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# Two Lives

Vikram Seth

## 1.1

When I was seventeen I went to live with my great-uncle and great-aunt in England. He was Indian by origin, she German. They were both sixty. I hardly knew them at the time.

It was August 1969 – the monsoon season in Calcutta. A few days before I left, Mama had taken me to a temple to be blessed, which was most unlike her. She and Papa came to see me off at Dumdum Airport. I arrived at Heathrow in the afternoon. My great-uncle and great-aunt were still away on their annual holiday in Switzerland and, as I recall, I was met at the terminal by someone in the firm for which my father worked. My first impression was of the width of the road that led (under grey skies) to London. I was housed for a night in a drab hotel somewhere near Green Park.

That evening Shanti Uncle and Aunty Henny returned from Switzerland, and the following day I and my luggage arrived at their door.

I looked at the house that was to be my home for the next few years. There was a red pillar-box not far from the gate of 18 Queens Road, Hendon; this was to be my beacon whenever I trudged up from the tube station. In front of the house was a small, low-walled, immaculately maintained garden with a few rosebushes in full bloom. A path led to the door. To the right of the path, slanted on a stand, was a burnished brass plaque that read:

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I set down my luggage on the front step. The thought of meeting people whom I had not seen for years and did not really know, and whose home I would be sharing, made me nervous. I was, in any case, fearfully shy. After a minute I rang the bell.

Aunty Henny appeared. Lean, tall, sharp-featured and attractive, she didn't look sixty. She greeted me with enthusiasm rather than warmth, and led me down the linoleum-floored hallway where three or four people were seated, browsing through old magazines. 'Shanti's patients,' she explained. She poked her head into the surgery to exclaim in her high voice, 'Shanti, Vicky is here,' before opening the door to the drawing-room. 'No, leave the luggage in the corridor, by the stairs,' said Aunty Henny. 'Now sit down and I shall make some tea.'

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Since I had been told by Mama not to give any trouble and to be helpful at all times, I offered to help. Aunt Henny would have none of it. I sat down and surveyed the room. Everything seemed inordinately tidy, down to the nested set of varnished side-tables and a polished cabinet for the television.

Aunt Henny brought tea with three cups, and soon afterwards Shanti Uncle took a break from his work. He was still dressed in his white dental jacket. As soon as he came in, he hugged me, then stood back and said, 'Now let me look at my little Vicky. It has been so many years since I saw you. Now you must tell me how your parents are, and what your journey was like. Have you got all your kit for school? Have you eaten? Henny, the boy's starving, you can tell. We must feed him up. Let's open a tin of peanuts. Have you shown him his room?' Aunt Henny looked on impatiently. Suddenly Uncle glanced at his watch, gulped his tea down and rushed back to the surgery.

In those days I was very sensitive about my height and cringed whenever anyone called me little. Shanti Uncle, however, was even shorter than I was, and Aunt Henny towered over him. Nor did I like being called Vicky, even though in India it would not be taken for a feminine diminutive. But my overwhelming sense was that of relief. Uncle's talk filled in, indeed flooded, all my awkward silences. And his hug had made me feel welcome, though it was made with only one arm. His right arm, being artificial, was withheld from the embrace.

## 1.2

I had been to England twice before. When I was two and a half years old, I travelled by sea with an uncle and aunt who happened to be going there. I was to join my parents, who had left a year or so earlier: the Bata Shoe Company, for which my father worked, had transferred him to head office in London. My widowed grandmother – my mother's mother (whom I called Amma) – had been left in charge of me at home, and I grew very attached to her. When I began to speak, Amma insisted that it be in Hindi and only in Hindi. She herself was perfectly bilingual, but had decided that I would get more than enough English in England. As a result, when I was delivered to my parents in London, they found that I couldn't speak or understand a word of the local language.

Shortly after my arrival, I was taken to see Shanti Uncle and Aunt Henny. During the time my mother had been in England, she had become very fond of Shanti Uncle, and he of her. Both Aunt Henny and he were keen on children, and were looking forward eagerly to my arrival.

