

*Sound-Shadows
of the New World*
1986

I

*THE CLOUD
HAS SPREAD ITS
DARK HAIR*

INDIAN YOUTH ASKS ADMITTANCE TO ASB

A 14-year-old blind youth from Simla, India, who has completed all of the training available to him in his native country, is seeking admittance to the Arkansas School for the Blind to further his education. [I was actually fifteen.]

Members of the blind school board at a recent meeting authorized James M. Woolly, school superintendent, to investigate the youth's situation. . . .

In his letter to Mr. Woolly, a letter he typed himself in English, the youth said:

"And there is no more scope in India for my studies as I have gained from St. Dunstan's what they could teach me. Now I have great wish to come over to your school, and hope that you will be kind enough to admit me."

He indicated a desire to complete the full course offered at the Arkansas School and was also interested in university examinations offered at the completion of the course.

—*Little Rock (Ark.) Arkansas Democrat,*
February 20, 1949.

FINALLY, I WAS IN AMERICA. EVER SINCE I could remember, I had been hearing about it from my father, Daddyji, as "God's own country." He had come here from India to continue his medical studies, and now I was here as a student. I'd been trying to come for at least eight years—since I was seven years old. The morning after I arrived, I sat down at a typewriter and wrote a letter home:

544, West
113, Street,
Apt. 4A,
New York 25,
N.Y.
U.S.A.

16th August, 1949

MY DEAREST DADDYJEE,

I reached New York yesterday. It was a very long Journey than we expected it to be. It took me 47 hours to get here. Mrs. John di Francesco came to receive me at the aerodrome.

Now I think I better tell you something about my journey. The Journey was quite boring and tiring. I reached London, by London timings, at 9:15 A.M. Cousin Nitya Nand was there to meet me. But the Plane did not stop there for long.

The people who met us at Aerodrome in Delhi and said they would look after me did not even come to me in the plane once, and I never even knew where they were. As a matter of fact, I—whatever I did was by myself.

I just now have had a word on telephone with Mr. Woolly. He wants me at Arkansas School for the Blind as soon as possible. He says the school will open in three weeks time from today. I rang Mr. Woolly because I came to know by Mr. and Mrs. di Francesco that there is lots of Infantile Paralysis going on in Arkansas. But Mr. Woolly has assuredly said that they are better off there than in New York. He left it to me when I wish to come I can come, but he said the sooner the better it is from his point of view. I think I shall leave for Arkansas on the 26th of this month. Mr. and Mrs. di Francesco will be going on six days holidays to Maine from the 27th. They say I am welcome to go with them if I wish to. But I am still thinking. Mr. and Mrs. di Francesco are very nice people.

I shall write you a very long letter as soon as I can get a good typewriter for long time. That I do not hope to get here in New York. Daddyjee I do not like to say anymore

what I feel. I am very homesick.

The bag which you bought me with a zip on it which you said will be very useful as a second bag was open on the way by breaking the zip, and all the Ivory things which you presented me were removed except one piece. Some of my clothes were also stolen. It was discovered there and then, at the New York aerodrome that the bag has been broken. It was also examined by the people over there. All the shirts which we kept in that were taken away. And instead of my things there was one hair brush and one shaving creams bottle which was not mine. I gave same back to them. The bag is absolutely spoilt. We have put down a claim for my things. But I do not know whether they will give it or not. The one piece which was left was the salt cellar. Mrs. di Francesco tells me that the price of it here in New York is 12 Dollars. She also seems to see other ivory pieces in shops over here and she says that they are very very expensive. Only if I have had those to sell I would have made at least one and a half months living expenses in School. I have put down a claim for over One hundred Dollars because they are even more expensive over here.

With love to all and respects.

Your affectionate Son,

Ved



At the airport in New Delhi, there had been dozens of relatives all around, laughing and clapping. Suddenly, they were embracing me, and there was such a rush and confusion that people embracing me were

themselves being embraced. Then Daddyji and I were walking to the Pan American airplane, dirt crunching under our feet. Daddyji fell into conversation with a couple of Sikh passengers walking just ahead of us and found out that they were going to New York on the same airplane. "This is my fifteen-year-old blind son, Ved," he said, introducing me to them. (I have been totally blind since I was four years old, as a result of meningitis.) "He's travelling alone for the first time—you see, he's going to America for his studies. I'd be grateful if you could give him assistance along the way if he needs it." I wanted to hide, out of embarrassment, but I had never travelled anywhere alone or gone so far away, and I said nothing.

