bobby’s in prison.”

“What were you in for?”

“Hacking.”

“Oh. Do you know who Robina is?”

“Sure. She came regularly to my prison. I told Bobby about her.”

“Why can’t the others be as nice as you and Stan?” said Gupta.

“Takes all kinds,” said Sid. “But I wouldn’t recommend testing Stan or me.”

Zooming out of there in the Porsche, I suggested to Gupta that since we didn’t know where we were going it probably wouldn’t be necessary to risk getting a ticket speeding to get there. And we might be going in the wrong direction.

He complied. “This car wants to be driven fast though.”

“Seven,” I said.

“Seven?”

“Seven as in seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, zero, bang you’re dead.”

“Oh yes. Do you have to remind me?”

We mulled over the new clue. I tried to find some connection to Fenster’s heroes but nothing came to me. “This is a treasure hunt, Gupta. The guy has put us on a treasure hunt. I can’t believe it.”

“He is so demented. When this is over I’m going to go back and... and...”

“And get your head cut off. How about forgetting the revenge for now and let’s concentrate on the hunt.”

I took out the small envelope and opened up the note again. “Nice paper—a lot of cloth in it.”

“Would you stop that!”

“Okay. Okay. Let me read the whole thing over again first. *So you turned pine needles.*”

“Pine needles are just pine leaves.”

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“Sure. Double meaning—pages and Red Pine. So that means we turned the pages of Red Pine’s book. *And found these planted seeds*, which must mean that the following are the clues, the seeds that are planted. And *congratulations*. So all that we can put on a shelf for now. It just says ‘good going and here’s the next clue.’ Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Gupta said driving onward. “Dunsborough is the next town.”

“Check on gas.”

“Gas in Dunsborough.”

“And thanks for not looking at me while we’re talking.”

“Why would I do that? I’ve got to watch the road.”

“It’s what they do in movies. It drives me crazy. If those scenes were accurate there’d be all sorts of bloody accidents in the films and they’d never get to advance the plot. You can’t look away for more than a second safely.”

“I don’t want to look at you anyway. You’re not that attractive.”

“I think they do that cause they’ve found it’s too boring, not good cinema to have one person looking straight ahead concentrating with frequent quick glances at the rear and side view mirrors when they’re supposed to be engaging and involved in snappy banter.”

“Fascinating—now why don’t you snap back at that clue.”

“Okay. So this part is the clue: *Now thrust through three blades above where one lives in leaf of glass and sneeze this which hales from the very first. If you can’t swallow it, then think about what it is.* What could that mean?”

“That’s impenetrable. I’ll drive—you solve riddle.”

“Thrust through three blades. Stab with three knives? Three forks in a river? In a road. Maybe there are three forks in the road somewhere but I can’t look at the map while you’re driving or I’ll get sick. Reading this clue has taken me to my limit.”

“Inner ear inheritance,” said Gupta.

To Find the Girl from Perth

“Yep. But Kelly can read continually even on windy roads—so it skipped a generation.”

“Fascinating again, but he’s not here. We’ll look at the map when we stop. Let’s keep going. Three forks is only one remote possibility and we can stop and think about it if we come to a place like that,” Gupta said staring straight ahead.

We did come to a place like that. Gupta pulled into a gas station that was at a fork in the road with a smaller road to the side. We figured it could be seen as three forks. There was a store there where we got some snacks.

“Oh no,” said Gupta. “Look at this.” He picked up a tabloid with a headline reading, “More Death in Melbourne.” Inside there was a photo of a dead man lying in a pool of blood.

“Black and white blood looks scarier than in color,” I said.

“That could be us, man,” said Gupta. “It gives me the chills. And these guys are probably getting killed by Rudy and Fenster’s boys just for being members of the other side. Maybe they haven’t even done anything that bad. But we’ve done something bad. We’ve lost Mindy. We might even get tortured before they kill us.”

“It is frightening,” I said. “All the more reason to get on the trail of this clue.”

“Which road do we take?” he said.

“I don’t know. Let’s look at the clue again.”

“Three... three... Okay—let’s go to the next. *Above where one lives*,” I read.

“*Above where one lives*. Where does one live? In a house? In an apartment? Above a house,” he says.

