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Arrival in America

AIRPLANES, TO ME WHILE HERDING CATTLE IN GAGRET, looked like birds, a bit larger than a crow and the same size as a vulture. Later, when living in Delhi, I had the opportunity to see some of them at the airport. They were larger, much larger. I saw scores of people disappear into the belly of the “bird.” However, the closest I had gotten to an airplane was the visitor’s gallery at the airport. I longed for the moment when I would also ride an airplane. Now, I was actually flying in a plane. I hoped the plane would fly over Gagret so that I could look down to see how small the cows looked.

Sitting on the airplane felt funny. There was no sign of the heat or humidity that was suffocating the airport outside. The faint aroma of hot cooked food wafting from the galley reminded me that I was hungry. The combination of many emotions—excitement, worry, sadness, fear—had pushed the basic human need, hunger, to the background. I wished the plane would fly and those pretty air hostesses dressed in colorful silk saris would serve food.

No one had bothered to tell me if the plane was going directly to London or would stop on its way. I had not asked, either. I sat in the cramped seat next to a young lady who tried to talk to me and, on finding I was deaf, wrote, “Do you know if we are flying over Amritsar now?” She must have been from Amritsar. I looked outside the window. All I could see was white clouds. But in order to look knowledgeable, I said, yes, we were flying over Amritsar. I didn’t feel guilty for lying. I had made someone happy.

The plane stopped in Tehran, Rome, and Frankfurt before arriving in London. A cab whisked me away to a small hotel, courtesy of Air India, in the city. The hotel room was the cleanest I had ever stayed in and the bed was the most comfortable I had slept in. However, sleep I could not.

I tossed and turned all night thinking about Gallaudet College and wondering how things would be there. How would they treat me? What was I going to do when my \$50 ran out? That was more than my salary for a month as a photographer in India, but it would not go far in the United States. This was the amount allowed in foreign exchange and that I had received using money from my savings and an uncle's gift. Would I be able to keep up with other students? These thoughts scared sleep away. I was also thinking about Big Ben, the London Bridge, Piccadilly Circus, Hyde Park, and all of those places I had read about and seen in photographs. I wanted to see them all. However, I had only a few hours the next morning. At about five in the morning, I got tired of trying to sleep and got up; showered; dressed in the same suit, shirt, and tie I had worn during the flight; and found my way to the dining room. There was no one there except a waiter. He asked me how I liked my eggs. That was a strange question. Eggs to me were eggs. The only words related to eggs I knew were "boiled" and "omelet." So I asked for an omelet and he asked what kind. I didn't know the types of omelets but also didn't want to show my ignorance, so told him with the air of someone who specialized in omelets, I want an egg omelet. Later, I learned he had given me scrambled eggs.

After a hearty breakfast, I approached the concierge and asked him how to get to Piccadilly Circus. He wrote down directions for getting to the tube station and which station to go to from there and what to do after I got out. He was thorough. Armed with his instructions, I visited several sites in London without getting lost.

It was a surreal experience thinking I was one of those people who had seen all of those famous landmarks. When I worked in the Goyle Photography Studio, I had developed photographs showing people standing in front of various London landmarks. I was jealous of them. Now, I was there! I walked with a swagger. I wished I could get myself photographed in front of one of the monuments to send home. I didn't have a camera and I didn't know anyone with a camera within a five thousand miles radius. At that thought I smiled: my world was broadening.

But those landmarks were not what I had expected. Trafalgar Square was full of statues and, surprise, pigeons. There was nothing about Lord Nelson and his glorious naval victory. Hyde Park was just a park and Piccadilly Circus was a busy marketplace not much different than Connaught Place in New Delhi. I didn't let myself admit that these places had a halo effect because of what I had read about them.

The concierge had told me to be back before 1:00 p.m. for a ride to the airport. I made it fifteen minutes before that. I was hungry and asked for lunch. No, he said, the airline had paid for my breakfast only. I had to wait and eat in the plane or buy my own food. Having already read the menu in the morning, I decided to skip the lunch. I already had spent more than \$4 in tube and admissions. My funds were dwindling fast. It was time to tighten the belt, literally.

