

WILL KELLY

## Plaza

It was raining when the chartered tour bus pulled off at the Belvidere Oasis, some 67 miles short of downtown Chicago. For Professor Rosenberg—seated at the front of the bus and sipping something pinkish from a bottle previously occupied by Nature’s Crystal Spring Water—the wet though unseasonably warm weather was a clear mandate for his proposed all-indoor itinerary. He had accompanied many a bus full of unappreciative students on this same route over the past 15 years, and never again would have been much too soon. But alas, though not a member himself, he had been entrusted through a series of personal connections to guide a group of Tajik Rotary Club members on an outing to the city—a packed schedule of museums, sightseeing, and shopping intended to counterbalance the picture of small-town America they had grown accustomed to during their month-long stay. Dr. Rosenberg had taken up the offer before falling on hard times, and it was much too late to back out at this point, the last full-service rest stop before the westernmost suburbs began.

His colleagues had been full of advice for the day’s programming, but no consensus could be reached on which museums to visit and how much time to budget for each. Deanne, who had stood by him throughout the divorce proceedings and pledged to remain his sister-in-every-sense-but-the-law, suggested they avoid downtown altogether, that perhaps “the foreigners” would prefer a full day of shopping at Woodfield Mall and the nearby Ikea. Having neglected to make arrangements for either scenario, the professor had settled on something else entirely: a thick cross sec-

tion of America and generous array of cultural accoutrements in one convenient location.

A 10–15 minute pit stop at the Belvidere Oasis was standard for groups headed into the city on I-90. When the bus had come to a complete stop in front of the eastbound entrance, Dr. Rosenberg whispered something to the confused driver whom he patted on the shoulder before informing the group—via translator—to take all personal items with them and leave nothing on the bus. The last passenger had barely debarked when the bus started up again and rolled away towards the onramp.

The Oasis itself was an impressive site for the uninitiated, one of seven such locations operated by the Illinois Tollway Authority and among the nation’s very few rest stops suspended over the highway on a specially designed bridge deck. At each end of the main building was a parking lot with an identical gas station and convenience store for traffic moving in either direction. The current Oasis had been built less than a decade ago when the original Eisenhower-era structure was torn down, and it shared many characteristics with a newish mall or airport terminal: shiny floors, sweeping panoramic windows, exposed white girders, and an astonishing variety of fast food kiosks and other amenities.

After a restroom break and samples of various items from the Starbucks menu, the Rotary members were greeted by none other than the general manager of the Oasis, who despite his apparent misgivings (“Where exactly is Tajikistan?”) agreed to give the group a thorough tour of the premises.

He took them to a concealed basement level under one of the parking lots and showed off its storage rooms, freight elevator, and employee facilities. In his office, he showed them pictures of all seven locations over the years, from bold and futuristic concept drawings of the 50s and 60s (when the Oases were anchored by Ed Harvey restaurants), to the grittier reality of the 70s (when Howard Johnson took over—lots of brown and lots of woodgrain), to the subtle horror of the 80s and 90s, when carpet was ripped up, concrete poured, molded furniture bolted in place, and the full-service restaurants ceded to fast food vendors before the Oases were returned to some of their former glory with the construction of larger, sleeker, and more inviting structures for the new century. It was unclear to Dr. Rosenberg how much, if any of this, was getting through to the Rotary Club members, most of whom had experienced Soviet occupation, independence, civil war, and authoritarian rule within the same timeframe.

The manager explained that when the Oases first opened, they were considered world-class destinations in and of themselves,

with families from across the state and beyond driving hundreds of miles for no better reason than to dine at restaurants overlooking the very highways that had made their journey possible. It was the manager's personal opinion that those had been better times. He then spent several unprovoked minutes casually downplaying allegations of corruption and cronyism during the Oases' reconstruction process.

Once the rain had subsided, the manager took them outside and showed them the Oasis' hidden access points for employees and distributors. He took them up a narrow spiral staircase to the roof, which boasted an even greater view of the Interstate and surrounding farmland. He pointed out a factory a few hundred feet away. Several years ago, an explosion at that factory sent debris all the way up to the westbound parking lot, killing a man. The translator relayed this information to the Rotary Club members, who nodded in a rare moment of wide-eyed understanding. Dr. Rosenberg looked mildly amused.

At the end of the tour, after he thanked the manager and tipped him from a large roll of bills in his pocket, it was time for lunch, which was to be the biggest and most elaborate meal of the day. All nine vendors provided the group with samples from their menus—the largest selection of American cuisine yet experienced by the Rotary members during their stay. Several vendors offered tours of their kitchens. After lunch, an Illinois Tollway representative delivered a lecture hawking the state's I-PASS, explaining the benefits of open road tolling.

As promised, the Rotary members were given two hours of free shopping time, which Dr. Rosenberg figured would be enough to pursue the wares at the Oasis' Travel Mart, as well as both convenience stores and the new Best Buy Express vending machine. At 4:00 they were to meet back at the table behind the Starbucks kiosk for an impromptu art history lecture, delivered not by the professor himself (who was beginning to slur his words), but by a friendly trucker he had met near the Travel Mart's magazine rack, deeply knowledgeable about the evolution of airbrush techniques and the effects of the digital revolution on modern day centerfolds and swimsuit issues.

A beer tasting was arranged in the westbound convenience store stock room, where a large selection of all-American brews were made available to willing Rotary members, including Bud Light Platinum, Bud Light Lime, Bud Select, MGD 64, Keystone Light, Michelob Ultra, Natural Ice, Colt 45, and Steel Reserve 211 (the clear winner among participants, as well as Dr. Rosenberg).

Back in the Oasis, it was almost time for dinner, an unstruc-

tured affair in which Rotary members were allowed to return to their favorite eateries from earlier in the day. The Oasis staff and food workers seemed annoyed by the continued presence of the tour group, and Dr. Rosenberg was forced to peel off increasingly large amounts from his endless roll of bills to cancel out their troubles. It was imperative to keep them off for at least the next two hours because more activities had been planned.

After dinner came one of the most anticipated events of the day: taking turns using the pair of coin-operated massage recliners near the restrooms. At some point Dr. Rosenberg stepped outside for a smoke and did not immediately return, though his absence went largely unnoticed among the Rotary members, who were still buzzing from the beer samples and the massage chairs' Shiatsu rollers.

The day had flown by faster than any in the group could have imagined, and when the bus driver finally showed up—immediately followed by a pair of state troopers—the entire Rotary delegation from Dushanbe, Tajikistan had arranged themselves in a neat row overlooking the twilight expressway, watching the sunset and digging into the massive pile of Illinois Lottery scratch tickets purchased by their host, who was nowhere to be found.