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Iolango

Some moments are life changing, yet random. For example, a friend of mine met her future husband for no better reason than that he dialled a wrong number and she answered the phone. Now, why would that happen? Whether it is all fate, luck, or a ricochet in God's random plan, who knows? Yet when it comes to life changing moments, the last place I expected one was in the Excelsior Hotel toilets at a heavy metal concert. Who would ever guess that an act of compassion for a drowning cockroach could lead so far?

Now stop right there. Don't make that face, turning your nose up like that. Yes, I too wish this story had a more glamorous beginning. If only it had begun at a Frank Sinatra concert at one of those Paris restaurants you have to book a year in advance, it would have been much more convenient for me. But it didn't, and I'm obliged to present the facts as they happened.

The show was on at the Excelsior Hotel in Surry Hills, Sydney. The band 'Nevermore' was playing that night and I, a recent convert to their sonic assault, was warming up with a couple of drinks. My rigorous preparation for the show had already begun on the bus on the way in. I'd sipped discreetly without attracting the interest of the bored, balding bus driver whose life had slumped to the depths of working on Saturday night. How could he do it? Personally, I can't stand working when other people are enjoying themselves around me. Like that time picking up glasses in the Cremorne nightclub a few years ago. Never again.

The bus stopped and I got off in the back streets of Surry Hills, an inner city suburb once frequented by street gangs but now semi-respectable. Not knowing where to find the hotel, I asked some young guys in black t-shirts if they knew where it was. Judging by their attire, they were going to the same place as me. They gave me the brush off, which was odd, but then I saw it from their side. Here I was, alone in a Surry Hills backstreet, clutching a bottle of beer in a brown paper bag, with the first flush of my youth somewhere over the rainbow. It seemed that the lads took me for some kind of unsavoury character, and did not identify me as one of their own kind. It was a sobering thought, speaking strictly metaphorically of course.

Brushing off the slight, I simply followed the lads' general tracks, and before long the Excelsior Hotel loomed up above me, with many more black shirted rogues spilling out into the streets before the show. Through force of habit, I scanned the various displays of band allegiance on the guys' t-shirts. It was all fairly predictable, with the usual clues to personality on hand. A few conservative Megadeths and Slayers. Some more recent fare like Arch Enemy and Opeth. A faded, retro Metallica from the Justice tour. An inappropriate AC/DC. Great band for sure, but not really the right genre tonight. Then there were a few pretentious underground types wearing the shirts of bands no one has ever heard of. It seems a bit contradictory putting your arcane knowledge on show like that.

Inside the hotel, the support band were thundering through their last couple of songs. I decided that they weren't quite worthy of going deaf for, and headed off to the gents to relieve myself. The toilets weren't crowded yet. It wasn't like the chaos at one of the big rock shows, where you almost have to take a ticket to line up. At the moment, the toilets were almost empty, with no queue for the trough.

Metal fans are a mixed bag, but my impression from twenty years of attending shows has been that they are a decent bunch on the whole. There is also that sense of brotherhood, so that no matter what your outside story – whether you're a plumber or a doctor or an accountant – once you put on that black t-shirt, you are a brother. This view is perhaps somewhat idealized, and it only took a few weeks exposure to the Blabbermouth website to realise that metaldom, like most subcultures, is the usual cross section running from intellectuals to idiots. Still, you get that anywhere, don't you?

In the Excelsior Hotel toilets that night, I ran into a couple of the idiots, and was quite disgusted by the casual cruelty I saw that night. As I reached the urinal trough, I glanced down to observe a large cockroach all at sea, struggling between dry icebergs, floating in a sea of flush, and - most disturbing of all – being callously pissed upon by a couple of sniggering, drunken young guys. Caught between this triple hazard, the poor creature was floundering desperately, and its prospects of escape were grim. Even if it could somehow escape from its watery peril, it would still be trapped within the stark surrounds of the men's toilet, a windowless prison soon to be invaded by herds of stampeding drunken giants in black t-shirts, as soon as the support band finished their set.

I found myself disgusted by the pissers' cruelty. There was just no need for this weak act of inter species bullying. A drowning cockroach was an easy target and no mistake, but it would be good to take these two to an African wildlife reserve and see if their toughness extended to pissing on passing lions. I was almost as dismayed to note that one of the guys was wearing a Guns and Roses shirt. In the 21st century, there was no call for that. GnR were a decent hard rock band in the early 90s before imploding under the weight of their own narcissism. They'd blown the chance to create a great body of work by being rock stars rather than musicians.

