



## CHAPTER 26

### SWAN RIVER

I don't want to go on this walk," said Gupta. "I want to sleep. I want Mindy to just come back without me having to do anything." He rolled over and hid under the covers.

"We've slept a ton. You said no sticking your hands in pianos, no flying, and no driving, but you didn't say no walking. It'll be refreshing," I said, looking at a map I got at the tourist bureau. "It's twenty kilometers by car, but could be more like thirty walking by the river."

"Thirty! And I have to go?" he said.

"Yes. Get up. And Gupta?"

"Yes?"

"Three."

"Three to go," said Gupta getting up.

"Three to go," I repeated.

"Three days till we have dinner with Rudy."

"Just the four of us."

## To Find the Girl from Perth

“Yep—Rudy, you, me, and—Mindy. She’ll be there,” he said in a monotone staring straight ahead and putting on a shirt.

I went back outside and joined Samo whom I’d been talking with for a while. We didn’t know what on the planet to expect from this assigned walk. Snipers? I had a mobile set to vibrate in case there was an urgent development. Samo said he’d not be far if we needed him.

We took off from the base of the Swan Bells Tower heading down along the Swan River estuary on a wide walkway. Soon we would see actual swans on the other bank of the river after crossing Swan Bridge.

“Lot of swans,” Gupta said, “black, white and titular. I just hope this isn’t our swan song.”

“I’m really glad to be finally doing this,” I said as we went along a marsh. It was so good to just relax and walk. “This is my favorite thing to do. I much prefer it, for instance, to shivering in claustrophobic paranoia in a cramped metal marine coffin.”

“Or frantically following psycho clues into oblivion.”

It was a lovely walk and a warm day. We passed wetlands, marinas, and the backsides and front-sides of upscale homes, condos, and apartment buildings.

While Gupta went to pee in a clump of trees I sat on a bench next to a well-dressed gentleman, a Mr. Huxworthy, who was friendly and talkative. He lived nearby and had worked for thirty years in sewage disposal. This is an area in which I also have some experience, having been involved with Zen and nonZen rural and remote communities and homes. I was somewhat familiar with septic systems, outhouses, compost privies, and aeration of sewage. Mr. Huxworthy was currently involved in the Woodman Point wastewater treatment plant on the southern boundary of Perth. It disposes of primary sludge by two stage anaerobic digestion followed by drying on open sand beds, the results of which are then used as a soil conditioner, an admirable arrangement.

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The solid waste disposal systems in Perth and the surrounding area are designed with the objective of preserving the purity of the Swan River. They are prepared for occasional huge rainfall that might flood the system and send impurities into the river. As a result, the sewer pipes are especially large and numerous. He said one could get lost down in that system.

Gupta returned from his minor waste disposal journey, found our conversation deadeningly boring, and said it was time to move on. So I bid Mr. Huxworthy good day, thanked him for, what was to me, a most invigorating discussion, and headed off with my fellow septic.

The sun was as high as it was going to get that day when we crossed a large bridge with heavy traffic. I was looking out over the wide expanse of the river at a cruise boat when Gupta clutched me.

“God! Don’t get me on the ribs like that!” I said shoving him back.

“Sorry, touchy,” he said. “I forgot. But something is worthy of your attention.”

“Okay. I’ve recovered. What is it?”

He turned and gestured to a large billboard ahead of us, which read, “Hi Davo and Guppy! Hope you’re enjoying your walk!” It was signed “The whole gang!”

“He’s sure going to a lot of trouble for us,” I said. “I’m beginning to feel that the strangers we pass are working for him.”

“The people in the cars too,” Gupta agreed.

“Even the disappointed ravens are reporting in,” I said watching a few of them calling from high wires.

A man standing at a bus stop followed us with his eyes. Children playing ball stopped to observe. Everyone worked for Fenster.

Thankfully it was a beautiful day and the smell of the air and the wooded area we entered combed the paranoia from our thoughts—for a while.

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We took a road that led to a dead end in a yacht club. We climbed up a steep embankment to the path above that we should have stayed on and at one point stopped to catch our, actually my, breath, and there, due to the steepness of the hill we climbed, not two feet in front of our faces, was a curious convex object planted into the ground. Was it an enormous dried flower with a multitude of desiccated petals? Was it a mushroom of sorts? A mottled stone? I started to feel it's texture when suddenly Gupta swatted my hand aside and I gasped, realizing it was a nest of bees. Cautiously we continued, hearts thumping, up and away from the hair-trigger hymenoptera bomb I'd almost absentmindedly triggered.

