



## CHAPTER 33

### PARTY TO CRIME

**Y**ou like the wine? That's a dynamite Margaret River Chardonnay." Rudy sat surrounded by five relieved and resting reprobates. Without waiting for a response, he continued his praise. "This golden nectar is one of Australia's very best which means of course about the best in the world." The man was jovial, enjoying his role as magnanimous host to his niece, her estranged hubby, distant nephew, and their pals. We were all enjoying his company as well. He loves to help others satiate themselves, encourages splurging on his largess. Good to be on his good side.

"Hey!" said Mindy who then playfully hit Gupta on the head with her napkin.

"Yep, she's real and really here," said pincher Gupta to me.

"You're supposed to pinch yourself to see if you're dreaming!" she scolded.

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Gupta and I were superlatively pleased and goofing. When Rudy's head was turned we made faces that conveyed subtle messages like, "We're here! We're alive! Mindy's here! Miracles happen! There is a supernatural power protecting us!" We were gaga.

Rudy's sun-glassed man Stevo was stationed at a nearby table sipping coffee, scanning the other customers and front door. I think he was a little extra nervous because Rudy wasn't sitting with his back to a wall. Rudy wanted us to have a view of the river.

"Is this the best or what?" Rudy went on.

"Excellent," I said.

"Better than best," said Gupta.

Gelar nodded drinking a non alcoholic wine. "Extraordinary. Better than any grape juice I ever had."

"It's not fermented," said Rudy, "so I pity you. You quit drinkin' too?" he said to Mindy.

"I'm thinkin' about it," she said. "Actually, not thinkin' about it—just not doin' it for a while. Thinkin' is what I had some time to do a lot of recently and decided I spent too many nights blotto—nights that were adding up to years. But don't let me stop ya."

"You're supposed to be the wild one honey," said Rudy. "Well god bless ya. And now there's more Leeuwin for the rest of us."

"We had a nice little visit to that winery, didn't we?" said Mindy, holding up the bottle and looking at the fine art on the label.

"Yeah, it was good," I said.

"Beautiful countryside," said Frannie.

"Oh yes—it was quite enjoyable," said Gupta.

"Better than that," Mindy said. "I'd say it was... ecstatic."

"We should have more contact with our American relatives," Rudy said. He lifted his glass, "A toast to our..."

There was a bright flash, as a waiter at the next table took a photo of a smiling birthday party of six. Instantly

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Stevo was out of his chair and had snatched the camera from the waiter's hand.

"It's okay," Rudy said to him. "It's a good day. There's no harm. Let 'em have it. It's okay," he spoke in a sort of "down boy" tone.

Slowly Stevo gave the camera back to the frightened waiter and returned to his perch. The birthday party-goers were stunned.

"Put their meal on my tab," said Rudy, then looking over at them with his glass raised, "Happy Birthday. Enjoy." They slowly raised their glasses, smiled, drank, and then gradually went back to laughing and talking among one another.

"Now where were we," he said. "Oh yes, to our American family."

For over a week none of us had much more than what food-on-the-go we could grab. That night we munched and wolfed like starved Kookaburras. The dinner was lavish and transcendently savory—thanks to Jessica's brilliant cooks, Bodhisattvic lobsters, and selfless crabs. Just being there at that table was like a dream—the sort of heavenly reward suicide bombers might expect to be reborn into, minus the seventy-two virgins.

Rudy asked what we'd done all August.

"Oh, nothing newsworthy," said Mindy. "Except for Guppy earlier today. We just traipsed about here and there. Let's see, we went to The Maze and got lost."

"Gupta's a maze savant," said Frannie. "He and Davo love conundrums."

"And we went to the Indiana Tea House," I said changing the subject.

"Rottnest," interjected Gupta. "The quokkas. Loved the quokkas."

"The whole experience was like—hmmm—one big treasure hunt," Frannie said fearlessly.

"What treasure did you like best?" asked Rudy.

