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STOPPING AT ALL STATIONS

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JAPAN fills me with amazement. Not because it is all that marvellous, but because, having come here fully prepared to find it marvellous, I find it a total blank. Next have I lived in a place for 6 weeks and had so little to say about it. Of course I can say that this country is full of consumer goods, priced well beyond my reach; that the parts of it that I saw were very crowded, but reasonably clean; that visually it has nothing much to offer, either natural or architectural; that I feel positively gigantic and that the clerks in the women's clothing shops put on their apologetic face at the very sight of me and start waving their hands in front of their faces as though warding off flies, which is a polite way of saying 'no'. But then I can say all this about good old Pune without stretching the truth too much. Where is the great Japanese aesthetic sense we hear so much about? Where is their famous courtesy? Oh, they are never *rude*, but then they are never polite either—unless continuously shouting 'arigato gozaimashta' is polite! They mostly just ignore you. And there is the answer, I think, to my blank feelings about them. They have returned my curiosity and offers of general friendliness with a formal blankness. They are correct. They entertain you in the prescribed manner. They give you sweet little presents at the right times tied up in the right way. They smile at your every joke (even if it is not a joke). They eat up all that you have cooked for them while praising it generously (and perhaps they are very sick when they go home). But hardly ever do you get the feeling that here are a few people who take some delight in your company, who would like to know you better, or who want to share your opinions about this that and the other. It cannot be the language alone. After all I knew no Croatian when I entered Yugoslavia, and I found the country and the people enchanting. As a matter of fact, I still don't know any Italian or Dutch and I find both lands and their people to my taste and can count a few good friends in either who would love to see me any time. And mind you, I made these friends in the first two meetings I had with them. Which is why Japan amazes me. I would have thought that as one inscrutable Oriental to another, we'll get on fine. But alas for my good intentions. And then I read the very funny books written by Occidentals upon their encounter with Japan and I feel even more depressed. Even those 'this could only happen in Japan' sort of things don't seem to be happening to me. I find my way quite easily,

I get onto the right buses by saying the name of my destination in apparently the right accent and waiting to see if the driver waves his hand before his face or says an abrupt 'hai', I don't get lost on the subway, the commuter-crowds don't distress me at all since I am a veteran of the Bombay locals, the taxi drivers don't discriminate against me and as I am also used to the traffic driving on the left I am never run over. On the whole an uninteresting existence, made more so by a drab sort of a country and uniform-looking people. I remember, only the other day the bus we were on, was suddenly inundated with five-year-olds on a school outing. Now, I mean, nearly *all* five-year-olds look the same to me. I have difficulty finding my daughter when school is out. Can you imagine my bewilderment when faced by fifty Japanese five-year-olds? They all looked alike. Absolutely. Like biscuits in a tin. They all wore dark blue hiking clothes, white canvas hiking shoes, light yellow-caps, and holding their little red satchels and white drinking-bottles on their laps they solemnly stared at us out of their small, 45-degree-angled eyes. And where were they going? They were going to the top of the small mountain that backs Kobe. And let me tell you, that mountain really shattered me. Practically everything on it is man-made. Man-made ski slopes, hiking trails (inhabited by parties of Japanese clad in the correct hiking clothes), trout-fishing ponds, alpine garden, what have you. Wherever you are going, you are told (in Japanese) what you can see from the left-hand or the right-hand window. I didn't see any Japanese scrambling to the windows in question to see the sights, and us, who did want to see them couldn't understand what was being said anyhow. So we just stared at the various vistas of Osaka Bay spread out below, and finally, almost tearfully, I said, 'Marine Drive looks better from Malabar Hill, you know!' I was told by a colleague of S's that the part of Japan we are situated in, is too industrialized to have retained much of its natural beauty. I suppose I'll have to give it the benefit of the doubt, but the other day we travelled over a thousand kilometres of country in a train, and all we saw were houses and factories. When I mentioned this to the abovementioned person, he said, 'You see what I mean.' I was silenced. I mean *one thousand kilometres!* I have been in highly industrialized areas before (I live in one at home, remember?) and all you had to do was travel twenty, thirty, or maybe a hundred miles before you found some beautiful piece of country—a seashore, a hill, a lake, a forest, farmland dotted with villages, a fort, a lonely temple on a peak. One thousand kilometres of highly industrialized area, they can keep!