I don't know whether it was Shanti Uncle's effusiveness or Aunt Henny's European colour and features, but I quickly became uncomfortable. 'I don't like it here, I want to go home,' I stated firmly in Hindi. Shanti Uncle looked startled. When Aunt Henny asked him what I'd said, he told her that I was enjoying myself and would come again, but that I was tired and needed to go home and rest.

The foreign Aunt Henny, whatever she represented to me, did pose a puzzle to the whole of Shanti Uncle's extended family in India. Uncle had married late, in his

forties, and had not brought her to India to be shown around in the proper way. They had no children. She was known to be a German, tall, quite brusque, and with no time for clan commitments in the Indian style. As Aunt Henny said, years later: 'It's very difficult to be enthusiastic about all these adults, these total strangers, who turn up every so often and call themselves your nieces and nephews.' Even my mother, whom Aunt Henny liked, never graduated to being her niece. Whenever my parents called, she would open the door, survey the visitors standing on the top step and shout out, in a view-halloo sort of voice, 'Shanti, your relations are here.'

After a year and a half, I was sent back to Calcutta with my grandmother, who had suddenly and unexpectedly arrived in London on a chartered flight. My parents remained in England for another year. When they returned to Calcutta, my baby brother Shantum was with them.

My second visit to England took place when I was nine, and lasted only a month. One memory of that visit was of Jackie, the plump and pretty au pair at 18 Queens Road, who was very huggable and on whom I had a crush.

But the event of which my memory is strongest, and perhaps has grown even stronger over time, took place at one of the bridge parties that Shanti Uncle and Aunt Henny used to hold from time to time on a Saturday evening. Shanti Uncle took his bridge very seriously, and my father had made a folding leather stand for him so that he could arrange his cards conveniently and play with his left hand. I was bored with watching this strange, intense game, which consisted of almost complete silence followed by incomprehensible, even acrimonious, volubility. It was late. I was leafing through a pile of magazines in another room. One of them – I think it was *Life* – contained an illustrated article about Adolf Eichmann. I cannot now remember much about it, but it must have covered his crimes, his capture and his trial. At one stage, either at a break in the game or while she was dummy, Aunt Henny stepped into the room, saw what I was reading, and said to me, 'So, Vicky, what do you think of him?' My reply was that he was an evil, horrible man. This seemed a natural enough reaction, but it had a strong effect on Aunt Henny. 'You think so? You think so?' she said, and looked at me searchingly. But instead of discussing matters further, she left the room and I went back to my reading.

### 1.3

Now, at the age of seventeen, I was once again in Shanti Uncle and Aunt Henny's home, reacquainting myself with them and with my surroundings.

18 Queens Road was a large semidetached house about five minutes' walk from the Hendon Central underground station on the Northern Line, a couple of stations after it emerged from its tunnel into the daylight. Apart from two small attics, the house was spread over two floors. Each floor had four main rooms. Downstairs, the sunniest room, with a large south-facing window, was Uncle's surgery. He spent more than eight hours there each day, and needed the light. The surgery faced the front garden with its roses and gleaming professional plaque, and, beyond the busy road, the green expanse of Hendon Park and the hills of Hampstead to the south.

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Across the corridor, which acted as a sort of waiting-room for the patients, was the drawing-room. This was divided from the small dining-room by a sliding glass door, which was left open whenever there was a party. The dining-room led to the large linoleum-floored kitchen, Aunt Henny's sacred space; and that gave on to the long, narrow back garden where a couple of gnarled apple trees produced malformed but deliciously tart fruit.

A flight of stairs led up from the L-shaped corridor. Upstairs, above the kitchen was the so-called X-ray room, still used occasionally for developing X-rays, but now mainly a storage space for everything from dental gold to yellowing newspapers to dozens of bottles of Schweppes tonic water. Shanti Uncle was something of a pack-rat. There was also an upstairs drawing-room directly above the surgery which, though filled with sunlight, was, for some reason, almost never used. Its main ornament was a huge, colourful porcelain cockatoo. The other two rooms were Uncle and Aunt Henny's bedroom and a guest bedroom. Everywhere there was a profusion of net curtains. The only toilet and the only bathroom in the house were on this upstairs floor.

