

Gulzar
Haider

DISTANT THUNDER

THE place seemed big, dark and lonely. On worn out oak benches sat aging black Americans. A few uniformed porters with red caps and an occasional family with children lent some colour to the place. Every few minutes there was an announcement for a train leaving or arriving. It was all very different from my memories of the Lahore railway station.

Faithfully following the instructions I received from the Institute of International Education representative in Karachi I was lined up to buy a ticket. I vividly remember when the big clock on the side wall struck 2100 hours. It was the fourth of August, 1961 and I was in the grand hall of the Illinois Central Station in Chicago. Forewarned that the ticket clerk might not understand my accent, I had the name of the train and my destination written neatly on a sheet of paper: SPIRIT OF NEW ORLEANS to URBANA - CHAMPAIGN, SINGLE ONE-WAY. Every few minutes I nervously scanned my surroundings and assured myself that I was in the right station, standing in the right line and that all my possessions, passport and money were still with me.

'O Hello, are you going to Urbana also?', the voice was soft and friendly. I turned and, with a sigh of relief, nodded my head. I was not alone anymore. A short, plump, considerably over dressed young person was inquisitively smiling at me through a pair of owlish glasses. 'What part of India are you from?', came the second question. 'I am from Pakistan', I tried to correct what seemed to be an innocent mistake. 'Doesn't matter, we are all the same. Those stubborn and prejudiced politicians partitioned our *Bharat*'. While I was formulating sentences in my mind to defend the self-evident distinctness of Pakistan he carried on with obvious confidence, 'O, don't worry about these things. I am very glad to meet you. My name is Dhirubhai Karamchand Desai. I am from the city of Surat in Gujrat,

The White Mercedes



Mahatma Gandhi's home area you know! A great man of our times, indeed the greatest after Christ and Buddha...'. It started to sound like the ecstatic testimony of a true disciple. Patiently I listened to a great deal more and then in utter desperation I asked about his educational plans, hoping that we may come to some more immediate concerns. 'O yes, I am going to do my Masters in mechanical engineering. You see, I can get it within nine months doing only the course work. Then I am going for a second Masters in business administration which I can get in three semesters and a summer. I have a loan from the Mahatma Educational Trust Fund plus Sohasni's father is helping me. I do not want to be indebted any more than what is absolutely necessary'. Dhirubhai seemed to know his future as I have known my past.

There were still 90 minutes before the train departure and I suggested we go to the cafeteria. I took a coffee and tampered it with excessive cream and sugar. He asked for a glass of boiled milk. The lady across the counter, a big stern faced black woman with sweaty forehead stared down at us in abject wonder, 'We don't have no boiled milk here, honey'. 'No, not honey, madam, I want boiled milk, buffalo milk, you know?' 'What?!', she thundered as if someone had

asked her for rattle snake venom. The situation was getting ugly and I was embarrassed on our joint Asian behalf. My friend, however, was calm, collected and determined to reach his milky goal. Finally the manager had to intercede and Dhirubhai Karamchand Desai got a glass of boiling hot milk served at the table. A small but significant triumph for the reincarnate Mahatama.

We had hardly settled down in our chairs when I saw coming towards us a fashionably dressed tall young man. He took a deep puff at his cigarette and. 'O Hi, you must be new students. I can tell by your clothes and your luggage'. He laughed at his own remark. 'You must be from India and which part of Pakistan are you from?' I was amazed at his ability to recognise my nationality. He continued, 'My name is Ishrat Khan, I am from Lahore and have been studying nuclear engineering at Urbana for the last two years. My girlfriend has been doing a summer job in Chicago and I visit her every week. Come on! Relax! Don't blush. You will soon discover what I mean... Urbana is a big campus and there is something for every taste. You, *Mawlavi sahib*, can offer your prayers in the Union and you, *Panditji* can have your *pooja* at YMCA, while My Royal Highness, Khan Ishrat Ali Khan can hold my court at the Fighting Illini Bar... The train will reach

Champaign-Urbana at three in the morning but don't worry, my land lady's daughter will be there to pick me up'. And then lowering his voice to a whisper, 'She really likes me, she is obese and plain but who cares, I get special benefits from her'. Once again, he laughed at his own cleverness.

Judith Brown was there to pick up her Ishrat Khan who, she knew, had gone to Chicago to do some important research and had come back exhausted. At Ishrat's suggestion she was happy to take us to her house. We were kindly received by the elder Mrs. Brown and overwhelmed by her hospitality I quickly decided to rent a small room in her house the very next day. Desai searched for a better, in other words a cheaper, room for a whole week while he doubled with me. He finally decided that while the rent was three dollars a month more than the place he had found it was beneficial, for the first term at least, to rent in the same house as Ishrat because of his incredible resourcefulness on the campus.