"Probably planted by one of Fenster's boys," said Gupta.

We passed through a park with an outdoor pavilion where people ate desserts, drank coffee and tea, and gazed through the trees to the river. I got cheese cake and tea and Gupta coffee and ice cream. The waitress told us our bill had been covered by a man who wished to remain anonymous. We looked around at the faces at the tables.

Continuing on we came to a bluff above the riverbank. There three Tibetan monks, easily identified by their maroon robes, caught my eye. They were sitting on a bench at an overlook, signs of Freo in the distant view.

"Let's go say hello," I said to Gupta. "Time for a rest anyway."

"Let's not," he said. "You should keep your eye on the prize."

"That would be 'eye on the pry', so let's pry."

"Ah Krishna," he mumbled.

As we approached the men of cloth, something about them seemed strange—the way they held themselves. I hailed them with a friendly "G'day." Two who had short hair kept their backs to me but the one in the middle with a shiny pate turned around. Oh! It was a woman, a Western woman. I could only tell she was a woman because her figure was too buxom for her maroon robes to hide. She was old, had a

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large nose, and there was something about that look in her eyes. I greeted her with a bow.

“Blessings to you,” she said in a quivering voice. Was this the famed Robina? I’d seen that photo of her and couldn’t quite remember.

“And the same to you,” I responded. Gupta nodded.

“Enjoying your walk?”

“Yes,” I said. “And what a lovely view here.”

“Where are you from?”

“The States.”

“Where have you been?”

“Just around WA.”

“And you?” she asked Gupta.

“Same,” he said looking away, not in a good mood.

“Have you heard the Swan Bells?”

“Yes—beautiful—to see as well as to listen to. In fact, we just walked from there.”

“Oh—quite a stroll. And the Maze? Have you been to the Maze?”

“Yes! Not many people mention that! But we have been there and we loved it.”

“Have you been to the Perth Mint?”

“Yes.”

“Would you like to go back?”

“Probably don’t have time.”

“Oh, I think you should,” she said with a lilt.

“Hey man,” whispered Gupta, “Let’s keep going.”

“Hold on there,” the nun said. “Would you do me a favor when you go back to the Mint?”

“I uh...”

“I’d like you to pick up a little something for me there.”

“She’s crazy man, let’s go,” Gupta said.

“Where do you live? I, I, I—if I go. What do you want?” I stammered, not wanting to be rude.

“Did you see the bar of gold they pour?”

“Yes.”

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“And the one in the clear case you lifted?”

“I lifted? Yes. I did lift it. But...”

“They would be nice to have.”

“Which would you rather have, the 200 or the 400 ounce?” I asked in jest.

“Both.”

This was weird stuff for a Buddhist nun to be saying.

“You’re not Robina are you?” I asked. No—couldn’t be.

“Yes I am,” she said. Wow. “And I’d be grateful for this contribution to my prison project. Let me play you some music while you think about it,” she said and hit the play switch on a CD player sitting on the bench.

“What the hell are you talking about?” said Gupta angrily. “Let’s go! We’re not going to...”

“Gupta, be quiet and listen,” I said, “listen to... Joan Sutherland.”

Joan Sutherland’s voice rang out majestically.

“Joan Sutherland!?” cried Gupta. “What the hell is this. Oh my god. You’re not... You’re Fenster. You crazy son of a bitch!”

The other two monks turned around. It’s the Goony Twins. They’re practically snarling in their monk’s garb.

“That’s goddamn Fenster in drag man—and with a fake nose,” Gupta said.

“I am *not* that man when I’m dressed in these robes! Now there is just Robina!”

“Just some friggin’ nut,” said Gupta.

The Twins lean forward and clench four fists.

We stagger back. “Be polite Gupta,” I said nervously. “Robina. Ah—I admire your work in the prisons,” I said to Fenster, uh to her, “A pleasure to meet you.”

“Okay,” said Gupta. “Nice to meet you. Let Mindy Go!”

“Listen to genius, you Hindustani piece of excrement. Listen to Joan Sutherland. She is the greatest ever. She had a divine gift.”

“I’m not in the mood,” said Gupta.