Up a flight of narrow stairs, directly under the slanted roof, were the two attics, each with a small window. One of these attics was to be renovated for me, so that I could have a room of my own and privacy for study. It was, however, directly above Shanti Uncle and Aunt Henny's bedroom, and occasionally at night I would hear them talking or quarrelling in German.

My room had not yet been done up, so I stayed in the guest bedroom. I was there for only a few days in the first instance, because term at Tonbridge School was about to begin.

I had won a scholarship to study for my A-levels at Tonbridge on the basis of my final exams at Doon, my boarding-school in India. But my mother was not at all keen that I go to England on my own: sex, drugs and general dissipation were what she feared. My father, however, prevailed; he told her that if she prevented me from going, I would hold it against her all my life. Perhaps it was to preserve me from the temptations of English ways that Mama took me to the temple. The other preservative would be Shanti Uncle. He would keep a watchful eye on me, report back to them, and act, in general, in loco parentis. Had he not been in England, I doubt Mama would have let me go; and Papa was right - I doubt I would have forgiven her.

#### 1.4

A few days after going to stay with Shanti Uncle and Aunt Henny, I packed a suitcase and took the train to Tonbridge. I was to be a boarder, but had to report regularly by letter and phone to Uncle and Aunt Henny, as well as, of course, to my parents.

Two large boars' heads made of stone greeted me at the entrance. I was lodged in School House, and in a cavernous hall had a small wooden cubicle of my own to work and sleep in. Students were permitted record-players, and the sound of 'Bridge

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over Troubled Water' in particular wafted over my first term. Though I had come in at a late stage of school life, when friendships were already formed, the boys were not unwelcoming. Nor, for that matter, were the masters, though I found my housemaster (who was also the headmaster) daunting.

Mr McCrum was tall and distinguished-looking – indeed, at that stage I thought of him more as a personage than a person – and was later to become headmaster of Eton. Shortly after my arrival, he gave a lunch for some of the students in School House; I was one of the invitees. Everything was decorous and measured; after sherry we repaired to the dining-room. A surreptitious glance or two told me which implement everyone else was using, and I followed suit. But at some stage of the meal, I relaxed my vigilance. Shrimps were served inside scooped-out apples. I ate both. As I ate, I became aware that the conversation around me had grown muted. People were staring at me, and when I turned to look at them I noticed something else. On each plate, the shrimps had all been extracted and consumed; the enclosing apples, however, had been left intact. A shocked silence had descended upon the table. My fellow schoolboys glanced anxiously towards Mr McCrum. I looked down at my plate. After a pause, he said, 'Yes, I've always thought it rather wasteful not to eat the apple,' and in due course, the plates and my mortification were cleared unpainfully away.

My subjects at Tonbridge were Pure Mathematics, Applied Mathematics and Physics, but shortly after my arrival, I decided that this diet was too unvaried. I dropped Physics and took up English Literature. We read Chaucer, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, George Herbert and Samuel Beckett. My teachers were excellent and I was happy in my studies, but Shanti Uncle was anxious about my anomalous mix of subjects.

In due course, Mr McCrum called me in for a serious chat about my future. It was decided, with some little input from me, that I should take the special entrance exams for Oxford. A little later, however, I discovered that one had to have studied a European language to O-level standard to be accepted at the university. I wrote to the authorities, requesting an exemption, explaining that I had studied Hindi to the required level but that I would never have had the opportunity to study European languages at my school in India even if I had wished to. I was told that no waiver would be granted.

I was now in a panic. Learning any language to the required standard in the ordinary way entailed about four or five years' work, and it was a mere six months to the O-level exams. Worse, there was a translation paper for the Oxford exams, which required a more advanced level of the foreign language. When I explained my problem to Shanti Uncle and Aunt Henny, they were worried for me, especially since they could see how dispirited I was. But shortly afterwards Aunt Henny sat me down in the drawing-room with a cup of tea and said firmly that there was nothing for it but to accept things as they were, unfair as they might seem. This is what life was sometimes about. I would have to fulfil the requirement. In addition, it was clear that German was the right language for me, because in the holidays she and Uncle would be able to help me where the school had left off.



