

A Passage to the Midwest U.S.A. – Fly High to Chicago

G.V. Desani's A Passage to the Midwest U.S.A... appeared in the May, 1979 edition of the University College Quarterly, published by Michigan State University.

THE RHETORIC EXHIBITED BY THE AIRLINE WAS FULL-THROATED. The Boeing was to be my "... Palace in the sky ... hat rack, always exactly where you wanted it.... Cove lights, to be subdued to a mellow glow ... to merge into twinkling stars ... happy reminder that you are indeed flying through the stratosphere.... For the sheer pleasure of building a card palace in the stratosphere, your cabin attendants will provide the pack.... Your purser, in the jacket of hand-loomed silk ... brings you the menu ... with gleaming plates, crisp napery, adding to the flavor of each delectable dish served with a deft, unhurried courteousness...." They were providing eye-masks, sleeper smocks, hand fans and "... special arrangements for children in the toilets ... disposable nappies...." And fringe benefit such as, "... a letter, a note to catch a thought" and "we are happy to act as your post office in the sky...."

Tsk! Tsk! All this brouhaha over a Boeing! Felicitous phrase! Applaud me, please!

So, taking advantage of only one U.S. city stopping facility, I chose Chicago.... So called, it says here, from the Ojibwa *Shekag-omg*, "Wild-onion-place". No more bizarre than the palace-in-the-sky post office! ... The second largest city in the United States, Cook County, in the Midwest state of Illinois, also called the Sucker State, and named after the Illinois river and the Indian tribe of that name, and – it says here – known as the

Windy City, also the railroad capital of the world, also the meat-packing center of the world, also Beefopolis. Its motto, “*I will*”.

On the course of the flight, I recalled Frank Sinatra’s ardent “*Chicago! Chicago!*” and the piece dedicated to pursuing a *Stranger in the Night*, in the course of which he (Sinatra) wonders, “... What were the chances!” Intrigued, I asked, inaudibly, “What indeed were your chances, signore?” He concludes the song, not with a bang or a whimper, as T.S. Eliot had it, but with “... *Do be do be do...*”

Arrived at O’Hare International Airport and, via limousine, downtown Michigan Avenue, and found everything *up! uupp!* However, behind the world’s largest, tallest, etc. up hotel – outside of which I was dropped to await sightseer’s bus – *vot ve got here? A drab street! “Shmile, shmile, Ishmael!”* I am not contending with anyone, but my fancy, at the sight of such drabness, rises no higher than an exhortation to my invisible *alter ego* Ishmael, to *smile*, and an urgent advice to the folk in Bombay, in spite of it all, to “Fly high to Chicago, where the action is, my *babas!*” (*Babas!* Hindustani for *pappas*, plural of *papa*, and no relations of Earnestine Geghan *Papas*. I request audience reaction, a laugh.... I have planned a personal version of *Lulu’s back in town! My babas!* With a chorus of laughers. Nobody, but nobody, has thought of a chorus of *laughers!*)

Seriously, although I have a foreign exchange account – legal and declared to the Indian Foreign Exchange Control – it could stretch my dollar to about *four hours* of daylight in Chicago, with the evening spent at O’Hare Airport, and the night in the racing Boeing, back to Bombay.... Hazards of group tour fare.... So I was waiting outside the hotel to board a sightseers’ bus and it was so beautifully, but ever so beautifully, on time, to show me the “Second City” of the United States, the playground of the late underworld czars Al Capone, Drucci – also known, it says here, as Schemer Drucci – Bomber King Belcastro, Hyme Weiss, Machine Gun McGurn, Jake Guzik Truly, names of fantasy!

We stopped at an inn type hotel to pick up sightseers. A cosmopolitan inn, obviously ... “*Danke Schön!*” “*Grazie! Tack! Obrigado! Merci Beaucoup! Mahalo!*” That is *Thank you!* in several languages. They had these words on the walls, and said so in solid paint in Japanese script, too, “*Arigatto! Gozaimasu!*” ... and *Shoukran* (Arabic).... In the inn, in the men’s room – they call them *rest* rooms – I assisted a fellow sightseer, who held up his two-year-old close to the bowl, having unbuttoned the fly of his blue shorts, and heard him ask the youngster, “Did you find it?” He had ... and duly watered the ... er ... porcelain ... serviceable American euphemisms for a visit to the *rest* room are to go water the lawn, to cash a check, to find a heaven of refuge or rest, to go give a music lesson, go shoot a dog, go to Cannes (the watering place) and go powder the face.... Promotion for colloquial American!