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“The Ozzies of WA,” I said. “So friendly and loose—and, maybe like me, some of them are a little tiny bit de-ranged.”

Rudy smiled and grabbed my arm playfully. “What else you got to say about us?”

“I have a toast,” I said standing up. “They say the Eskimos have all these words for snow—sixty-five or two hundred—changes depending on the source. As with so much we’re taught, it’s not true. Its an Arctic myth. But what is actually a true anthropological fact is that the Ozzies have an uncountable number of words for, well for Schindlered, blind, blotto, pissed, Brahms and Liszt as well as Adrian Quist gutful of piss, mental, as full as a goog, canned, cot face, shit-faced, slaughtered, sloshed, soused, sizzled, stonkered, Molly the monk drunk! So a toast to our toasted hosts, the venerable boozin’ Ozzies, good mates who love a good time and who, unlike my ancestors, didn’t let the Puritans overrun their shores and spoil the party!”

Customers at the tables on both sides of us cheered with raised glasses as well.

“Where’d you get that?” asked Gupta.

“I been writin’ ‘em down in me wee notebook,” I said.

“When have you had the time to memorize it?” he asked.

“While you were drunk on Mindy,” I whispered.

Gupta scribbled something down and quickly handed it to Mindy while Rudy was at the loo. She read it out loud.

*Dear Mindy  
My friendly,  
I’m stupid.  
’Twas Cupid  
Made me do it.  
I Intuit.  
Love, Guppy  
Dumb puppy*

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She smiled broadly and kissed him on the cheek.

“Did anyone ever tell you that you were accident prone?” said Rudy laughing.

“You’re the first,” said Gupta with a forced smile.

Gupta’s bandaged and unbandaged wounds were an inescapable topic of conversation. All passed as results of the searing gold ingot incident that had been at the top of the news all day featuring that still shot of Gupta as he was rolled delirious into the ambulance. It was spread wide across the front page of next morning’s early edition, already out, and which Rudy held up for all to see.

“Aside from that, Mr. Gupta, how did you enjoy the Mint?” Rudy asked loudly, and leaned back guffawing.

Gupta needed more professional care. Back to his hospital bed and an overnight. Arm inspected and redressed, finger and feet attended to. The morning was spent largely in talking to members of the press making up all sorts of crap. When the curvaceous nurse from the day before came on duty she was puzzled by the new wounds as she didn’t realize Gupta had ever left. Techo dropped by to see how Gupta was doing and paid a bit of attention to her as well. Frannie got instructions on how to tend to Gupta’s wounds and we took off for Dwellingup where he was to rest up before our departure. He needed a place to repair including from injuries resulting from his madness with Mindy whom Gelar had gone home with after dinner. Frannie said I should take it easy too and I did sleep a lot the first night, but the next day I was obsessed with the idea of cleaning up and organizing three areas we hadn’t gotten to before—the laundry hut, the storage shed, and her cluttered, jam-packed art room behind the kitchen.

We got going with the latter—pulling its innards out—the paints, brushes, canvases, poster board, bottles of glue, bags of glitter, clay, wood, stones, normal tools and curious apparatus, books, pieces of junk, unnamable objects, half

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filled coffee cups, a vacant wasp nest. After a proper cleaning, throwing up additional shelving, dividing stuff into want and don't want, give and take, here and there, this and that, a painting to give to Sal and his old dog next door, it was all done and we stood proudly and surveyed our handiwork. On to the laundry room. It was all work and all play.

We took a break in the late afternoon and walked to the pub to graze on Emu with the local stock. Went shopping together and our rich friend Gupta bought the groceries but Frannie insisted on paying for her own lotto ticket, saying he shouldn't have to support her gambling habit. He knew it was bought in hopes of helping her friends in Mandurah. He bought her another ticket for good luck. I pointed out that by not buying a lotto ticket I got to keep the cost of the ticket *and* had the same chance as her of winning—if you round off the odds to the nearest ten thousandth.