“Overhouse. Outhouse.”

“What’s the name of that place where Frannie lives? Dwelling?” he scratches his head.

“Dwellingup! Dwellingup! Above where one lives!”

“Which way to Dwellingup?”

“Davo! Guppy!”

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“Why hi there!” I said.

Hug for each of us.

“What are you doing here?”

“Just happened to be in the neighborhood,” said Gupta.

“Frannie! Am I glad to see you!” I said.

“Come on in. How’s Mindy? What’s new? What happened to your mouth Guppy?”

“Hmm—we’ll get to that.”

“We’ve got some catching up to do,” I said. And then, looking down. “What are you wearing on your wrists?”

Frannie had been having a hard time. She’d been sad about her mother. Her vacation wasn’t over but she didn’t want to play. She’d been staying alone making necklaces and bracelets and hanging decorations with lots of little tiny beads and stones and stuff to sell at crafts fairs but the repetitive detail work had gotten to her—carpel tunnel syndrome. At first I was worried she’d cut her wrists. But that’s not like her. She’s not a complainer so I didn’t even know she had the carpel tunnel. She’d moved to working with larger objects and paint, activity that uses her hands and wrists in different ways. There was paper hanging up to dry she’d just pressed the night before.

“Used the lint you brought,” she said. “Getting ready to do more.”

While letting her in on what had happened to Mindy and the frightening peculiarities of our visit with Fenster, Gupta and I scarfed up the leftovers in her fridge. Then we slept for a couple of hours. We were exhausted but couldn’t sleep long with Mindy’s dilemma pressing on us. Frannie had been cogitating on the conundrum. She’d written it up on the door to her refrigerator.

She had a line going through “above where one lives” and had written “In Dwellingup” over it so that it read: *Now thrust through three blades in Dwellingup in leaf of glass and sneeze this which haes from the very first. If you can’t swallow it, then think about what it is.*

To Find the Girl from Perth

“How did he know about Dwellingup?” I wonder aloud.

“I know,” said Gupta. “Remember that first night when the four of us were at the pub and Mindy and Frannie started listing all the things we should see. There was Dwellingup and stuff near here on it. Maybe they took the list from the bathroom wastebasket.”

“Oh yeah, you didn’t want it after it had fallen on the floor below the urinals. Maybe they were watching Mindy and picked it up.”

“With latex gloves I would think.”

“Well, let’s see. Maybe that will help. What from around here would be on that list. I don’t have it. It’s with my stuff at the hostel. It’s with my email on the Internet, which you don’t have here. But I’ll remember.”

“Three blades, leaf of glass, sneeze, from the very first, can’t swallow it,” Frannie said, going over the parts.

“Leaf of glass sounds like a book,” Gupta said. “Whitman. The last one was a book. Got *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman?”

“No. But the library might. It’s tiny though,” said Frannie.

“What’s ‘from the very first?’” Gupta said.

“Adam and Eve,” I said.

“Aborigines,” said Frannie.

“Yes!” Gupta and I said simultaneously.

Striking and superscripting again we now have: *Now thrust through three blades in Dwellingup in leaf of glass and sneeze this which haes from the Aborigines. If you can’t swallow it, then think about what it is.*

“A book on the Aborigines,” I said. “What about *Voices of the First Day*? Where would that be? Library again. Bookstore. Or maybe in the museum.”

“Maybe so, but there are also Aboriginal blades—knives, axe heads and spears in the Dwellingup Museum,” Frannie said. “Maybe three of them together.”

“The Dwellingup Museum was on the list,” I said.

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“We’re on an anthropological quest,” said Frannie, “and we wish to see ‘three aboriginal blades.’ Do you have anything like that here? Blades, knives, axes? Anything of that sort?”

There were a few aboriginal odds and ends but nothing that filled the bill.

“Wait a minute,” said Gupta. “Three blades. Blades can be the sections of a leaf.”

She gasped.

“It’s not that big a deal,” I said.

“The Forest Heritage Centre!” she said excitedly. “That was on the list too!”

“Thrust through,” said Gupta as we paid our admission. “It doesn’t mean there are blades thrusting through something but that we go into the blades, the sections of the building are built like a leaf.”