When it comes to animal relations, I am no vegetarian, so my hands are not clean. These hands are bloodied, and I know it. Yet the guilt I sometimes feel is not strong enough to stop my acquiescence to this cultural norm. In all honesty, I wasn't much braver in the present situation. Although disgusted, I did not wade in throwing heroic punches at the urinals. I grimaced internally, but was not bold enough to rescue the drowning insect. In the macho atmosphere of a metal gig, I did not want to be thought either soft, or someone who sticks his hands into piss filled urinals.

The next moment, however, the two urinals left and returned to the hotel, and for once there was hardly anyone in the room. Just a couple of guys behind me at the wash basins. The poor cockroach was still struggling, more feebly now, as it faced its liquid doom. There would be no escape for that wretched creature. Unless I did something very simple.

Impulsively seizing a decent sized wad of toilet paper, I stooped down and wrapped it around the wet insect before heading straight for the exit. There was hardly anyone around, apart from a big guy standing by the door. I glanced up anxiously as I passed, hoping he had not seen my act of rescue. In this glance, I took in a Morbid Angel t-shirt, and was surprised by the look of extreme malice its owner shot at me. I brushed past him as quickly as possible, moved through the hotel crowd, and emerged into the cool night air. Behind the hotel was an empty beer garden with a few trees and plants around the edges, and removing the wad of toilet paper from my shirt pocket, I dumped the cockroach onto some dirt at the base of one of the trees. It crawled weakly away to safety.

Now that I was alone in the beer garden, I pulled out a cigarette from my wallet and lit it. When drunk, I sometimes perform such acts of depravity that would never happen while sober. Soon it would be time for Nevermore's pulverizing musical attack. I took a few quick puffs, slightly nervous in case the band started without me. There would still be a fair bit of jockeying for position in the crowd before the band's entrance, yet I was by now a veteran of moving through densely packed crowds at gigs. There are two rules. One: keep moving, don't lose any momentum you've built up. And two: let someone else do the work. Find someone else who's already blazing a trail through the crowd, and simply follow through in their wake when they've done the hard yards for you.

There's nothing like the start of a rock show. Those first moments when the lights dim, the curtain falls, and the crowd roars to witness the band's appearance. The sheer power of the manifestation of a supreme musical entity is always a highpoint. With a sudden sense of urgency, I turned, ready to walk back inside the hotel, only to be interrupted by a voice behind me.

'Wait.'

I had been sure the beer garden was empty, and turned around in surprise. A man was sitting at one of the tables. Some old homeless guy, it appeared. I ignored him and turned away. Who cared about him, when Nevermore were about to come on? But again he called upon me to wait.

He was dressed in a drab brown suit which looked way too warm for the time of year, so it was no surprise to see him perspiring freely. Even his clothes looked a little damp. And he was close enough for me to notice that his choice of cologne left a lot to be desired. It seemed that eau d' Urine was scent of the month in Homeless Guys Weekly. What a disgusting, smelly wino! Yet basic manners forced me to acknowledge him.

‘What is it, mate? I’ve got to go.’

‘Let me thank you first.’

The comment made no sense, and there was nothing this guy could possibly offer me. Nevermore would be on stage any minute, so I was about to turn on my heel for the last time when something very odd happened. The perspiration so visible on the man’s face a minute before seemed to dry up right in front of my eyes, and more dramatically, the drab brown suit began to gradually change colour. It lightened to tan, morphed into gold, evolved through red and green, before finally settling into a dull luminescent blue. The odour of his ‘cologne’ also receded, and I was standing in front of a handsome man in a blue robe.

‘That doesn’t usually take so long,’ the man said, ‘but I was exhausted. Without you, it wouldn’t have happened at all.’

In my twenties, I had a couple of times taken LSD, but I hadn’t seen anything as weird as this. Yet in hindsight – and this should give you some idea of the single-mindedness of the metal fan – what stands out is that in spite of what had just happened, the single thought over-riding all others was the need to get in and get a good position for Nevermore! So if this guy thought I was going to stand by while he drew me into some long winded conversation, he was much mistaken. I still didn’t know who he was, and to be honest I didn’t much care.

