

# English Lessons

by

Shauna Singh Baldwin

I told Tony — that is what he likes me to call him in America — I told Tony I will take English lessons till my Green Card comes. Valerie says there are English teachers who will teach me for free and she will find a good one who will come to the apartment so that I do not have to go outside. Tony says OK, and then he leaves for work at the cardboard factory.

I pick up the breakfast dishes and Suryavir's toys. No one can say his name here. I will tell them at the school to call him Johnny, like Tony's Johnny Walker whisky.

The phone rings and my heart starts to pound—*dharak, dharak*. Our answering machine has Valerie's voice and I follow the words with her accent. "We're naat here right now, but if you leeev a mehsej, weell get right baak to you." But it is only Valerie herself. "Pick up the phone, Kanwaljit. I

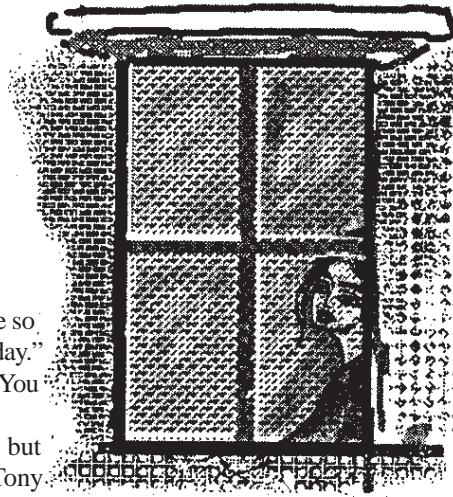
want to know if you're home so I can drop the kids off for the day."

"Hello," I say. "I am here. You come."

Valerie is a nice person, but you cannot be too careful. Tony says we cannot meet anyone from India till my Green Card comes, so Valerie is the only one who sees me. I call her Grocery Store Valerie to myself, because she answered my card in the grocery store, and now I babysit her two strong and unruly boys. What fanners they would have made in Punjab! My son is not so strong. More than two years of women's company. I spoilt him while we were waiting for Tony to get his citizenship, but what was I to do? If I had disciplined him, Tony's parents would have been angry — he is their only grandson.

Valerie's boys don't listen to love or scolding. But they go to school and Valerie says it is the law. I have to send Suryavir to school. So I went with her to register him and on the form I wrote the address I had memorised from Valerie's cheques, not ours. Still, Tony was worried in case I was seen by someone who might report me. He makes me dress in pants so that I look Mexican and says it is only a short while now. I hope so.

But first I will learn English. It's not that I don't understand it, but it has too many words. Get it.

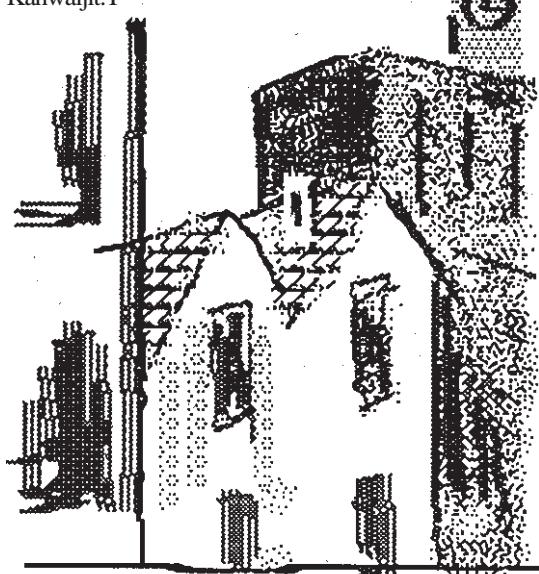


Put it. I am stuffed. Pick up your stuff. On the other hand. Hand it to you ... I learned English in school — passed my matriculation examination too. We learned whole passages of translations by heart. I had a good memory. Now Tony says I must speak English to pass my immigration interview and to memorise my amnesty story.

Was that a knock? Someone is standing far away from the peephole — why are they doing that? Oh, it's Valerie. She was bending down to tie a shoelace for little Mark. "Hello, hello. Come in. How are you?"

Valerie has found an English teacher who will come to the apartment and teach me for free. But Tony and I are afraid. This English teacher is from India and we did not want to meet any people from India. Valerie said she told the teacher that I am Tony's girlfriend and that Suryavir is our son. She said the English teacher was surprised. Indian couples do not usually live together, she told Valerie. Tony says to tell Valerie we don't need this teacher. But to please Valerie I took her phone number. I may call her just to speak in Punjabi for a while.

I told Valerie I will change my name. I asked her to call me Kelly. No one here can say Kanwaljit. And Kanwaljit is left far away in Amritsar, before the fire.