“In leaf of glass—that’s the display cases. There’s something in one of them.”

He read the clue again.

Now go into the Forest Heritage Centre in Dwellingup to a display case... *and sneeze this which hales from the Aborigines. If you can’t swallow it, then think about what it is.*

“Now what can you sneeze if you can’t swallow?” I asked.

“I know,” said Frannie and we followed her running. A guard coughed as a warning.

“The snotty gobble!” she said arriving at a case. “The Aborigines used it for chewing gum. You sneeze snot and it’s not considered nice to swallow it—or gum.”

“And to ‘think about what it is,’ is to chew on it,” I said, “which is what we do with gum.”

There it was for the second time—a little sample of the curiously named plant in the glass case. “Weird,” I said, “this place was on the list we made at the pub in Perth, but not the snotty gobble. Yet, Fenster chose the one thing that struck me most here.”

To Find the Girl from Perth

“So where’s the next clue?” Gupta wants to lift the display case glass and look under the snotty gobble but there’s the guard at the end of the room. Frannie drops her brochure and while stooping to pick it up looks under the case. She reaches her hand in and tugs. I hear the faint sound of tape being pulled as she fake coughs loudly and voila! An envelope is in her hand.

“Who should open it?” she asked politely.

“Well you of course,” I said. “You won it.”

She does so as we press in. “Lovely paper,” she said unfolding it.

“See,” I said to Gupta who is not to be distracted.

And then she reads:

A man falls in love with a woman not just because of her beauty or learning but because of the tenderness she gives to frivolous things.

“Horrors!” cried Gupta. “Where the hell would that take us? We’ve got to find Mindy right away! She’ll be dead or Rudy’s gonna have us killed by the time we get through this joker’s treasure hunt!”

“Cool off,” I said to him. “You’re disturbing the guard. It’s not going to be impossible. It’s going to be something around here. Let’s go.”

“Horrors! Horrors!” Gupta kept saying as we filed out.

“Thank you sir,” I nodded to the attendant as he eyed us suspiciously.

Back at Frannie’s we couldn’t get anywhere with the clue.

“Let’s forget it for a while,” she said. “That’s what I do when I want to find something.”

“Let our subconscious mull it over for a while,” I said.

“I like that,” she said. “Our subconscious, not our subconsciouses.”

“Well I don’t know if it’s singular or plural,” I said.

“Or both or neither,” she added.

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“And I don’t know if it’s the subconscious or the psyche or brain or mind or angels or what,” I said.

“Leave it alone and it will come home,” she offered.

“Wagging its punch line behind it,” Gupta completed.

“I don’t know what’s happening but I always ask for help,” I said.

“By saying thank you,” Gupta added.

“That’s right Let me illustrate that with a song.” I picked up the guitar. “It’s called...”

“Lemme guess,” said Gupta. “Thank you.”

“Nope. It’s called *Francine*.”

“That’s sweet,” said Frannie when I was done.

“I played it for an Aboriginal buckster in Freo late the other night. That’s what he said too.”

“Sounds more like Mindy than Frannie,” Gupta said.

“We’re one and the same,” said Francine.

“Not to me,” sighed Gupta. “Nero fiddled while Rome burned. We sit around and sing while Mindy languishes.”

“Sing another,” said Frannie. “The muse will find Mindy for us.”

I played a song called *Thank You*.

“I knew it,” said Gupta lying down.

“Gimme the words to that last song, will ya?” Frannie asked.

“See you in my nightmares,” Gupta whispered turning over on his side.

Continuing to pursue the method of discovering through forgetting, he falls asleep. Frannie gets a blanket and gently lays it over him. She suggests I take a nap in the guest room, Mary’s room. I remove my shoes and get on the bed. She puts a blanket over me.

“Don’t need so much cover inside here anymore,” she said.

“Yes, it’s getting warmer.”

“No, that’s not what I mean. The house is warmer because of the insulation in the attic—thank you very much.”

To Find the Girl from Perth

“Oh yeah—and the ceiling here. It looks great,” I said gazing up at it. “If you’re into funky.”