There is one thing about Kobe, however, which makes me feel right at home. The guide book says it is a sister city to Seattle, Marseille, Rotterdam, Rio and Riga. That's as may be, but I feel it must be a soul-sister to Bombay. I haven't yet found a single undug street or sidewalk. And the one they made only yesterday and I heaved a sigh of relief because I could walk on it without the planking getting up and hitting me in the face? Oh, they dug it up again today and are laying down the sidewalk in a new and more intricate design of small bricks, a little more perfect

than the last time. I stood and watched. It involved a lot of measuring by a foot rule (I mean a metre) and stretching out a lot of string, then a lot of consultation and reference to a master design and so forth. They worked extremely diligently and ignored me as I was obviously some crazy foreigner. Now this could not have happened anywhere else on earth. You see, I have been a foreigner in many countries, and I enjoy being a foreigner. For then I am an object of special interest. People, even perfect strangers, want to observe me, want to talk to me, want to know where I am from, what it's like in my country, how I like it in theirs, and so on. Not here. And you must also understand that however much of a Women's Libber I may be, I am still accustomed to the attention given by males to personable females (even pushing forty) anywhere in the world (probably because they cannot tell by my face that I am such a staunch Libber!) But here? Forget it! I think perhaps they think it is polite not to make the foreigner feel conspicuous by paying him too much attention. I wish they paid me some attention, because I feel I am slowly becoming invisible. Inaudible I became the moment I stepped off the plane, for who understands English? And finally one of those 'it can happen only in Japan' things did happen to us and hooray, it brought into our lives the first spontaneously friendly gesture made by a Japanese to us. The first reaction of a veteran Bombay Local traveller upon seeing a train about to leave a platform is to run and catch it. This we did, only to discover upon its immediately leaving Kobe, that it was a super fast express. There was no hope of our getting off at the next station, as we had wanted to. We watched dry-mouthed as the stations zipped past. Maybe it was going to Tokyo! We did not want to ask anyone for fear of appearing exactly what we were: a bunch of foolish foreigners. And besides every one was sleeping. That, according to S's gloomy proclamation was a sure sign that we were going straight to Tokyo. Dejectedly we sat down staring at all the houses and factories and more houses and more factories of this highly industrial area, when, miracle!, the train slowed down and we caught the welcome words Osaka in the Japanese announcement. It stopped and we jumped off. Now what? We were standing by a large map showing the various train routes (quite useless, because it was all in Kanji or something) when another miracle happened. A housewife with two small children came along to help us and when we helplessly said Kobe, Kobe, explained to us in Japanese how to get to Kobe, and when we of course looked more helpless than ever, simply smiled and smiled and took us by the hand and took us to another platform and put us on a train, and smiled even more widely when we looked terrified (it may have taken us to Nagasaki!) and nodding very reassuringly, said Kobe, Kobe. It sure went to Kobe, but stopping at all stations, and it took us over an hour to complete the journey we had made earlier in about fifteen zipping minutes!

But there are a couple of rays of sunshine. There is a serial Samurai drama that my little daughter religiously watches every afternoon at 3 sharp. Its hero is a most impossibly handsome, dashing, brave, peculiarly

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and yet most beautifully garbed, 45-degree-eyed man. We are both desperately in love with him. And I feel that any country that can produce both, Toshiro Mifune and this handsome Shurai (I don't even know his name!), cannot be a total writeoff. We will wait for Spring.

STINK IN HIGH PLACES

W. M. AITKEN

(Continued from 17-2-81)

Until that happens it would be well for the rest of us, who love these beautiful creatures inhabiting the sacred heights, to identify clearly our real enemy. The musk-deer is not so much threatened by the Joshimath shikari, the Tanakpur lala or the Sadar Bazar Commission Agent. Even the royal proprietor of the Paris perfumery is not the real culprit. The next time you, dear Consumer, decide to spend the remainder of your foreign exchange while winging your way back to India, please remember the musk-deer and buy anything duty-free but that bottle of scent.

POST-BUDGET PRAYERS

1. Give us, Lord, good monsoons during 1981-82.
2. Let those in authority, and especially the Prime Minister, realise fully, Lord, that implementation is still the essence of policy. Crores may be allotted for expenditure, crores may be stated to have been expended, crores may infact have been expended, and yet the result may show failure in implementation.
3. Let those in charge of the spending of public funds, especially the Prime Minister, recognise fully, Lord, their total responsibility for obtaining for the nation full value for every rupee they order to be spent.

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