

SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN

English Lessons and Other Stories

Reader's Guide Edition

With an afterword by KULDIP GILL



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Rawalpindi 1919

Whole wheat flour and water. Not just any flour will do either, she thought. He is very particular about that. Choudhary Amir Singh would dine on simple fare, but the first chapatti must be made from the wheat of his own mills and it must come from the hands of the mother of his sons — Sardarni Sahib herself.

It seems warmer than usual, she thought, as her fingers moulded and formed the dough, knuckling into it, brown soft hands suppling it, readying it as she had made her sons ready. And for what, she thought. The elder a poet. Gentle and kind but no businessman. What would he make of the flour mill? Now the younger one, he's more worldly. Twenty-one years old and Choudhary Sahib had found no bride worthy of him — yet.

She made a ball of the dough . . . patting . . . patting . . . smoothing the wet, glistening gold-flecked ball. Now dig a small ball out of the large one. Cut it apart from the whole. Now shape it, roll it between the palms. She looked at the small ball cradled in her hand. At this stage, she could still return it to the large ball and no damage would be apparent. She could knead it back and it would blend again.

But this idea, who knows where it came from. This idea that her boy could go to Vilayat, to the white people's country, to

learn from their gurus in their dark and cloudy cities — her youngest — and then return to Rawalpindi, and his people would know no difference. She shook her head. Hai toba!

It will be different in three years, she thought. Today Choudhary Amir Singh washes his hands after shake-hand with an Angrez, the collector with the brown topi and the red face. But Sarup is a friendly boy and he will have Angrez boys as friends and he will learn the shake-hand instead of our no-polluting palms-together Sat Sri Akal.

A little flour on the ball now. Just a dusting. Enough to swirl the ball between her thumbs and the first two fingers of her hands. Round and round, faster and faster, flatter and flatter, larger and larger, thinner and thinner.

He would look thinner after three years. She tried to imagine him. They would expect him to tie his beard, his long dark beard, up under his chin. She would be sure he had enough turbans to last two months on the boat and three years in Inglaand. Some silk ones — oh, the brightest colours — so the Angrez would know he came from a bold Sikh clan. But he would be thinner, with no woman to cook chapattis. Sardar Baldev Singh had been to London, and he had told her he had eaten only boiled food with not a single chilli all the time. Perhaps he said it as an excuse for his appetite on his return, but she'd noticed even quite high-up Angrez were thin. It must be their food. Sarup would never become used to that.

She rolled the chapatti with a rolling pin, picked it up and deftly slapped it from one palm to the other. Then whoosh — onto the tava over the coal fire. She steadied the tava with one hand, and, with a small rag in the other hand, rotated the chapatti till it was almost cooked.

But perhaps there were other customs he would get used to. He had already, she knew, bought an English book to read, now it was agreed he would be studying in Vilayat. She had seen it

and it had an Englishwoman and a man in a black English suit on the outside. They were kissing, but Sarup told her it was a classic, like the story of Roop-Basant. He said all the English stories like “Roop-Basant” are written down, and in Imperial College, there were even people whose only study was to learn those stories. This one was called *Thelma*, he said. It was written by a woman called Marri Corrilli. Now how could this be, that a woman would write such a fat book. But maybe she was a poor woman who could not afford to get a munshi to write down her thoughts.

She took the chapatti off the tava. Quick, snatch the tava off the fire and replace it with the chapatti. She watched as the chapatti rose into a hot-air-filled dough balloon. Just at its peak she lifted it from the fire and set it on the ground on a steel thali to cool.

It was the thali that brought it to mind. Angrez don't use steel thalis. They use white plates. They don't use the chapatti, breaking off a small piece to scoop up their food. They use sharp forks and long knives — straight ones, not curved like our kirpans — to keep themselves distant from their food. He will have to learn that.

And as she rose from her haunches to pick up the thali and covered her head with her chunni in preparation for entering her husband's presence, she decided to talk with him about it. She moved to the doorway and stepped over the wooden threshold.

“Ay, Ji,” she said. She would not bring him misfortune by using his name.

Choudhary Amir Singh looked up from the divan and cushions on the floor.

“You will need to buy chairs for this house when he returns,” she said. “And we will need plates.”

Montreal 1962

In the dark at night you came close and your voice was a whisper though there is no one here to wake. “They said I could have the job if I take off my turban and cut my hair short.” You did not have to say it. I saw it in your face as you took off your new coat and galoshes. I heard their voices in my head as I looked at the small white envelopes I have left in the drawer, each full of one more day’s precious dollars — the last of your savings and my dowry. Mentally, I converted dollars to rupees and thought how many people in India each envelope could feed for a month.

This was not how they described emigrating to Canada. I still remember them saying to you, “You’re a well-qualified man. We need professional people.” And they talked about freedom and opportunity for those lucky enough to already speak English. No one said then, “You must be reborn white-skinned — and clean-shaven to show it — to survive.” Just a few months ago, they called us exotic new Canadians, new blood to build a new country.

Today I took one of my wedding saris to the neighbourhood dry-cleaner and a woman with no eyebrows held it like a dishrag as she asked me, “Is it a bed sheet?”

“No,” I said.

“Curtains?”

“No.”

I took the silk back to our basement apartment, tied my hair in a tight bun, washed the heavy folds in the metal bathtub, and hung it, gold threads glinting, on a drip-dry hanger.

When I had finished, I spread a bed sheet on the floor of the bathroom, filled my arms with the turbans you’d worn last week and knelt there surrounded by the empty soft hollows of scarlet, navy, earth brown, copper, saffron, mauve and bright parrot green. As I waited for the bathtub to fill with warm soapy water, I unravelled each turban, each precise spiral you had wound round your head, and soon the room was full of soft streams of muslin that had protected your long black hair.

I placed each turban in turn on the bubbly surface and watched them grow dark and heavy, sinking slowly, softly into the warmth. When there were no more left beside me, I leaned close and reached in, working each one in a rhythm bone-deep, as my mother and hers must have done before me, that their men might face the world proud. I drained the tub and new colours swelled — deep red, dark black mud, rust, orange, soft purple and jade green.

I filled the enamel sink with clean water and starch and lifted them as someday I will lift children. When the milky bowl had fed them, my hands massaged them free of alien red-blue water. I placed them carefully in a basin and took them out into our grey two rooms to dry.

I placed a chair by the window and climbed on it to tie the four corners of each turban length to the heavy curtain rod. Each one in turn, I drew out three yards till it was folded completely in two. I grasped it firmly at its sides and swung my hands inward. The turban furrowed before me. I arced my hands outward and it became a canopy. Again inward, again outward, hands close, hands apart, as though I was back in Delhi on a flat roof under