Within a semester Dhirubhai developed an impressive network of friendships with his classmates, professors, Indian community and the Dean of the Foreign Students. He had three passions: highest marks in mechanical engineering, spreading of Gandhian gospel and meticulous management of money and food. From six to ten p.m. he locked himself up with his books. His wardrobe consisted of five dollar suits and ten cent ties from the Salvation Army surplus store and he never missed his glass of boiled milk before going to bed. In December he left us to rent a room with Dr. and Mrs. Sinha who gave him some reduction in lieu of light house work and occasional baby-sitting. Pandit Dee Bee, as he had come to be known among his friends, finished his two degrees exactly on schedule. By then he had become an important figure in the international students' affairs and was president of the Students' Council on Religions and Races. His farewell was hosted by Rev. John Spike of the YMCA where the President of the University, Bernard Robinson, made a special appearance to honour him as the most valuable foreign student in the past five years. I cannot forget that Saturday because the day before the Muslim Students Association had had an ugly confrontation with the Egyptian students as to whether the first Algerian national day was to be celebrated as the victory of Arab nationalism or Islamic movement.

Ishrat Khan had to marry Judith Brown and sooner than expected they had a daughter. These events turned his life upside down. It was a biblical return of the prodigal son with a vengeance. He grew a beard, became a one man Islamic theological seminary and a proselytizing squad on the campus. He left nuclear engineering and successively attempted economics, political science, history and comparative religion. He finally gave up on his studies and Mrs. Judith Khan gave up on him. In the custody battle he lost his daughter also. And he left for Pakistan. It was 1965.

Last Saturday as I walked past a travel agency on South Michigan avenue I was attracted by the bargain fares to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh advertised in the window. I was ill prepared for what I was to see inside. Ishrat Ali Khan with long greying beard and a *tasbeeh* in hand. A simple looking middle-aged lady wrapped up in a long tunic and scarf standing beside him. A bit on the side three young girls in Pakistani clothes with colourful scarves acting as token *hijab* perhaps to avert the wrath of their father. 'Asslam-o-Alekum wa Rahmatullah wa Barakat-o-Hoo', Ishrat stepped forward to embrace this long lost friend. The daughters impressed by the enthusiasm of this reunion greeted me in an orchestrated, 'Hi, uncle'. The father frowned at them and one by one they, with great difficulty, managed to say Asslam-o-Alaikum. The wife looked depressed and resigned to her fate.

We were completely engrossed in bringing each other up-to-date on the happenings of the past twenty one years. We almost simultaneously noted that a milky white Mercedes stopped outside the agency. A short plump, balding man with owlsh glasses emerged. He rushed in and every member of the staff stood up in awe and visible respect. He went straight to the back of the counters. The manager greeted him as if he was royalty and they both disappeared behind a door. Seeing the bewilderment in our eyes the girl behind the counter volunteered to help, 'That was Shri D.B.K. Desai the founder-owner of Mahatma Enterprises. Travel is just a small part of his business empire. He owns the Sohasni line of Indian fashion sarees. He is also famous in India for financing socio-religious nationalistic movies. But he really is an inventor and industrialist. His real fame rests on two out of his dozens inventions. His portable milk-boiling electric kettle. The traveller's model is

small enough to be carried in an attache case. And then he designed a lightweight, all terrain armored car that played a historic role in the Bangladesh war. Indira and now Rajiv have decorated him with the highest civilian honours. Lately we hear he is negotiating a multimillion dollar deal to supply Indian manufactured spare parts to the American automobile industry. He is a great man. We are all proud to be working for him'.

While I was still trying to digest all this, another girl came to the counter and said, 'Mr Khan your tickets are ready. The routing is Chicago, Amsterdam, London, Jeddah, Karachi, Lahore. The return is open. Our lowest fare, including the extra stopovers comes to 9,312 dollars. How would you like to pay? We have a very good credit system provided you qualify.' Ishrat Khan took a deep breath and in a very injured tone said, 'I thought we could manage in 8000 dollars. Anyway, the stopover in Jeddah is necessary and furthermore I neither take nor give interest. But please keep our reservations till Monday, I will bring a certified cheque'.

On our way out he told me that after leaving America he married his cousin to whom he was engaged from childhood. He tried hard but could not find a career that his in-laws considered respectable. So he returned and for the past seventeen years has worked for Illinois Central accounts department. His evenings, weekends and holidays are dedicated to the spreading of Islam. That now he and his wife save money to take the daughters to Pakistan every two years to keep them in touch with the Pakistani culture and Islamic values.

Getting a bit tired standing outside Mahatma Travel Agency next to the white Mercedes I invited all of them for a cup of coffee. The ladies seemed quite interested but Ishrat Khan declared, 'We have to go to Gary, Indiana for our weekly *Hadith* Study Group. Why don't you come along with us'. I politely excused myself. We parted after exchanging phone numbers and promises to meet again.

An unfamiliar sadness descended on me like a dusk fog. I walked another mile to have a coffee in the Illinois Central Station cafeteria. The place had changed drastically. The clock was not there anymore but a big black lady was still at the cash register. Ahead of me in the line was a short, plump young man with an Air India shoulder bag. All I heard was 'Can I have a glass of boiled milk?'

Suddenly I lost all desire for coffee. ■