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“You be quiet. Why even the noble Doberman Mars loves to hear her sing. He comes into the library or wherever her voice is playing and he just sits and listens. Every time we are blessed to hear her voice is like the first time we hear her. She is the best there ever was and the best there ever will be. Now listen and appreciate greatness.”

“Have I heard that spiel before?” said Gupta. “It sort of gives you away.”

“Silence!”

The Goony Twins stared at us to insure compliance. The short one was fingering a knife. At least it was short. A couple walking by with a child looked at us curiously, the five of us standing still and listening to Joan Sutherland’s platinum voice soaring through to the treetops. After this aria was finished, Robina Fenster shut the CD off.

“It’s been quite a trip,” I said. “You have a complicated mind.”

“A complicated sick mind,” said Gupta. “A sick mind that...”

“Now now,” I interrupted. “And you created an incredible task for us. It’s been quite a trip. Now please, give us Mindy back.”

“First take another trip to the Mint—except this time lighten their load a little.”

“That would be awfully difficult,” I said.

“It’s your final task in the treasure hunt. Treasure for treasure.”

“We’ve had enough of your games,” shouted Gupta. “Give us Mindy!”

Fenster Robina stood up and pronounced shrilly, “I’m talking about bricks of the shiny Kalgoolie! And, failing that, an equal serving of sausage and mash—rhymes with cash! One hundred plus two hundred is three hundred.”

“We can’t. Are you kidding. We can’t do anything illegal like that—or dangerous, or come up with that much money,” I said.

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“Oh you’d be surprised what people can do if they’re motivated enough.”

“And if we fail?”

“Then you and your friends will be entering the next bardo, as the Tibetans say. Now listen to this:

*Kali takes while Shiva gives,  
With the smaller brick she lives.  
With the bigger she and Fran.  
With them both long live your clan.”*

Oh my god. Frannie. She *is* in danger. And what’s that about the clan? It’s not just Gupta and me anymore.

He-she reaches into his-her robe’s sleeve, pulls out a large envelope and hands it to me. “I work on death row,” Robina Fenster said. “Here are the condemned. I will ordain each one of them before they are executed.”

“Why? You’ve got plenty of money!” I said.

“For my prison project!”

“Robina’s prison project is to help people. She doesn’t hurt people.”

“Don’t lecture me! I’ll build my own prison! And you’ll help me do it! That’s why you’ll do it! For that and to test you and punish you if you fail the test! It’s a challenge! It’s karma! Be up to it or reap the headless fruit of failure. Thanks to me you’re going to see what sort of stuff you’re made of! I’m not poured into the wimpy mold of your meditate-and-be-nice Buddhists. I’m from the blood and guts school of life and death, act or be acted on! Prepare to taste the sharp edge of fate! I was a punk and then a Black Panther and then a man-hater. Now I’m a muscular Buddhist you must fear!

*Kali takes while Shiva gives,  
With the smaller brick she lives.  
With the bigger she and Fran.  
With them both long live your clan.”*

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“Couldn’t you integrate a little more ahimsa?” I suggested. “You know ahimsa? Non-violence toward sentient beings? Not harming? That’s Robina.”

“You don’t know Robina! She’s a woman. Yours is girly Buddhism! Bring the bricks to me or for starters I’ll go slicing through *your* friend’s pretty soft neck! And then the rest of you! Halleluiah!”

“God, he’s over the edge crazy for real,” said Gupta. “Let’s get outa here.”

“If you two wish to be able to go back home with something connected to your shoulders, then dare to do what no one has done—rob the Perth Mint! Halleluiah!”

We’re just standing there as if in a windstorm.

“Bring my treasure to the Amenity Funeral Home in Perth anytime night or day within three days—that’s Friday by sunset or it’s headset. Now have a nice walk! Halleluiah!”

As we walked quickly away, Fenster danced around in his robes wailing halleluiah while the Goony Twins’ cold eyes followed us.

“That Hindu poem, the Christian Halleluiah, the Buddhist robes, old testament punishment, cultish threats,” I said to Gupta. We rounded a bend and dashed off into the woods. “He sure mixes his metaphysics.”

“And meta-forensics,” Gupta replied.

Dusk was taking over for its brief interlude as we entered Freo. Suddenly I jumped and grabbed at my thigh. Oh, it was the mobile vibrating. Samo on the other end.

“What can I do for you?” I said.

“I think we know where Mindy is,” he answered.