Gupta spent a goodly amount of time reading on the rattan couch in the patio out back. His job was to heal, he was doing it splendidly, and the aches and pains had decidedly subsided. He didn't like the pain killers they gave him at the hospital so the bottle just sat there all lonely till Banger came by for a visit. Once Gupta got up to assist a couple of intriguing women of the woods who came down the dirt access road out back in a rusty old truck pulling a cart. They picked up the trash, recyclables, and sellable stuff gathered from all the organizing. Frannie paid them with *objets d'art*.

Two dreams came true on the last day there. We rode the Hotham Valley Railway and saw wallabies at sunset hopping along their way. That night we three sat at a blaze under the stars round the ring of volcanic rock. Frannie did another fire dance. We looked at the Southern Cross and its neighbors not seen by us up above down under.

Gupta and I took turns playing the guitar. Here's one I sang.

*Looking up above tonight—at the spread of brightening stars  
Hints of wonder that recite—how wonderful you are*

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*I love you for your eyes on me—I loved you from the start  
But in the end I love you friend—for you are pure of heart*

*Walkin' down the street alone—dog on leash that's trailin' free  
Kickin' long a bouncing stone—where once you walked with me  
I love you for your gentleness—I love you for your warts  
But in the end I love you friend—for you are pure of heart*

*Pen on paper light from lamp—stomach's growlin' goes unheard  
Late and tired dear here I am—a wrappin' up these words  
I love you for your mischief—I love you for your art  
But why I still hold to this torch—is you are pure of heart  
But why I still hold to this torch—is you are pure of heart*

We left early the next morning. Freddy was sleeping in the bed on the porch. Hmm. Never met him.

On the way to Perth we visited Simon and he joined us in a game of catch. All Gupta could do was chase the ball and kick it back to one of us. Then we played a game where we'd give Simon a subject and he'd draw it. He was quick. I got a 1937 LaSalle Hearse on Google Image search and he whipped one right out. He did about forty sketches including one of Frannie and friends saying g'bye to Gupta and me at the airport down a long hallway.

Hours before takeoff. Party down. While a cool and versatile quartet serenaded us with rock, swing, jazz, and country tunes, the treasure hunt gang surrounded a nightclub table, celebrating our monumental and accidental success. Bonded and bound, in high spirits to be all together for surely this one last time. Moving around the table, there's Techo, Samo, Gelar, Mindy, Gupta, Frannie, and me. The first hour of the gala was ours with more mates invited following that. With the minute hand creeping close to the top, Frannie excused herself, saying she'd be back in a jiff. As soon as she was gone, Gupta announced he'd something to bring up quickly before the others arrived.

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Mai came in about the time our little private chat was over. She asked what we were all huddled together about and I said it was a secret. Mindy jumped up, ran to her, and they hugged. It turns out they'd met at the restaurant at the Swan Brewery just after Mindy escaped. It was Mai and family who had given Mindy sanctuary at their table and a ride into the center of town. The blonde nurse from the hospital joined Techo. I'd invited Ian but he had to be with his Freo zazen group. Slim from the Northbridge Hostel came with a French woman who was staying there. Frannie came back in with her new friend Gecko, the fellow whom she'd met selling his crafts in front of the bank, the president of which arrived as well—Vargas. He was all blown away to be at a party with Ross. Ross wasn't there yet though. I knew he probably wouldn't make it because he was in the studio recording and we'd already seen each other earlier—had lunch at a Chinese restaurant in Northbridge. I had assured Vargas that Ross would be forever grateful for his role in sparing him from the grips of the terrorists, but reminded him he could never mention it for reasons of international security. He nodded in utmost seriousness. I introduced bachelor Vargas to single Mai. It turned out she was also interested in tango dancing. Maybe he'll like her dolls and she'll end up living here near her sister.