Immediately she'd announced that I would have to learn German, Auntie Henny began to speak to me in the language. 'Was ist das, Vicky?' she asked, pointing at a picture, and I had to respond, 'Das ist ein Bild, Tante Henny.' I didn't much care for the sound of the language. After a while, German spread to the dining-table, and I would have to ask for bread or butter or whatever it was in German before it was offered to me. It was a game, sometimes interesting, sometimes tedious, but Auntie Henny was determined that I should have some grounding in the language before term began and all my various studies descended on me simultaneously.

Uncle used to have a hurried lunch with us, and return to the surgery shortly afterwards. While I washed the dishes and Auntie Henny dried them, she would sing songs she remembered from her youth. Her voice was penetrating, even strident, but very much in key. 'Röslein, Röslein, Röslein rot,' she would sing, pausing dramatically on the final word, before descending at last to 'Röslein auf der Heiden'. If she noticed a speck still remaining on a plate, she would return it to me with the word 'Retourkutsche [round trip]!'.

Lessons were also arranged for me with the German wife of an Indian friend of Uncle's, who lived nearby. She baked delicious biscuits, talked to me about left-wing politics and taught me the rudiments of grammar. Back at Tonbridge, a scholarly and somewhat frail teacher gave me private lessons at his house, since it was clear that I would have to be force-fed the language at high speed. As for German itself, after my initial resentment that I had to learn it at all and the shock of the genders and declensions, I began to enjoy it, though it was stressful every month or so to have to vault into the next year's course.

By the time I returned to Queens Road for the holidays, I found I could speak the language a little. I could understand the quarrels between Uncle and Auntie at the breakfast table; they were of surpassing triviality. At night, though, when they bickered, I would occasionally catch 'der Junge', and realised they were discussing me.

Now that I knew what their altercations were about, I was less concerned when there was an explosion of irritation between them. They made up by simply ignoring the fact that they had quarrelled and getting on with their work or chores. Each mentioned to me in private that they were worried that the other was working too hard.

It was through my study of German that my relationship with them deepened. They were proud of my progress. Every day, Auntie would spend a long time on the phone with her friends, speaking mainly in German; now, when they visited, I was told to demonstrate that I too could speak to them: to Mia and Peter Schwab, to Auntie Rosie, to Sonja. I found the experience embarrassing.

Uncle's friend and fellow dentist, Fred Götte, was a different matter. With him I talked more freely, unmindful of my mistakes. He and Uncle would walk in Sunny Hill Park and discuss the world and their colleagues and friends. Fred was cheerful and foul-mouthed and a great deal of fun. 'Ach, die blöde Kuh!' – Oh, the stupid cow! – was one of his favourite expressions.

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Whenever I returned for an exeat or for the holidays, Uncle would question me in detail about my activities (and inactivities) at Tonbridge – my course of studies, my social life, my avoidance of chapel, rugby and Corps, my contacts with my teachers and housemaster. He approved of my early-morning cross-country runs, warned me against bad company, reproved me for not writing or telephoning often enough, and kept telling me to eat more.

My chronic untidiness distressed Aunty Henny, who could not stand the smallest bit of paper, thread or dust on the carpet. She came upstairs to inspect my room, said, in German, 'I can't stand it, Vicky, I'll faint,' and ceased to bother me as long as I confined my mess there. In general, though, Shanti Uncle was inclined to be strict with me, Aunty Henny lenient. 'Where have you been? What did you do? How much did it cost?' followed by 'Shanti, let the boy be!' was a constant refrain during the holidays.

After a while, I stopped being a guest for Aunty Henny, or a project, but became a sort of companion. I was still 'my husband's nephew' when introduced to strangers. One evening, however, she introduced me as 'my nephew', paused, but did not correct herself. After that, she used the terms interchangeably.

For Shanti Uncle, I became 'Söhnchen', or little son.