It was a crisp fall day when the TWA plane I had boarded in London landed at Dulles Airport in Virginia. I had a splitting headache and the bright fall sun made my eyes water. I lined up behind other passengers for customs and immigration checks. I was not sure what lay ahead, and in order to avoid making any mistake, I looked around for any instructions on how to go through immigration. There were none. A lady with a clipboard caught my attention. She would look at her clipboard and shout something as she scanned the passengers in the line. I decided to go read for myself what she was telling us. After gesturing to the passenger behind me to watch my attaché case and bag, I walked to where the lady stood. I maneuvered behind her and looked at her clipboard. It was a list of passengers, and I saw my name encircled in red ink with the word “DEAF” written next to it. I tapped the woman and pointed at my name. She looked relieved. Apparently she was yelling my name in the hope that the deaf guy would hear her.

She was of great help. After learning that I could not lipread, she used a pencil and paper to tell me that she was going to help me go through immigration and customs. I didn't have to stand in the line. Deafness has its advantage. She took me to a closed counter and talked to the supervisor, who looked through my passport and stamped it with a smile. I thought about the rude, slow, and unfriendly immigration personnel I had dealt with in New Delhi compared to their U.S. counterparts. The efficiency, friendliness, and the “may I help you?” attitude were simply overwhelming.

Then she took me to the baggage claim area. The luggage carousel fascinated me. Bags of all shapes and sizes were going around and around and people were picking up their bags. There were no coolies—the ever present laborers who carried bags in India. Americans seem to do all their work themselves. We waited for my little bag to make its appearance. Finally the carousel stopped, and I learned that my bag was still somewhere between India and the United States. With the clipboard lady's

help, I filled out the forms they gave us, picked up my tote bag and small attaché case, and walked outside. I paid \$2.50 to the driver of the airport bus that was to take me to Washington, DC.

Up until then, my vision of America consisted of cowboys trotting on their sorrel and pinto horses through the purple sage and mesquite. I also had seen some movies starring Gary Cooper, John Wayne, and others riding fast horses, shooting guns, cleaning up towns of black-hatted bad guys, and riding into the sunset for yet another adventure. The lush Virginia countryside along the Dulles access road was very different than the America I had envisioned. Imagine my disappointment at not seeing any cowboys or horses. There were, however, more important things to worry about, and I decided to forget the missing cowboys and horses for now.

I had about \$43 in my pocket, two pairs of clothes, a pair of shoes, and the clothes on my back. I didn't know anyone in the whole country and didn't even have a letter of introduction. There was little or no hope in my mind of getting the bag containing all my worldly possessions—two suits, four shirts and four pairs of pants, underwear, and socks. A few gifts for people who might help me completed the contents of my small bag. It was all gone.

The bus dropped me at 12th Street, NW. And now I faced the problem of getting to Gallaudet. I tried to talk to people like I always did in India but found no one understood me. A huge black porter was helpful. He asked me to write. In the past, hearing people had always written to me and I always responded with my voice because I was understood. I never had to write to express myself. This was a new experience. My speech was not good in America! I had never heard English spoken, especially by an American; therefore I had no idea, and still do not, how Americans speak. My heavy Gagret accent had made my speech unintelligible in America.

The cab driver and the porter didn't know where Gallaudet College was. I gave them the address and the cab driver shook his head and drove away after taking a look at it. Apparently, Gallaudet College was not situated in an area that cab drivers liked to go. The helpful porter made getting the cab for me his personal mission. He waved for another and talked to the cab driver who opened the back door for me. As the cab drove, I noticed the difference between Indian and American cabs and drivers. The driver sat relaxed and used the index finger of his right hand to steer. I didn't know about power steering, so I wondered how strong

his index finger was. As he stopped at a light and then started again, I was puzzled, as he never shifted gears. I craned my head and noticed there was no clutch, either. American cars and drivers were funny, I thought.

I had practiced the American Manual Alphabet on the airplane and felt very comfortable with the speed I could spell. I was confident that I would be able to communicate with American deaf people easily and flexed my fingers.

The cab entered Gallaudet campus and the cab driver stopped in front of a huge building, which I later learned was College Hall. I saw about thirty students milling around, signing to each other with the speed of lightning. The cabdriver asked me where I wanted to get off. I told him this place would be fine and got out. I stood there with the Air India handbag at my feet and gaped at the students walking and running around signing so animatedly. I could not understand even one word. I decided to keep my knowledge of the American Manual Alphabet a secret.

The students ignored me totally, and I wondered if I was invisible. In India, the arrival of a stranger is a big event. A student from another country would have been surrounded by and questioned about where he was from and what he was doing there. I looked at myself to make sure I was there and knew that I had to do something to get help or I would have to stand there with the Air India handbag and the attaché case at my feet for the rest of my life.