Where was I? ... We picked up a family and – since the driver asked every member’s name – we had aboard a boy named Stephen, a girl named Susan and an English boy named Guy.... All three age eight to twelve.... We made two more stops and collected the rest of the sightseers. Our tour of Chicago would take about two hours and a half. (American usage is two and one-half hours.)

The driver – who was also our guide – speaking into the microphone about three inches from his mouth, and checking in the rearview mirror for audience reaction, addressed Stephen. “Steve! Did you pay for this ride? I asked you, Steve, did you pay for this *tour*?”

Children accompanying paying parents ride free. Stephen was heard giggling. “You didn’t pay for this here ride? Do I need you on this *tour*, Steve? Take another bus, Steve! You won’t? Dummy!”

“What is your name? Susan? Got to remember the name! Don’t tell me! Don’t *tell!* Don’t *tell!*”

“Tell me one more time! Tell! (Self-conscious laugh from Susan.) It’s Betty Jane? Florunce? Debbie? Do tell! It’s come back ... Su ... Susan!”

As we passed on, I saw a woman eating in a restaurant and a raccoon sitting on her head. Possibly a wig, or a hat.... We passed 300 Randolph, Showmen's League of America, a small and sorry construction dedicated to fab showmen of America.... We were proceeding to North Michigan Avenue – *magnifique!* – and this Avenue's a testimonial to or a commentary on the industrious few – the doers – and the slothful many – the non-doers, the consumers – not forgetting that Chicago was a mere frontier outpost of less than a dozen cabins in the year 1830.

“This here on the *luft* (left) is the Millionaires' Club....” We passed the Club, the Madinah Temple. Someone said, “It is masonic.” I saw the crescent of Islam on it.

“My name is Ben. Benjamin. ‘Ben, honey!’ ” the guide so addressed the microphone.

We stopped at an address and a young inspector briskly stepped in – to check the tickets and count the passengers – and forthwith stepped out. As the automatic doors of the bus closed behind him, Ben said of the inspector....

“... The only way this guy can get to college is by working in the summer. I am trying to teach him. (*Laugh.*) ‘Ben, honey!’ That's my wife bugging me! (*Laugh.*) ... On the *luft* is the Chicago river....”

We passed the Church of Christ Scientist, and the Executive House....

“Ball players live in the Executive house. Don't ask me who's in town, Steve. I don't know.... This statue here is General George Washington shaking hands with two financiers. (*Laugh.*) ... On the *luft* is the Marina City. The Illinois Janitors' Union owns it. (*Loud laughter.*) ... I am not Bob Hope....”

I didn't intervene. The *obvious* thing to say was, “... You can *Hope!*”

“... In this here Marina City, you have bowling alleys ... barber shops ... you name it.” He drew our attention to the Chicago

Tribune tower. He had nothing to say of Col. McCormick of the *Tribune*.... We were moving on, not too fast.

“If you have a question, just ask, ‘Hey, Ben, what’s going on?’ and I will tell. I have promised the boss.... Let’s make it a family affair....”

“Sex, race, religion and politics, I don’t discuss ... and don’t give me no trouble! Now where’s the other guy who didn’t pay? The English guy....” (*Giggles.*)

We were wheeling, working our way back and around The Loop, downtown Chicago ... and since the driver’s seat in the States is on the left, our tour was geared on that basis ... *left*.

“What have we here on the *luft*? We see here a *wumann*. A *wumann*? ... Is she a *wumann*? Has she a *wumann*’s ribs? Do you see a *wumann*? Do you see a nun? Do you see a nurse? I asked you, *do you see a wumann?*”

The children: “*No!*” (*Laugh.*) So much for the piece of sculpture the late Pablo Picasso gave as a gift to Chicago, a figure in iron, bidding defiance to its living women.

