A Beginner's Guide to Acting English

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Extract

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PART 1

LONDON CALLING

'You could easily fit a whole person into that *tanoor*, couldn't you,' Maman Shamsi remarked as the baker lifted a giant sheet of flat bread out of his oven with long metal tongs.

I backed away. I was small; the baker would have no problem at all fitting me in there. He wiped his brow with his sleeve and took money from Maman Shamsi's hand that she stretched out from under her blue, flowery chador.

'Can I have some now?' I asked, skipping out beside my grandmother.

She tore a bit off one end and handed it to me. 'It's hot, be careful.'

I blew on the bread then nibbled at it as we walked hand in hand down the street. The bread was warm and soft and delicious. The baker waved at me as we walked past his shop and I waved the bread up in the air but I was still relieved to be out of his reach, just in case.

'Can we buy a watermelon?'

I loved watermelon more than anything in the world, except maybe the ice creams and hot chocolate Dayee Masood bought me. There was a pyramid of watermelon on the corner of Maman Shamsi's street and the neighbourhood women walked round it, tapping each fruit to make sure they had a good ripe one. Some of the watermelons had burst open with ripeness in the hot Tehran sun. The red flesh glistened and dripped with pink juice that was very hard not to bend down and lick.

I tapped on a few. They all sounded the same to me, but I was not an expert like my grandmother. When Maman Shamsi chose the family watermelon, she spent a long while circling the fruit with a very serious look, tapping each and listening for the right mysterious sounds which marked a good watermelon out from an average one. But she was not buying one just now. She was going to spare the watermelon seller the task of pulling

out the fruit in the most precarious position, the one most integral to the balance of the pyramid because it was always the one most likely to be picked by Maman Shamsi as the best.

'We'll send one of the boys out for one later; it's too heavy for you and me to carry.'

We turned the corner, jumped over one of the little streams that ran through the pavements all over Tehran and walked to Maman Shamsi and Baba Mokhtar's house with the orange gates.

'*Kotshalvar!* Suits! Who will buy a suit!' The suit man was calling up and down the street. He measured up the men and made suits for them at a very reasonable price.

'Shamsi Khanoom!' he called. 'Any of your boys need a suit?'

'*Na, merci*,' Maman Shamsi called back, pushing open her gate.

'Mokhtar Khan? His suit must be very worn by now, I shall make him a new one. I have the finest fabrics. Here, look!' He held up a piece of grey material to Maman Shamsi's face. 'It's from *kharej*!'

'It could be from the moon, we still don't need them.'

The suit man nodded his head respectfully forward as a parting gesture. Having established the Delkhasteh house did not have a suit shortage, he continued plying his trade in the neighbourhood. From three streets away we could hear him call '*Kotshalvar! Kotshalvar!*'

I felt sorry for the suit man, I felt sorry for all the salesmen who tried to sell something to Maman Shamsi. Either she refused to buy or she would mercilessly haggle them down to a fraction of what they had first asked for. I wished I could buy something from everyone to keep them happy. The suit man never wore a suit himself.

We went home to have our breakfast, *barbari* with *panir*. We had the same breakfast every day, crumbly white feta cheese or jam made from cherries or quinces, washed down with cup after cup of hot sweet *chai* from the samovar burbling away in the corner of the big living room.

In the other corner of the room lay our two enormous suitcases. They waited patiently, packed and ready to leave for our adventure to *kharej* – the West. In our case, London.

Maman Shamsi grumbled as she uncovered her hair and tied the chador around her waist. She set down a big plate of *sabzi,* fresh mint, coriander and other herbs to have with our *barbari* and *panir*. 'Why has your father put them right there, getting in the way?' She shouted up the stairs. 'Masood! Mehdi! Come and put these suitcases in the guests' living room!'

Maman Shamsi did not want these reminders that the eldest of her nine children, Fatemeh, was leaving Tehran with her two little grandchildren. Hadi, her son-in-law, my baba, had found a job in London. Baba was a writer, a journalist. Someone always read his articles and poems to her and he was gifted, no one could argue with that. It was just that if Fatemeh had married somebody less gifted who wasn't going to take her so far away from her mother for so long, then Shamsi would have fewer worries.

