

Entry number 2

A Long Story

As the plane taxied toward the terminal, the flight attendant announced we could use our electronic devices. I switched my phone out of airplane mode and double tapped its Be My Eyes icon.

The app executed with the automated announcement “Waiting for first available respondent”.

Within a minute an Indian accented voice said “Hello, I am Veda. How may I help?”

Veda was now seeing my environment via my phone’s camera. I told him I was totally blind, waiting to disembark an international flight at Brisbane International Airport and needed help to get to immigration and out to the taxi rank. With considerable hesitation I asked him if he thought my request was achievable?

“No worries mate, Aussie Aussie Aussie, oy oy oy,”

Inspired with Veda’s confidence, I placed the phone in my front shirt pocket with the rear camera pointing forward, unfolded my white cane and stepped into the aisle.

After a short wait, Veda spoke “Ok the people in front of you are moving and we are clear to go.”

The flight attendant, standing at the exit, farewelled each passenger as they turned to the door. But to me she said.

“Oh Sir, as soon as the other passengers have disembarked, airport assist will arrive and help you through the airport.”

Normally I would accept her offer but feeling a new freedom, I replied “No thanks” and followed the footsteps towards the door.

“All clear up the aerobridge.” Veda said as I stepped out of the plane.

The gentle incline levelled as I entered the terminal.

“Turn left, go with the flow.”

The sensation produced by moving within this human stream felt like that of uncontrolled sliding down a slippery slide.

“A little left... a little right... you’re doing fine” came Veda’s calm corrections to my path along the corridor. Suddenly a shout, “quick right!”

Hitting something with my left foot, I stumbled but kept my feet.

Veda explained, “Some rude bastard focussed on his phone cut you off. He didn’t even look up.”

With renewed attention I bounced along with Veda’s gentle corrections until another instruction flashed.

“Turn right 90 degrees. we’ve entered a T-junction. Maybe drift to your right until your cane picks up the wall.”

I continued, guided by the wall, but now expecting surprises.

“Stop, wait. Goodness gracious me. A tall blond, legs going way up and in a very short skirt has pulled up in front of you. She’s leaning up against the wall scratching her left ankle with the big toe of her other foot.” An ominous pause followed by “No, she’s trying to use that toe to slide a fallen strap on her left shoe back up over her heel.” Another intense silence followed by “Now, she appears to have given up with that approach. Both feet are on the floor and Oh my god! She’s leaning forward. Her skirt is riding up over her... Thank Krishna, she’s aborted that approach and is now leaning backwards trying to reach her foot.”

I waited breathless for the next instalment.

“That didn’t work. Her facial expression now suggests she’s contemplating yet another approach.”

The Sir Galahad in me awoke. I asked Veda to position me alongside of our damsel in distress.

“Sure, move away from the wall one step. Move forward. A couple more steps. Ok, she is an arm’s length just to your right.”

Nonchalantly, I asked her to hold my cane. Without hearing a word from her, I felt my cane being grasped. I squatted down, felt for the heel of her left foot, slid the shoe strap up and stood up.

“There you go. I said gesturing for the return of my cane.

A moment later she returned my cane and, in a stunned voice, said “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“You just did. I don’t want to hold you up, see ya.”

With a shoe secure on each foot she set off.

“Why did you dismiss her abruptly?” Veda asked “She was looking at you with eyes as big as papadums and smiling as though she was standing before the Taj Mahal.”

Without waiting for my reply, he added in a chastising tone, “You should have asked for her phone number.” And with his voice rising, “You didn’t even get her name”

There was no point arguing with him as I had more pressing problems requiring attention.

“Veda, I need to make a pit stop. Can you find a toilet for me?”

A few moments later. “Ah, I see one. It’s on the opposite side of the corridor about 20 metres just ahead. Veer left as you go forward.”

Right on cue the next set of instructions came.

“Turn left 90 degrees, Now turn right 90 degrees. Ok, one more turn left 90 degrees. We’re in. Number one or number two?”

“Number one,”

The confidence in his voice evaporated as he said “I don’t know if other patrons will appreciate your phone’s camera relaying their valued privacy to the outside world?”

I reminded him that my phone was in my shirt pocket and that nobody should even know its camera was active. Admittedly, our communication on loudspeaker mode may have concerned a few. But hey, this couldn’t be any stranger to those folks who speak into their phones while walking down the street, confusing hell out of me. As I was now getting desperate, I told him I would take the risk.

Veda began the instructions guiding me to the urinal with the precision of an air traffic controller.