◆  
Some nights I lie next to Tony — here in America where I live like a worm avoiding the sunlight, and I wonder if he knows. Is it only because it was his brother that he does not sense that another man's body has come between us — or is it perhaps that he cannot remember the fire we felt in those early days? We only had three weeks in which Suryavir was made. Then he was gone.

If I had been able to return to my parents until he told me to come to America, I would not have been so weak. But to do so would have smelled of disgrace, and I am not shameless. Nor was it a matter of a month or two — Tony told me after six months, when I was becoming big with his son; it would take two more years.

I tell myself that it is not only another man's body that invade our bed, but another woman's too — and yet, that is different. I hear her voice on our answering machine. Her anger follows us from city to city — Fremont, Dallas Houston, Miami, New York, Chicago — threatening to report us to Immigration. He lived with her for two years, shared her bed, paid her our life savings. I will ask the English teacher how to say, "Is not two years of our life enough? Is not my worm existence, unacknowledged wifehood enough for you? Enough that I call myself his girlfriend, my son his bastard?"

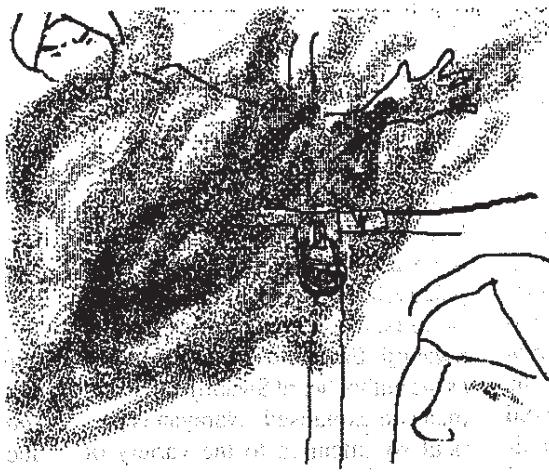
But she does not have form, substance in our bed. I cannot imagine him with her black body — and if I can, what of it? Many men pay prostitutes. This one's price was higher and she lasted longer. And he got his Green Card after two years... thus I am here.

◆  
The other man in bed with us — he has form. He looks like Tony, only younger. And he still laughs at me, waving pictures of Tony with that woman. Telling me Tony left me for an

untouchable, a *hubshi*. Threatening to tell my parents if I would not open my legs to him.

I did *Rubba-mere*, I did. I thought some force would come upon us then and tear him from my flesh before the act was done. Save me, as the virtue of Dropadi was saved. And it did. Too late for virtue but soon enough for vengeance.

The police came looking for him. Oh, not for my protection — no. They were rounding up all Sikh boys between the ages of 15 and 25 for "questioning". Tony's parents knew what was in store and they hid him in



the servant's quarter, a cement room on the flat roof of the house.

They told the police he was with Tony in America. That made them angry. One sinewy fellow with a whisky smell took a can of gasoline and slowly, as we watched from the rooms around, and as Suryavir's eyes grew larger, poured it in a steady dribble all around the centre courtyard. They all walked to the door and, almost as an afterthought, the sinewy policeman lit a match and the world exploded from silence into horror.

I took no chances. I gave Suryavir to Tony's mother and they climbed out of the back window. His father was blinded by tears and I pushed him after them. Then I ran up the narrow steep staircase to the servant's quarter on

the roof. And I locked it. And ran back through lung-searing smoke and purifying flame. I was given vengeance and I took it as my due.

But he still comes between us — from half a world away.

◆  
I called the English teacher today. She speaks Punjabi with a city accent. I will have to ask Tony, but I think it will be, like Americans say, "Fine, fine" for her to come and teach me.

Her family on her father's side is from Rajasansi, just outside Amritsar. And she is married to a white guy, so she is probably not part of the Gurdwara congregation; they have all heard of Tony's Green-Card Wife. (These matters travel faster than aero-planes fly between cities). I will tell Tony that I will take English lessons and that she will be my teacher.

◆  
Tony was finishing breakfast when Mrs Keogh, the English teacher, arrived. She rang the bell and I let her in. Then I asked her to sit down, offered her some tea and listened while she and Tony spoke English. 'Thank you very much — my girlfriend is just new from India. As soon as her Green Card comes we will be married, so till then I think English lessons will help her pass the time."

The English teacher did not remark on the "my girl friend". Good. Not a prying woman. She said, "I am glad to help you and your fiancee." Tony continued, "I will not like it if you teach her more than I know. But just enough for her to get a good paying job at Dunkin' Donuts or maybe the Holiday Inn. She will learn quickly but you must not teach her too many American ideas."

The English teacher smiled.  
Tomorrow, I will ask her where I can learn how to drive. □