Masood and Mehdi were uncles number six and seven. They obediently bounded down the stairs in their home-made drawstring pyjamas and dragged the suitcases away. Masood and Mehdi were nearly seventeen and nearly sixteen. I was only nearly four, so they were like grown-up men to me. Grown-up men who could still be really fun and who played with us without getting bored.

Suddenly voices were raised, deep, angry male voices. Somehow, during the removal of the suitcases, a row had erupted between Masood and Mehdi over the ownership of a pair of socks. It escalated to the kind of violence that brought the neighbourhood children to Maman Shamsi's yard to watch. A fight between the Delkhasteh boys was always worth running down the street for. They were Mokhtar Khan's boys, after all. Baba Mokhtar was respected in the neighbourhood for his generosity and his sense of humour. But he was also known for being very tough. He had been a soldier and a wrestler. He had raised his boys to fight and fight fair.

Even in the middle of a fight, Masood and Mehdi showed respect to their parents by taking their quarrel to the yard, sparing Maman Shamsi and Baba Mokhtar's humble ornaments and furniture.

The house was a typical Iranian house so it was centred on the yard. Most houses in Iran had a *hoz*, a small freshwater pool for the family to splash cool water on their hands and faces in the hot dusty summers. Baba Mokhtar did not build a pool because a neighbour's child had drowned in the family's shallow *hoz* while his mother was chattering for a few minutes with a neighbour.

The kitchen where Maman Shamsi was preparing breakfast stood across from the main house. She heard the fight and glanced out the doorway to see the spectators gathering in her yard – the gates were hardly ever locked. She got a tray together of the jams and the cheese and the herbs and held it in one hand, tucked the cooling *barbari* under one arm then, with her free hand, she got the hose. She turned the ice-cold water on her boys, separating them like fighting dogs. The watching children in their plastic house slippers laughed and whooped until Maman Shamsi turned the hose on them, though just splashing their feet, and they turned and ran out of her yard.

'Go and lay the sofra! *Yallah!* Both of you!' she ordered. She handed the tray and the sofra to Masood and Mehdi, who, despite their snarling, obeyed their mother.

My uncles glared at each other; their wet shirts clung to their bodies, showing off their rippling muscles and toned torsos. They abandoned their bout to lay the sofra.

Masood ruffled my hair and winked at me as he went past to let me know the fight wasn't serious. Dripping water into the house, he was happy that the stolen socks his younger brother wore were now sodden and unwearable.

A few minutes later, dry and friends again, my uncles sat cross-legged either side of me at the sofra and tucked into their food. It was crowded at breakfast today.

Although Baba had bought us a smart new flat, we had been staying at Maman Shamsi's in the weeks before we left so she could look after us. Maman and Baba had so much to do. The new agency gave him a formal leaving party, but they still had to go to the parties Baba's innumerable friends gave them before they went off to *Landan*.

All of Maman's brothers and sisters were here. We all sat around the sofra with a smattering of my cousins produced by Dayee Taghi and Khaleh Essi, numbers two and three respectively.

Baba was not at breakfast; he was already at his work in the office. I didn't know what Baba did in the office but it took him away in the early morning and he didn't come back until late at night. I knew Baba wrote things, but that was all. Now his office was going to be in London so Maman, Peyvand and I were off to have breakfast without him there.

Dayee Mehdi, now barefoot, sat next to me and helped load my plate up with bread, cheese and a heap of fresh herbs. I preferred my nan with just butter and *panir* but I added a few herbs because it was a very grown-up thing to do.

Ramin, who lived next door and was friends with Mehdi and Masood, came in with the newspaper and said salaam to everyone individually. Ramin had only one eye. The other one was all white and blind. Anytime I went near a walnut Maman or Maman Shamsi or one of my uncles would say, 'You know how Ramin lost his eye? He was cracking walnuts and a piece flew into it!'