“There’s a free one between two in use. Turn a little to your right and move forward. You’re drifting to your left. Ease a little right. Good, good your almost there.”

The familiar sound of my cane clinking the porcelain filled me with relief. But just as I got started, a distressed voice blurted from my phone’s speaker.

“Oh my god, the camera is pointing at the gentlemen standing alongside you. Please turn.”

But as following that instruction would have resulted in disaster, I place my free hand over the camera’s lens and whispered for him to be quiet.

A minute later and much refreshed, we were retracing my steps back into the main corridor.

Veda, spotting that red and white sign just before immigration asked.

“Duty Free, do you need anything?”

As we traversed the shop’s first aisle, Veda gave me a running commentary on his search for the Chivaz Regal I had requested.

“Ah, Bombay Gin, my favourite. That’s a very good price. Maybe you should buy this one.”

“No, I prefer scotch.” At the end of the aisle, he told me to turn right so he could survey the back wall of the shop. The enthusiasm in his voice suddenly escalated.

“Your green-eyed blond is at the checkout counter. She’s staring at you.”

I said “My blond?” and turned 180 degrees trying to refocus his attention back on the mission. Veda found the scotch and with my interest in further shopping extinguished, we headed for the checkout. After purchase, the next stop was immigration.

Stepping forward from the front of the cue, I handed over my passport, placed the sequence of thumb and forefinger presses on the designated screen and I was officially back in Australia.

One more stop at baggage claim before customs inspection. Veda requested a slow turn so he could find the screen displaying the carousel numbers for each flight.

“Got it. Yours’ is number three. Please turn left, a quarter turn and move forward. Take it slowly. This is a mine field, people and wheeled suitcases randomly scattered everywhere.”

With a few cautionary taps with my cane and Veda’s careful guidance, I arrived at the front of carousel three. Veda’s relaxed voice describing the items popping out the luggage tube onto the circulating conveyor belt lulled me into distraction. Suddenly the excitement in his voice surged.

“The green-eyed one is at the edge of the carousel about 20 metres ahead of you. She is reaching over a suitcase lodged between her and the one she wants. It’s just out of her reach. She missed it and is now standing erect with her arms folded. Frowning, she’s watching her case moving away and in our direction. Hey, I’ve got an idea. Put your left foot on the stationary lip of the carousel and with your hand feel the cases as they pass by. Be prepared to reach for a case just above one you’ll touch. But wait for me to give you the word. It’s just about here, three, two, one, now, the case above the one you are touching. Yes, that’s hers.”

I snatched the case off the conveyor belt and placed it on the floor beside me.

“Well done! Green-eyes saw what you did. A luxurious smile has replaced the frown of a moment ago and she is walking towards you.”

A few moments later, I was being thanked for a second time.

“You’re making a habit of saving me. Thanks very much.”

I couldn’t suppress a grin as I awkwardly wished her a quick pass through customs. The sound of her wheeling case faded into the background noise and I turned my attention back to the carousel.

“You didn’t ask for her phone number again. Are you mad?”

I reminded Veda about my case and after a brief sequence of instructions “here it comes, you’re touching it now take it.”

On my way to customs and a minute later I was in the express line. On the other side of the public arrivals door we turned right and began our now well perfected weave through a kaleidoscope of humanity meeting passengers.

“I see the taxi rank. Not far.”

Within moments Veda was announcing our arrival at the end of the zig-zag taxi queue.

“Guess who’s coming in our direction in the next arm of the queue. She’s spotted you, she’s doing something with her hands. We’ve almost reached her, and she is looking back up at you.”

I heard the now familiar voice greeting me and feel a slip of paper being pressed into my free hand.

“My phone number” she said as she progressed in the queue passed me.

“We’ve got it! I mean you’ve got it,” Veda proclaimed.

I placed the folded scrap of paper in my shirt pocket just behind the phone. A minute later I was at the front of the queue being greeted by the taxi driver who took my bag and ushered me into the back seat of the car.

“Do you want me to read the number to you?” Veda asked.

Deciding to extract that information by other means, I politely refused his offer and admitted this was only the second time I had used the Be My Eyes service. His reply shouldn’t have surprised me.

“Actually, this is my first job.”

I thanked him profusely before closing the app. The driver slotted in behind the wheel and turned to me.

“You’re blind?”

As his simple assertion sounded like a rhetorical question, I didn’t reply.

“Howdya get this far?”

That one wasn’t rhetorical.

“It’s a long story.”