“... This here is a candy shop, Susan. *Goo.*” (*Giggles.*)

On the left was Marshall Field, Chicago’s largest store. His repertoire did not include, “... On the *luft* is the Field Marshal of *deeparthmenal* stores, Marshall Field.” Of the store he said, “Man, you have no problems. You will never find what you are looking for! ... Guy, don’t go to sleep on me! Are you awake, Stevie?” He gave a brisk salute to a party of Indian boy scouts led by a leader wearing a khaki turban. “... These here are my *cousins!*” (*Loud laughter.*)

“Will you buy me something tomorrow, Sue? Susan! I am talking to you, Susan! *Stee-phen!* You didn’t pay for your *tour*, Stephen!”

“...This here on the *luft* is the Board of Trade building.... Do you see the statue of Ceres on the top, Stephen? She is the goddess of grain ... I know my ideas! Ben is telling ’em boss!

That there is the place for trade – wild rice ... wild booze, wild goose. You name it! (*Laugh.*) ... On the *luft* is the world's greatest post office.... I'm telling 'em, boss!"

He referred to the Chicago fire. The subject elicited the maximum response. There were questions from the young and the old. The *dates*? October 8-9, 1871. *Area affected*? Three and a half square miles. *Individuals affected*? Over 100,000. *Estimated property loss*? \$200,000,000. *The origin*?

Says an American history book, "Origin of the *holocaust* is unknown." Says another American history book, "... But Mrs. O'Leary's cow, in the process of being milked, is credited with kicking at or upsetting a lamp...." (What else is interesting in this history book? *Chisholm v. Georgia* is interesting in this history book. The U.S. Supreme Court, year 1793, upholds the right of a British creditor, that is, Mr. Chisholm, to collect a debt from the State of Georgia. Georgia Legislature passes a law which, in effect, states that the federal marshal attempting to reinforce the said court's ruling would be guilty of a felony, subject to hanging "*without benefit of clergy...*" (Mr. Chisholm doesn't collect.)

"... On the *luft* is the place where the *holocaust* started. It is now Chicago Firemen's Academy. General Sheridan stopped the *holocaust* with dynamite.... Any more questions? Speak up? ... This on the *luft* is the flag of Chicago. The second star is for the *holocaust* started by Mrs. O'Leary's cow ... the fourth star is for the World Fair...."

"Stephen, I am speaking to you! don't you come to me with no *personal* problems! Go to the boss!

Putting down my notebook and pencil, I asked my solitary question. "Who is the boss?"

"Bossman Daley...." (*Loud laughter.*)

That laugh was earned. If Stephen, who, unwittingly, was serving as a foil for a comic, had a *personal* problem – sightseers' buses not equipped with *rest* rooms – Stephen was

not to apply to Ben for aid and comfort but beckon the boss himself, the former Mayor of Chicago, the late Hon. Richard Joseph Daley ... still very much a living symbol of politics, power and governance.

A voice: "He might hear about you...."

"I hope he does. I am bugging him! ... On the *luft* is the statue of a man who died very stupid! He said, 'I am glad the bullet hit me and not the President!' *Stoopid!* I would have said, when this here bullet hit me, '... *Uh!*' " (*Laugh.*)

"... I am glad y'all are enjoying this *tour*. I used to work for the day care in the State of *Ileenois!* Nothing to do, but I felt so tired! *Kids!* (*Laugh.*) ... This here is man-made reclaimed land.... The city of Chicago has five thousand firemen.... One million motor vehicles.... And *one*, I repeat *one*, handsome bus driver! (*Applause.*) (To Susan, who had stood up.) Sit down, Sue! Let me know if you can't take it, Steve! Are you a cry baby, Steve? Can you take it man! I have something to do, kid! I am doing the best I can! (*Applause.*) ... The Boss says to me, Ben, *improvise!* I guess he means love. That means kidding, Steve!"

We entered the campus of the University of Chicago and someone asked a question about a seal embossed on a house.

"I don't know nothing about no emblems. Don't ask me about emblems and semblems.... It is *here*, *Deecember* the 2nd, Fermi discovered controlled fission...."

We drove on.