‘Good trick. Whatever you just did, very impressive, but I’ve really got to go. So whatever you want to say, you’ve got about ten seconds.’

‘You still don’t know who I am?’

‘No idea. Never seen you before.’

‘Until tonight, when you saved my life.’

I was starting to get it. The guy was a religious freak, and he was about to convert me, then ask me to deposit ten thousand dollars into a Nigerian bank account.

‘I am in your debt,’ he continued. ‘Through my long and hazardous lifetime, I have faced many perils and sometimes wondered how I would finally meet my end. But to come to such a dire end as nearly happened tonight would have made me a tragic laughing stock. Which was exactly what Elijinx intended.’

‘Who?’

‘Elijinx, my mortal enemy. We passed him on the way out.’

‘Out of where?’

In hindsight, I’m quite ashamed of my slow-wittedness.

‘I know you’re in a hurry, so I’ll get to the point. My name is Iolango. Elijinx and I are shape shifters. We live in the shadows of your world, the nocturnal realms. We can change our form to blend into the patterns of your planet.’

‘Change your forms – what, change your clothes like you did just now?’

‘More than that. We can change our bodies too.’

‘Change your face?’

‘Easily.’

‘Your race? Your sex?’

‘All of that was mastered aeons ago. There’s more than that. We have gone far beyond identification with any one species by now. We enjoy the myriad creature forms in this world.’

‘Really, so you can turn into animals as well. You’re having me on. Well, even if you can really do it, I’m still not paying any money into your bank account in Nigeria, OK? I’m broke, so forget it.’

‘We have no need for money. That is for you humans. But if we ever do need it, there is no problem getting it.’

‘Speaking of getting it, I feel the penny dropping. And you know what? Nevermore is about to start, and I think I’ll take the express route and bypass the sceptical inquiry stage. It’ll save a hell of a lot of time I don’t have. So tell me, do you and your pals ever turn into birds, or even insects?’

‘We do indeed.’

‘Are you trying to say that you are that goddamned cockroach I fished out of the piss trough tonight?’

‘Yes, and thank you for saving my life.’

Iolango extended his hand to shake. I began to extend my own, then quickly retracted it. Who knew what I was really shaking hands with?

‘So you people are some kind of magicians?’

‘Magic is only a word. It is technology really. Clarke’s magic, to use the words of one of your own kind.’

‘Oh yeah, I’ve heard that one. “Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” Arthur C. Clarke.’

‘Exactly. Anyhow, Elijinx and I have feuded for longer than I can remember, and tonight he nearly brought me to a dire and ignominious end. I would have been the laughing stock of our race. It was Elijinx who changed me into the cockroach and dumped me in the loo. I couldn’t break the charm while he was in the room. Watch out for him, by the way, you’ve made a foe there.’

‘My friend’s enemy is my enemy?’

‘Yes. Watch your back. And your front and your sides. Especially your sides. He’s very cunning.’

‘You mean that guy in the Morbid Angel t-shirt is Elij-whatsisname? I’ll keep an eye out for him then.’

‘He won’t look like that next time though, will he?’

‘Oh yes, of course.’

‘But you may still have an inkling. Look for the shadow behind the smile. A certain malevolence which can’t be hidden by change of form.’

‘What about you? Will I bump into you again?’

‘More than likely. But I’ve a gift for you, a gift that will offer some protection on your travels.’

‘What travels? I’m not going anywhere, am I?’

‘It’s up to you. You’re stuck in a rut. Give yourself the gift of freedom. Go and do something different, have some adventures. And take this, it will help you.’

Iolango handed me a small rectangular device. It looked like some kind of phone or tiny laptop.

‘That’s the Vortex Winder. It will provide you with special powers, a different one every week or so. Explanation will come at the time, when you require them. Then use them as best you can.’

‘Thanks, I’m sure. Very good of you. Now I hate to be rude, but I’ve got to GO! Nevermore is about to start.’

‘OK. Go and start your travels. Your random, surprising adventures. My people do not have a monopoly on shape shifting.’

That was the last thing I heard before I ran back to the hotel, where I made it inside just in time to find a prime position to see Nevermore and their opening song, ‘Enemies of Reality.’ Brilliant!