Semi-woke to—what is it?—sounds like a little helicopter. It’s still light outside. Usually know the approximate time even half awake. Hmm. Say, five—an hour before sunset. Ah. Bed soft. Interesting ceiling—crudely textured swaths of plaster fixing the rupture that came at the finale of the insulation madness. Reminiscing. In Mandurah the salesman’s head shook—you can’t get all that insulation in your Mazda. Squeeze in trunk, shove in back, and Frannie waved triumphantly driving off with me pinned under two rolls sharing the front seat. Back home we unloaded the insulation, which puffed up beside the dwarfed car. Neighbor Sal said we’d found the circus clowns’ secret. At my urging, Frannie tacks a Do Not Disturb sign on the front door. We don gloves, respirators, goggles, and up she goes with mat knife, trouble light to hang, torch in hand. I hand up, she pulls up, fluffy unrolled bats. She works from the cramped edges, big me from the peak. Silent teamwork. Time passes. We’re three quarters done. A distant sound tugs—it’s the doorbell. We ignore it for a while but it won’t stop. Descending. Open door. Banger, beer bottles bulging in coat pockets inside and out staggers in and urges we join him to torch black boys in the bush. What? Frannie explains black boys are tarry grassy trees like Joshua Trees and they go up whoosh! Don’t do that, we say. We gotta work. Bad boy insists on helping. While he’s WCing she whispers how he lay around drunk and stoned for a year and a half and now wants to help. I say no, but she says a softhearted yes. He does okay for a while in the attic helping stuff the stuff between the joists, but approaching the finish line he loses balance—whaa! crash!—through the ceiling to the first floor. Light streams up into attic. Down-laddering into the guest room. He’s okay. Hit the bed’s mattress dead center. Luck o’ the drunk. It’s a mess. Sheet of rock hanging, battered, broken, white bits ‘n’ dust all over bed, dresser, floor. Poor Banger’s mortified. She says

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it's okay but time to go. I say all jobs have goof ups. He leaves with his tail between his legs. We turn in. Getting' that gypsum board fastened to rock hard jarrah joists next day was a bitch. Bent screws and broke screws from neighbor Sal, bent and broken nails from craft room. Finally pre-drilled for thick nails from hardware nook in general store. Respect for WA carpenters cemented. Plaster of Paris spread with kitchen spatula over first-aid-box gauze sealed up unions and cracks. And now there's a healed ceiling with character holding in the attic's thick coat of fiberglass and we're all toasty warm, me in bed gazing up remembering, smiling. End of nostalgia. Leaving foggy here and then for back to planet Dwellingup here and now. Whirring in my ears. Hmm. She's blending up stuff to make more paper, humming. Pretty. Sad. She sings.

*Take this lint and add it to
A basket of the shredded news
Blend with water, flowers, and glue
Oh mama—I'm losin' you*

*Here's a bead that I forgot
To string before I tied the knot
I'll put it in the bauble box
Oh mama—I'm losin' you*

*Take the kettle—water's hot
Earl Grey's waiting in the pot
Set the cream out, sugar, and cups
Oh Mama—I'm losin' you
Oh Mama—I'm losin' you*

I wander into the kitchen rubbing my eyes. Hers are red. Paper hangs to dry on string running over our heads. I hold her and we stand there for a moment and let the sadness soak in.

To Find the Girl from Perth

"I thought you said you didn't use glue making paper," I broke the silence.

"It rhymed," she said softly.

On the fridge I see the clue I was supposed to be solving in my sleep instead of remembering Banger stumbling through the ceiling. *A man falls in love with a woman not just because of her beauty or learning but because of the tenderness she gives to frivolous things.*

"This clue could have something to do with you, I think," I said.

"Me?"

"Yeah, your art. I appreciate all the little things you do. Banger does. Now Gupta does. I don't know. Any of your art downtown here in a shop?"

"Yeah. Are you saying it's frivolous?"

I walked into the living room where Gupta lay sleeping on a couch. A fire was going in the iron stove. "Let's go check it out. He can guard the fire."

Thirty minutes later we're back. "That's weird. It's something I've read. I know that quote."

"Me too," she said. "I read it recently—I can't remember."

"I can't think of anything from the list. I want to look at all the books here," I said.

