



Trouble

Look for the Silver Lining

Traveling solo needs a cheerful attitude. I knew that. Loneliness, boredom, safety worries, culture shock – I knew I could handle every anxiety with the right attitude. Ignore the negative. Dwell on the positive. Flirt with fate. Trust in the spirit of adventure.

Go and grow. That's the attitude, I told myself.

Right. The truth is that words of wisdom, however true, ring trite as bumper-sticker slogans when travel leads to trouble, which it sometimes does despite all positive thinking. Less than two months into my year-long solo journey my travel dream started to disintegrate with a bout of cold, harsh reality.

The crisis began in Bali where I crossed paths with my daughter Karen in Denpasar airport. Never had a daughter been happier to see a mother, I can tell you, but fate made a joyous reunion impossible. Karen collapsed in my arms, stricken with some sudden illness. Malaria, dengue fever, we didn't know what, but I decided to chance a three hour flight to the small, isolated city of Darwin in Northern Australia. There, at least, we could seek help in our native tongue.

Thankfully, Garuda Airlines let us on the plane, Australian authorities let us pass, and we managed to get settled in a hotel. Karen's condition worsened during the night, and I had her hospitalized for tests the following morning. With the diagnosis still undecided at the end of the day I left the hospital immersed in anxious thoughts.



I couldn't face returning to a drab, lonely hotel room. Instead, I roamed deserted downtown Darwin. It was about 7pm on a Sunday evening. A clammy, wet-season gloom hung in the twilight. My footsteps and the frenzied buzzing of insects hurling themselves at street lamps were the only sounds disturbing the quiet until two laughing teen-age boys emerged from a restaurant across the street.

Their gaiety intruded cheerfully on my melancholy, giving me a brief lift. They seemed not to notice my existence as they crossed in front of me then stopped to peer in a music shop window. One fellow, I noticed was about fifteen, tall and lanky with longish, fair hair. His buddy was half the height and pudgy, with short, dark, bottle-brush hair. Mutt and Jeff, I mused with a silent chuckle as I walked on by.

In a moment or two I heard the thumping sound of running footsteps and almost simultaneously, a whoosh of air, a tug under my arm then the clattering gait of the boys disappearing down the block into the nearest alley. My wallet! Gone! Driver's license, credit cards and about \$60 in cash. In less than ten seconds, I'd been ripped off and left standing in dumb shock, alone on the street surrounded in a sickening, dead silence.

It was my own fault. Walking with the wallet tucked carelessly under my arm made grabbing it as easy as plucking a ripe apple from a low hanging branch. Fortunately I hadn't been totally stupid; my passport, tickets and travelers cheques were secure in the money pouch around my neck, but that was little consolation.

There was no point in following the thieves; they were long gone. Shrouded in self-pity and helpless anger, I turned and walked woodenly back to the hotel, called the police and made a report before heading to my room. All I wanted was to obliterate the day's events in sleep. But as they say, there's no rest for the . . .

The moment I entered the room and switched on the glaring overhead bulb, a flickering movement caught my eye. On the wall, about a foot or so above the pillow upon which I expected to lay my sorry head, a cockroach waggled its antennae in greeting. Now I have faced cockroaches before in my travels without undue hysteria, but this Australian sucker was so big you could see the wicked grin on its face. Three inches at least, five with antennae. I kid you not! It's amazing how dignity maintains you through real problems yet abandons you over something absurd.

"Disgusting, horrid, thing!" I shrieked. "A sick daughter! Mugged! Now this! Why me?"

Twitching antennae dared me to come near that pillow.

I stood at the foot of the bed contemplating my options. Throw my shoe; no, lousy aim. Clobber it with my shoe; no it'll squish – shudder – all over the place. Worse, I'll botch the job, and it'll run right up my arm. Maybe, the old glass and paper trick: place glass over bug, slide a sheet of paper carefully between wall, glass and bug, then quick, run and flush it down the toilet.

Just as I was imagining a five-inch cockroach bouncing off the toilet seat onto and up my leg, the bug caught my drift and went into action mode. Antennae flashing, it raced down the wall to the floor in that zig-zaggy cockroach way, so you can't be sure if it's in retreat or on the attack. You only know it could easily skitter out of sight then reappear without warning somewhere on your person.

That thought was enough to set me in zig-zaggy motion too. With revived energy, I scurried and darted, determined to keep the bug in sight and at a safe distance until I could work out a plan. Before that happened the roach called time out and withdrew under the refrigerator – and I claimed the bed, but not the victory. I wouldn't be able to sleep now would I? Who knew what despicable mischief might be performed upon my body should I nod off. Knowing that cockroaches prefer the dark, I left the overhead light on and lay there staring malevolently at the refrigerator, spitefully aware that the brightness would allow neither the roach nor myself any comfort that night. I concentrated on staring, shoe in hand and primed to kill should the thing dare to appear again.

Suddenly, it was ten hours later. Sleep, blessed sleep had come despite problems both real and imagined. And if any insect danced on my body during all that time, I was blissfully unaware of it.

I awoke to a brand new day, not exactly feeling on top of the world, but at least I was refreshed enough to face come what may with a clear mind. Humor would help, but there wasn't much funny about a sick daughter or getting robbed. Nevertheless, had other passengers looked my way during the bus ride to the hospital, they might have wondered what joke caused a crooked little grin to appear on my face. Had anyone asked, I would have told them I was just thinking about a cockroach.

I wasn't immediately prepared to accept a cockroach as my partner in combating misfortune, but I had to admit our little *pas de deux* must have looked pretty funny. Karen got a laugh out of the story anyway. Later on with time and distance between me and the events of Darwin, I came to realize that the bug had done me a real favor, simply by providing a trivial pursuit to focus on rather than the weightier matters that might well have deprived me of the regenerative sleep I sorely needed. In retrospect it looks to me now that the cockroach had the starring role in this travel tale.

P.S. Karen recovered from a kidney infection after a three-day, \$1,000 hospital bill paid cash-on-the-spot. The two of us spent several more days in Darwin restoring our spirits and

reassembling our resources. Soon we were both back on the road resuming our singular journeys, a little bruised, a little wiser but once again eagerly anticipating the rosier side of travel.

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