"Most certainly, most certainly," the two Sikhs said, and clicked their tongues.

We dropped behind. "Son, you must build up your health," Daddyji said. "Ninety-one pounds for a boy five feet five is a very low weight. Even the officer who gave me permission to accompany you to the plane remarked on how thin you look for your age."

I had never been on an airplane before. There were steps going up and up and up. They were so narrow that Daddyji and I had to go single file, and they were tinny and flimsy and shook under us, creating a little storm. Inside, the floor sloped upward, and the ceiling was so low that I had to walk with my head bowed.

"Another thing—you'll have to learn not to be so shy," Daddyji was saying. His voice sounded painfully loud to me through the haze of voices in the plane.

"I'm not shy," I snapped irritably.

At my seat, we embraced quickly, like two Pun-

jabi adults, and he hurried away, leaving me sad at my outburst. I had no idea when we might meet again.

There was a pair of seats on each side of the aisle. My seat was next to a window. I sat strapped in it, wondering how high off the ground I was and whether anyone in my family could see through the window. I tried to smile, as I always did for photographs—which, of course, I couldn't see, but which I would overhear others commenting on.

It was very hot: it was the middle of August, and we had not had any monsoon rains for days.

Daddyji had been gone no more than a few minutes when I heard the hasty rustle of a sari. It was Mamaji. She planted a kiss on my forehead, her face wet with tears. "Let God keep you," she said.

I struggled to unstrap myself, but before I could she was gone. My forehead burned. I had not been kissed since I was a small boy—since I was eight or nine, perhaps.

Almost immediately, the airplane under me roared and trembled. An air hostess who sounded very American came up and said, over my head, "Above you there are two buttons—the red one is for calling me, and the green one is a reading light."

I nodded knowingly. It is just as well she doesn't realize I can't see, I thought. This way, she won't be oversolicitous.

Several times, I thought that we had left the ground, but then the tires bumped along the runway or the plane lurched to a stop. I began to feel that we would never get off. I'd often had the same feeling during the months of preparation for going to America, when I

was waiting to complete the required medical tests, to get inoculations, to have my picture and fingerprints taken, and to hear from the various authorities concerned with passport, visa, foreign exchange, and police clearance.

Finally, the airplane paused, then raced along the runway. I held my breath. Then I felt the airplane shaking in the air as it rose like a speeded-up lift cage. The airplane levelled off, but there was no letup in the roar. It all but blocked out my hearing, and I wondered how I would survive it for such a long journey.

In my flight bag I had a Braille copy of "Murder on the Orient Express," by Agatha Christie. At first, I felt awkward about reading Braille in public, but I got bored just sitting, so I took the book out and started it.

"Is that Braille you're reading?" the air hostess asked, bending over me.

I nodded sheepishly.

She sighed and went away.

The rest of the journey is a jumble of disconnected memories. I remember that I felt frightened when we landed in Karachi; all of us in my family were refugees from Pakistan, and I was wary of being in a Muslim country. I fell asleep reading. I had to go hungry for a long time, because I didn't want to confess that I didn't know how to use a knife and fork. We landed in some place, but I didn't catch its name. Everybody got off, and I waited for someone to help me, but no one came—neither the air hostess nor the two Sikhs. We went high up in the air and it got very cold, and I had to breathe very fast. My ears popped repeatedly. They

hurt so badly that I thought I would go deaf. We were in Damascus. The man who was cleaning and restocking the plane helped me off and showed me to a restaurant in the airport. The waiter there did not speak English; I had to order food through an interpreter. Luckily, they had Indian food, and I ate my fill with my fingers. In one place, it was sleeting, and the airline people gave us raincoats to walk to a small waiting room, where we had to wait for two hours. We stopped in London. Cousin Nitya Nand had come from Cambridge specially to meet me, but it took so long for me to find someone to take me to a bus, for the bus to take me to Customs, and for the Customs people to clear me to go to the visitors' lounge, where Cousin Nitya Nand was waiting, that we had time only to exchange a few pieces of news before I had to get back on the bus.

After forty-seven hours, we reached New York. It was two o'clock on the afternoon of the fifteenth of August.