In terms of coupling, Mindy'd definitely softened up to Gelar. They had the vibes of a new item more than a failed marriage. Gelar, who'd always been fairly quiet, got down on his knees before Mindy, opened up his shirt revealing the tattoo he'd acquired on his chest years before, and dramatically stated for all to hear, "Oh Bluey, take me back! See—I love you always! It's still there branded on my heart. Melinda! And I'll *never* find another Melinda like you. You're the best of 'em all!" She grabbed him and they smooched uninhibited before a roomful of eyes and sighs.

"Love a public pash," said Frannie.

"It's for the best," said Gupta smiling bravely.



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After Samo's wife arrived, Gupta and I were the only unmatched ones in our troop.

"Well, we've still got each other," I said.

"Oh great," he responded unimpressed.

I made up for my singularity by bringing over a funny older woman I'd been flirting playfully with at the bar. Can't remember her name but recall she was retired from a company that made pies out of marsupials.

Gupta was staggering around talking to people. He had no date so he played cupid. There was a fellow he got to chatting with who was upset because his boyfriend was mad at him. During a break, Gupta went into a huddle with the band. When they came back on, they said there was going to be a special song sung by a patron of the club. Gupta picked the mike out of the stand using his less wounded left hand with wrapped finger, and softly spoke in a dramatic deep voice. "Frank, this is a special song dedicated to you from Trenton." At a table near the front, one man looked at another. The band struck up a few bars and Gupta belted out *John Belushi Butt*. Afterwards the two men embraced and all clientele burst into applause.

"And now," Gupta said, "a little something for the one who is responsible for bringing us all together. And with sincere congratulations to Gelar for winning her back," he proceeded to whip out a thumping rock 'n roll song that went:

*A walkin' downtown, at a corner I found myself  
Talkin' to that girl from Perth  
There was a warm breeze, my darn knees about  
Buckled to that girl from Perth  
She took me drivin' in the country, sunny, bumpy  
It was somethin'  
Now I'm standin' alone, hand on the phone  
Thinkin' 'bout that girl from Perth*

*Those looks sorta started when our pals parted  
Talkin' 'bout that girl from Perth*

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*In the woods, on the shore, on the dance floor I'ze  
Stalkin' that girl from Perth  
Walkin' down the city street with her yin yang tattoo  
An' her bare feet  
Then I'ze sittin' here workin' on my second beer  
Drinkin' to that girl from Perth*

*She'll be in Queensland, hair full of sand  
Sun on that girl from Perth  
Or in Darwin town, she'll burn it down  
Look out for that girl from Perth  
I'll jet through the astral stream  
To get to that rascal of my dreams  
Now I'm drivin' along, high on a song  
Singin' 'bout that girl from Perth*

“Astounding song,” I said to Gupta as he sat down amidst enthusiastic applause from the besotted patrons as well as the band.

“Couldn’t have done it without you,” he said.

“A song for *me*. Thank you my hero,” and Mindy gave him a kiss.

“You guys sure have similar styles,” said Frannie.

“Only superficially,” said Gupta, “and I’m better. Davo’s terrible to play with. He has a bad sense of rhythm. He speeds up and slows down. He gets things discombobulated. But he’s got his good points.”

“We got a song from this guy,” said Mindy hitting me on the head. “It’s for all of you.” She jumped up on the stage and grabbed the microphone. Frannie joined her and they sang, starting off *a cappella*, the band gradually joining in.

*There’s a time to grieve, a time to groan  
A time to say I can’t make it on my own  
But oh, there’s a time it is known  
To say thank you*

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*There's a place to sigh, a place to cry  
A place to sit and wonder why  
But oh, there's a place in this life  
To say thank you*

*Here come the boys  
Makin' all their noise  
The gals get them to lay down their toys  
To rejoice to rejoice to rejoice*

*There's a mind that is lonely, a mind in pain  
A mind that somehow makes it through the day  
But oh, there's a mind on the way  
That says thank you  
Thank you*

We stood outside the nightclub in a light drizzle. Gupta and I were bidding last farewells to the fellow revelers not coming to the airport—principal among them, Samo and Techo. Ross had not shown up. Too bad. I wanted to say bye to him. Vargas was even more disappointed. One unexpected visitor was the Aboriginal buckster whom I saw sitting unobtrusively on some nearby stairs. He'd been there all evening. He wouldn't come in so we'd had a dinner sent out to him. Gelar went down the block for the La Salle hearse. It had been found on a side street not far from where he'd last parked it. Not a scratch.