"We are going to stop at the Museum of Science and Industry.... See the U Boat and the coal mine and nothing else. *You do not have time!* The washrooms are in the basement. *You do not have time!* (*Laugh.*) Aren't I terrible! Thank you for agreeing with me!" (*Laugh.*)

This museum, a 14 acre structure, welcomes visitor participation. You are invited to push buttons, turn cranks, play with levers, and generally get involved. They have a U-505

submarine, a giant pulsating human heart – you are invited to walk through it, but *you do not have time!* – and you may handle an old Ford, may cause and be amazed at a million-volt bolt of lightning as it strikes ... see chickens hatching, see and touch a personage, a female body, showing the female body functions and functioning.... As he said, *you do not have time!*

We start back for downtown Chicago.

Lake Michigan, embraced by the sun and shadow, looked beautiful and the park on the left (*luft*) pure gold and shredded gold, its clean cool green showing off the touches of turquoise, and the lapis, too.... As we passed, catching but a glimpse of the wonder, Ben drew our attention to the *mirrul* (middle) income class Chicago *residencies*, followed by the upper income class Chicago *residencies*. The upper income class includes, "... *tour-bus drivers.*" (*Laugh.*) "... It sounds good!" And he summed up a millionaires row – Chicago's gold coast – resident's existence. Surrounded by lavender furniture, and more bathrooms than he can handle, he lives with "... a martini in his right hand and his favorite person on his *luft*" (*Laugh.*)

We passed by the sky-high Standard Oil building. He commented, "... I don't know what the fragments will sell for, Steve! (*Laugh.*) Do you collect rocks, Steve?"

On the left, we saw the Wrigley Building. Wrigley, the chewing gum man.... We were driving through a park and he stopped close to a bridge. On the left, at the edge of the bridge, stood a young bather, determined but hesitant. Our man opened the automatic doors of the bus by pressing a button and made her look back, and laugh, and eventually take the plunge. "Go on! I will split a ten dollar bill with you! Go! Go, go, *go!*"

"This here on the *luft* is the Amalgamated Meat Cutters, the butchers of Chicago. The figures on the outside show *togetherness....*" The figures were holding hands or fingers or thumbs. I am not sure. We were moving on, almost expeditiously. Ben had to pick up another bus load of sightseers....

“... The guy on the *luft* don't know nobody! ... I can tell you all about this here statue but it would cost you a few martinis. (*Laugh.*) Anytime after 6. (*Laugh.*) ‘... Where were you at 6, Gregory! Remember, I am your wife, Gregory!’ (*Laugh.*) ... If you are a senior citizen, low income class, \$25 to \$65 a month, hear me good. Put in your application.... The bossman will give you a low, low income apartment ... 25-hours' security guard. (*Loud laugh.*) ... (to a fellow sightseeing bus driver on the road) ... Keep going, man! See you around! ... This here is the Biograph Theater. Right here, Dillinger was cut down. The lady in red put the finger on him.... They sell classical music, family color slides and *English* books in there. (*Loud laugh.*) ... On the *luft* is the College of Surgeons....” He was unsure of the significance of the sculpture. Could be two surgeons meeting each other. Could be something connected with hope and glory. Or, “... a patient receiving the doctor's bill! *Uh!*” (*Laugh.*)

After handing him substantial tips, everyone got out laughing!

He dropped me outside the hotel to await the airport limousine. There's one every 15 minutes. “Take care!” “You too,” I said.

Incensed, Arnold Bennett described Chicago as “... a suburb of Warsaw.” It's a lie! I saw no suburb of Warsaw. After a visit to Chicago, unquestionably roused, said Rudyard Kipling, “... I urgently desire never to see it again.” N-a-aa-sty man! “... Youse's a viper, bum! Us-uns in Chicago hain't no call to be ashamed, anyways! Yahp!”

Although pleased as the deuce with my visit ... as I stepped into the Boing, back to Bombay, I did wonder if I hadn't missed a mite by offhandedly neglecting all the facts, events, wonders and marvels *dextral* of the bus.... Maybe, the two groucers aforementioned had material cause: perhaps seen the city from the *right* side, exclusively ... as I had from the *left*, exclusively.... Son of a gun.

(Note: In addition to minor editing, the text has been made consistent with American English spelling, style and punctuation.)

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