My first two attempts to get someone's attention were a total failure. I waved my hand to a tall, thin guy who looked at me for a second. He walked toward me and I began to spell, "W-H-E-R-E." By the time I was spelling "R" he was gone back to his friends. My effort to get the attention of another guy met with the same fate. The first thing I learned about Gallaudet students was that they have little or no patience with someone who does not sign. I thought this was rude, but then I remembered the kind of treatment deaf people without the ability to speak clearly get when they are trying to get attention of a hearing person. "Well," I told myself, "the tables are turned here." However, the irony was I was also deaf. But I was a deaf person who didn't know American signs.

Finally, I did succeed in getting the attention of two pretty girls. They both had short hair, wore tee shirts and shorts, and seemed like they were just going for a walk. I waved timidly and was surprised to see them both stop in their tracks and look at me with interest. One of them looked at

the Air India bag on the ground and pointed at it and then at me. I nodded my head vigorously. We were communicating!

My “W-H-E-R-E” was interrupted again, however. One of the girls grabbed my hand and turned it around to face her. I was first puzzled, but then the light dawned upon me. I was spelling the letters to myself. It was like someone showing a photograph to another person but keeping it facing himself! Boy, did I feel dumb. Spelling in this new orientation of the hand was a bit difficult at first but became easier in a few minutes.

Then the second girl spread the five fingers of her left hand and touched her pinky and ring finger with the index finger of her right hand alternately and pointed at me with a questioning look in her eyes. She wanted to know if I was a pinky or a ring finger person. I shrugged my shoulders like I had seen Americans shrug in the movies. My shrug must have been pretty awkward—it was my first shrug.

One of them wrote on her notebook, “Are you a freshman or prep?” I didn’t know which one I was. Worse still, I didn’t know what a prep or freshman was. Our talk, or rather the effort to talk, got the attention of a male student with thick glasses hanging from the very tip of his nose. The three consulted with each other and then the male student motioned me to follow him. I waved to the two girls and followed my benefactor.

He wrote on paper that his name was Godsey and he was from Florida. “Where are you from?” He wrote. I pointed at the Air India bag. He nodded his head in understanding.

We passed the College Hall and walked to another building. He wrote, “This is Fowler Hall.” I wondered why he called the buildings halls. A hall in British English is a large room and a building is a building. But I had more important things to worry about than the nomenclature so I remained quiet. Fowler Hall, it turned out, was a dormitory for preparatory boys. Godsey, my guide, knocked on a door and a muscular man opened it. They both exchanged conversation with fingers and hands flying to and fro. I looked from one to other and began to talk to the new person, who looked back at me as if I was speaking Greek. Apparently, he didn’t understand one word I was saying. Their exchange in signs was also Greek to me; I could not understand even one word. Their conversation resulted in the other man’s handing me a key along with a pillowcase and two bed sheets. Godsey and I climbed four floors and then he led me to a room—his own—and helped me make one of the beds. I learned

later that he had offered to be my roommate until the mystery of my being a pinky or a ring finger was resolved. The bed-making process was new for me. I had never made a bed and was glad for his help. In India, one spread a *duree*—a thin mat—and a bed sheet over the cot. There was no tucking needed as there was no mattress to tuck the sheets under. This tucking the sheet, I thought, was a bit too much. I would rather let the sheets hang out.

Hunger was gnawing at my arteries. I made the universal sign for eating. He shook his head. The cafeteria was already closed. We walked to yet another building. It was the Students Union Building (SUB), he told me. My brother Narain was very active in the student union in his college and later in the railway employees union. I thought about joining the students union later when I was settled.

In the student union building, I saw my first vending machine. Godsey helped me insert a dollar in the change machine and then helped me find a dime and a nickel. I inserted the two coins in the Coke machine and pressed a button. I got a can of Coke and was pleasantly surprised to find the can very cold. The vending machine had a refrigerator built into it. I was amazed. I also got a package of biscuits, which Godsey called cookies. While munching cookies and sipping the Coke, I looked around. Godsey pointed to a machine in the corner. I walked to it with coins in my hand, as I was still hungry. There didn't seem to be any food in that machine and I looked helplessly at Godsey. He wrote, "This is a pinball machine. Later you can play on it." The steel balls in that machine didn't look very edible, anyway.

The Coke and the biscuits, I mean cookies, gave me some energy and we walked back to Fowler Hall. Godsey showed me the bathroom where I changed into my sleeping suit, shook hands with Godsey, who looked puzzled, slowly got into the bed, and passed out.