Between the hugs and slugs, the friendly put-downs and pulling up of embarrassing memories, Gupta and I shared the limelight with some guys just a few meters away who were struggling with the task of holding ropes, lowering a piano from a balcony on the second, third, wow, way up on the fourth floor of the building. A truck had backed up to the sidewalk and was prepared to be loaded with what they told us was a Steinway grand. It was wrapped up to protect it from scratches and the elements, tied with thick ropes,

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hanging from two large pulleys protruding from the parapet of the flat roof.

One of the ropes was stuck and a guy was tugging on it. He got that fixed and they gave up some slack to lower the massive keyboard. Then with a loud crack! one of the pulleys broke loose and the piano swung down vertically, jerked, held, and rocked twisting and creaking. The crowd below backed up emitting gasps. The moving men were yelling at each other. One pulley was holding. The rope for the broken pulley was drawn back and tied off taut again. Slowly the piano was lowered to the sidewalk, a few of us helping it to land.

Our collective sigh of relief could probably be heard across town. Gupta gave the instrument an affectionate pat, and as he did, a BMW turning the corner much too speedily lost control, went into a spin on the wet surface, jumped the curb, and plowed right into the piano smashing it against the brick building, ripping it's covering off, snapping it's lid, and spilling some of its contents out. Gupta tumbled back and landed on the pavement. People screamed and jumped away, glass broke. We all stood in silence, agape as the dust settled. A piano string hanging from the side of the squashed grand was swinging in the air. The owners sprinted down the stairs and stood astonished looking at the results of the melee. The driver leaned, uninjured but in minor shock, on the steering wheel of his smashed vehicle which had bounced back a few feet. Our party stood stunned in the aftermath of the disaster, feeling new intense emotions that had switched from parting to coming apart.

Vargas put his hand on my shoulder. "Where is Ross Bolleter now that we need him," he said, looking with sadness at the ruined piano.

"A brilliant idea," I said to him. "I know exactly what you are thinking. Except this is not Ross's moment. This is yours."

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Vargas looked at me intensely. He turned with a sense of resolve, walked up to the piano, took a deep breath, and struck a key, then another. He reached into the crunched Steinway and plucked a string. When the drummer started whacking on the wrinkled fender of the car, the driver sporadically honked his horn and played with the radio—turning it on and off, changing stations—with a deft touch. Gradually this demolition symphony built and the band members joined in with found objects as they meted out the *just this* of the moment, the dirge of a great instrument cut short in its prime. Vargas smashed his fist on the broken key cover, stepped on a bent pedal, ran a hand down the traumatized strings, hammered the piano hammers. The owners of the broken Steinway seemed comforted—one clapped, one sang out. I looked at Gupta's watch. Time to go.

Gelar gunned the engine. Mindy hopped in. Gecko told Frannie to go on with her friends. I stepped on the running board and called out, "Good to meet you Gecko," and he smiled. Mai winked, the woman I'd flirted with blew a kiss. Bye Slim! Vroom, vroom grumbled the hearse. Gupta hopped up with me. Wild strings were sounded in dramatic dissonance, fender drummed. Two figures stood on the curb. "Samo!" We bow. "Techo!" Raised fists. "Love to all WA!" Gupta waved and I called, "Take care dear mates! Bye! Bye!" As the dissonance and random harmonies climbed to a crescendo, the hearse took off with us waving and blowing kisses, Gelar's ooga horn blaring in the finale.