

Obscura

by Mike Waugh

The crowd jostled to see the pot-bellied Indian as he rocked from heel to heel, waving his arms as if conducting magic. He presided over a long fire-pit, and the licks of the flames were a deep, emerald green. The gasps from the crowd suggested this was evidence of supernatural interference but looking around at the poor, uneducated folk around him, Jack wasn't entirely surprised. He remembered from his misspent youth how the liberal use of boric acid, found in modern insecticide powders, would colour flames without much effort. Clever though, the guy had clearly thought this through.

The performer waved his hands across the flames, summoning imaginary spirits from the dead. He starting speaking in tongues or an unfamiliar Indian dialect; Jack wasn't entirely sure. However, it was safe to say no one else understood a word of it. The performer's eyes seemed to pop out on stalks, as he rushed towards and retreated from the crowd like a one-man wave.

His arms swept across the crowd as he demanded total quiet from the crowd. They fell into a hushed silence, awaiting the next revelation. Jack, arms folded, looked around at the mouths agape, the punters completely hooked and he smiled. This guy was a true professional.

The performer then kicked off his shoes, motioned to the heavens and appeared to fall into a deep trance. Jack stared at him; the performer's face had the steely determination of a world-class athlete. Paired with the body of someone who'd avoided sport their entire life, it was quite a sight. The man then slowly, carefully and deliberately walked across the embers of the fire pit much to the delight and breathless amazement of the crowd.

Here in Delhi, Jack expected that this would have been met with more of a shrug, given fire-walking originated in India. Maybe those in big cities have lost their village connections, he mused, as the performer reached the other side to rapturous applause. Jack admired his showmanship but knew the truth of firewalking - so long as you walk slowly, your feet don't stay in contact long enough with the embers, which are already poor conductors of heat, and you remain unscathed. This gnarly little secret lay behind the success of all those corporate group workshops and team-building weekends. Everyone is blissfully unaware that physics rather than mind over matter is responsible, but so long as nobody digs too deep, and so long as no-one breaks into a run, everyone goes home happy.

The beaming performer turned to the crowd and bowed. He then dropped his smile, as if receiving a message through the ether and started whispering. The crowd leaned in, unable to make out his words. Jack, listened. "Nurt nod klaw. Nurt nod klaw. Nurt nod klaw." He said it over and over again, getting louder. He motioned to the

crowd to repeat after him who did without much encouragement. Jack joined in, “Nurt nod klaw!”. Whatever that meant. Jack spoke good Hindi, a smattering of Urdu and had heard a fair amount of Punjabi but didn’t recognise it from anything. He was lost in his thoughts when he realised the performer was pointing at him, encouraging the crowd to shout at him - “Nurt nod klaw!”. Jack felt uneasy. As the western outsider, performers often did this, singling out the foreigner for entertainment.

The motioning of the performer meant one thing - they were encouraging Jack to do the fire walk. The crowd’s rhythmic chants got louder; all they wanted was to see a foreigner do the same. Now, Jack thought about this for a few seconds. On the one hand, he’d do his country proud and he knew that proper fire-walks weren’t dangerous. On the other, he knew it only took a stray bit of metal to get mixed in with the embers to burn your feet irreparably. Also, theory was one thing, fire was quite another. Jack shook his head much to the disappointment of the crowd but the performer didn’t drop a beat as he turned his attention to another foreign face in the crowd, some blonde-haired gap-year kid with henna tattoos who took to the walk like a phoenix from the flames.

Once he finished to rapturous applause, the performer started shouting his odd phrase again - “Nurt nod klaw”, encouraging the crowd to join him. He then picked up a stick wrapped in muslin and set it alight, creating a giant firelighter. He then touched the pavement and whoosh! Words appeared like magic, burning in the ground. “Nurt nod

klaw". A round of applause and whooping, the crowd had reached peak fever. Jack laughed - a magnificent trick; even though it appeared he had just chosen a random patch of land to begin his performance, he must have prepped the area and laid down some flammable accelerant on ground beforehand. Ingenious.

With the expert timing of someone who'd done this a thousand times before, the performer ran around the crowd scooping up donations. Everyone who gave a coin received a little bow. Everyone who gave a note received a bow and a little business card. Jack threw in 20 rupees and met the performer's eyes. His eyes bored down on him, his frivolity seemed to melt away and he pressed the card in Jack's hand and leant in. "Nurt nod klaw". He said it like Jack should have understood the importance of it, even though it was as meaningless as it ever had been. Jack rotated the card around in his hand which was embossed with the same phrase together with a picture of the performer's jolly face superimposed against a thunderbolt.

It was three weeks later when the accident happened. Jack arrived back at dusk to his guest-house and it was ablaze. Later, they would discover that it had started in his room on the first floor, the fault having been narrowed down to the decades old brittle electrical wiring. Right now, Jack watched the billows of smoke, the shouts, the screams. Amongst the chaos and shouts of men motioning to bring water, he felt a surge of calm

wash over him, and began walking into the hotel. People tried to physically restrain him, but he brushed them aside. They shouted, women screamed, as Jack entered the flames of the building and headed for the first floor.

The fire was at the other end of the corridor, and they say the heat would have been deadly but Jack seemed impervious to it. He held his breath through the dense acrid smoke, and made his way to a room opposite the fire. The timber groaned and crackled around him but all his focus was on the door in front of him. He kicked it repeatedly until it gave way, opening up into zero visibility and a choking black cloud. Jack used the walls as a guide and edged slowly around the room until he could hear the unmistakable sound of the baby girl crying. She was swaddled in blankets, her voice no match for the sounds of creaking and crunching beams and floorboards disintegrating around them. It turned out she'd been left by her mother who had run off to a family emergency before the fire, without realising she was about to create one of her own.

Jack turned around just as calmly as he had come in, and walked out. The crowd were going wild outside, shouting and screaming as he handed the child over to a waiting ambulance driver.

Jack sipped on the coffee. Less than forty minutes ago, he had walked through searing heat and rescued a child, but now he struggled to remember exactly why he did what he did. Or even how he knew. His brain turned and tumbled, searching for answers, for logic inside the fog of irrationality. The bill arrived and he pulled out his wallet to pay and saw the business card from the firewalker. He pulled it out, rotating it across his fingers, sighing as the hopeful significance he wanted to find didn't appear. 'Nurt nod klaw'. Just then, Jack caught himself in the mirror, his face still bearing the marks of black ash on one side. He stared back at the reflection.