Everyone in Iran had a story of someone they knew who had lost an eye or a leg or a finger doing something perfectly ordinary. I became frightened of walnuts. When Maman Shamsi sat in the street cracking a big pile of them to make *fesenjoon*, one of my favourite foods made with chicken and pomegranates, I watched from a distance, wincing and praying she wouldn't be blinded. We had shelled walnuts at our breakfast table to put in our pieces of bread and cheese. I wondered if the walnuts on the table made Ramin feel sad about his poor eye.

'Ramin Jaan,' Maman Shamsi called to him, 'sit down and have some breakfast.'

'*Na, merci*, Shamsi Khanoom,' Ramin replied. 'I just came to give you the paper. Agha Hadi's article is very funny this week, I wanted to make sure you have seen it.'

Despite swearing he had already eaten and that he didn't want to disturb our meal, Ramin was brought a cup of tea and room was made and everyone insisted that he sit. A plate of *neemroo*, fried eggs, was set before him.

No guest would ever sit down straight away. They would always say, 'No, I'm not hungry, I won't disturb you,' then you had to go, 'No no no, I insist, I'll be offended if you don't share our meal,' then the guest would protest a bit more, and we would insist a bit more and in the end the guest stayed and everyone had a nice time. This was called *tarofing*. Everyone did it all the time so everything always took ages. In an Iranian house, a guest, whether invited or unexpected, is the most important person in the room.

Finally, Ramin sat and passed the paper to Dayee Taghi who read the article out to everyone.

Peyvand and I never understood the things Baba wrote but we listened anyway. We knew our baba was funny because he was always making us laugh whenever he played or talked with us. His writing though, Maman explained to us once, was *tanz*, satire, not for children to understand.

I became bored of listening to Baba's article and mashed some feta cheese on my fresh *tanoor* bread. The piece was really too big for my mouth but I jammed it in anyway and was able to take the tiniest sip of sweet tea to help it go down quickly so I could jam in another piece.

The grown-ups talked as I filled my little glass full of tea from the samovar, balanced it very carefully on my saucer and took it back to my place at the sofra. Peyvand liked to drink like Baba Mokhtar. He put a sugar cube into the saucer, poured a little tea over it and slurped. I preferred to put the sugar in the glass and stir it. It stayed sweet for longer.

'I had a dream last night, Fati.'

Maman Shamsi believed her dreams to be premonitions. When she was pregnant with Auntie Nadia, her ninth and last child who was born only eleven days before Peyvand, she hadn't wanted her. 'I'm too old! I can't have another child!'

Maman Shamsi had lost the baby before Nadia. After Mehrdad, her eighth, she couldn't bear to bring another baby into the world and Baba Mokhtar had simply not left her alone. In desperation, she had taken pills and the baby died. Maman Shamsi nearly died too. The doctor had told her, 'That is that! You are ruined, you won't be able to get pregnant again!' and Maman Shamsi was relieved. But then, eight years later, she was pregnant again. Maman Shamsi did not know what to do. She was too old now, too old for a baby. Then she had a dream. A little blonde girl came to her and told her she was called Nadia and promised her she would be a good girl and please, please let her be born. So Maman Shamsi did not take any pills and little blonde Nadia was born.

The dream she had the night before about us going to *Landan* was not so happy. 'You will not be back, maybe once or twice for a visit, but my children won't see Iran as they grow up. They won't come home.'

She meant me and Peyvand when she said 'my children'.

Maman rolled her eyes and smiled. 'Don't be silly, Maman! We are not moving for ever! We will be back, Hadi's work is here.'

But there was no consoling Maman Shamsi. All the young people wanted to go to *kharej* and why shouldn't they? A few years abroad gave them more opportunities when they returned to Iran. Being able to speak English or French was important. All the educated people spoke one or the other. Perhaps it was because Fatemeh was her eldest or perhaps it was because her husband was such a high-flyer with such a successful career that Maman Shamsi worried for her sweet, gentle Fatemeh. She buttered her bread and shook her head. 'You're taking my children away, God keep you, God keep you. It's all in His hands now.'

Maman Shamsi trusted God and put everything in his hands.