"What's that gonna help?"

"I don't know. What else can I do? I think this one's from a book. I'm turning over every stone. It might help me think."

I went to the bookcase in her bedroom and squatted down. "Let's see. You've got your tarot books, some poetry. Don't rule anything out. I've given you a few—the *Botany of Desire*. You've got my old Lin Yutang Tao translations I left here."

"The worn one you said you wanted to read one last time tearing out the pages as you finish them?"

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"Yeah. Let's see. What else is there?" Some fantasy, crafts, a few novels. "Nah. Not one of these. Frivolous things? Where would I start? Where else are books? I think it's here—either in a frivolous thing or in a book."

"You're not gonna find a clue in here. They don't know anything about my place. They haven't been in here—I hope."

"I might find something that leads me to the clue. Anyway, I'm desperate. We have to go forward. Any books in the bathroom? No. God—maybe it's in the crafts room, the repository for frivolous things." I opened the door.

"Look what I found on the table out on the patio," she said holding up a book. "I'm sorry. I forgot. That's not good for it to be outside. You sent me this last year. I was readin' it yesterday."

It was Tazi John's *The Light Inside the Dark*. I started thumbing through it.

"I like his Zen," she said. "It's got a lot of warmth. Yours is so much nothing—no me, no you, no here, no there. His has got people and the world and feelings."

"He's a soul-man," I said continuing to look—and somewhat hurt at her estimation of my soulless Buddhism.

Frannie poured me more coffee. "Let's move to tea after this," I said. "I'm gonna get the shakes and diarrhea if I have any more coffee."

"What kind of tea you want?" she asked.

"Bingo!"

"Don't have that."

"Frannie! Here it is! Page 129! *A man falls in love with a woman not just because of her beauty or learning but because of the tenderness she gives to frivolous things.*"

"Oh wonderful!"

"But wait—there's no note." I kept looking through the pages then went out to the patio where she found the book. Nothing. I went back inside dejected. Frannie wasn't there.

"This is impossible!" I call out so she can hear.

"Here it is!" came her voice from the front porch.

"What the hell?" I went running out.

To Find the Girl from Perth

“Page 129. That’s my address.”

She pulled a small envelope from behind the solid block with a “nine” painted on it. “One twenty-nine Marginata Crescent,” I said. “Oh yeah.”

Back at the kitchen table. We’re sitting across from each other.

“You’re finding everything,” I said.

“I’m gonna be a private eye!”

She opened the note and then didn’t read it to me and closed it. “One question.”

“Okay.”

“Who put this note there? Who put the one in the Forest Heritage Centre? Are they dangerous people? Who did it? What are they doing in my house?”

“Somebody who works for Fenster. But it looks like he didn’t get in your house—just the back and front porches.”

“There was a man here this morning. Out front. I forgot. He was dressed up. Formal. He asked where the cemetery was with the motorcycle engine. So I sent him down there. He was English.”

“Did he,” I started to ask and paused for a moment. “Did he have much hair?”

“Not much. And it was gray. But he looked like a mouse with his really long ear hair.”

“Oh, then I know who left the clues.”

“Who?”

“Stan—Fenster’s butler. Fenster’s English butler.”

“An English butler?”

“Bobby Fenster’s butler or valet. He’s obviously putting the clues up.”

“He seemed nice enough,” she said, and again unfolded the piece of paper and looked at it. “This one’s strange.” She read it.

Not a cricket call, nor informer in need of bath, the void is, inside out, and under an old wet roof.

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I repeated it while looking at the sheet upside down and knitting my brow. “Well, looks as if Stan went over to the cemetery. The inside of the motorcycle is there outside. It gets rained on—wet roof.”

“There are crickets there,” said Frannie.

We ran over and checked the plot with the motorcycle engine encased in glass but could find no clue anywhere near it.

I sat down on the edge of the gravestone. “Hear the crickets?” she said.

“Not a cricket call,” I shook my head.

“Mozzies coming out too,” she said whacking a mosquito.

“What now?”

“We’ll think of something,” Francine offered with an optimistic determination. She was definitely on the team. I was glad. And I was stumped. Discouraged. I feared it would take forever to figure this one out.