

## "Montreal 1962" by Shauna Singh Baldwin

Shauna Singh Baldwin (born 1962) is a Canadian American novelist of Indian descent. "Montreal 1962" is from her book of short stories *English Lessons and Other Stories*. In this short story, a Sikh woman who has recently come to Canada with her husband describes washing his turbans. In the Sikh religion, men often wear turbans and grow their hair long.

In the dark night you came close and your voice was a whisper though thee 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.<sup>1</sup> Mentally, I converted dollars to rupees<sup>2</sup> and thought how many people in India each envelope in India 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<sup>3</sup> to the neighborhood dry-cleaner and a woman with no eyebrows held it like a dishrag and 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 unraveled each turban, each precise spiral you had wound round your head, and soon the room was full of soft streams of muslin<sup>4</sup> 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.

1. money brought by a bride to her husband when they're married
2. the basic unit of money in some Asian countries, including India
3. a garment that is elaborately draped around the body, traditionally worn by women of South Asia
4. a type of cotton fabric

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 a hot sun or perhaps near a green field of wheat stretching far to the banks of the Beas.

As the water left the turbans, I began to see the room through muslin screens. The pallid<sup>5</sup> walls, the radiator you try everyday to turn up hotter for me, the small windows, unnaturally high. When the turbans were lighter, I set the dining chairs with their halfmoon backs in a row in the middle of the well-worn carpet and I draped the turbans over their tops the way Gidda<sup>6</sup> dancers wear their chunnis<sup>7</sup> pinned tight in the centre parting of their hair. Then I sat on the carpet before them, willing them: dance for me — dance for us. The chairs stood as stiff and wooden as ignorant Canadians, though I know maple is softer than chinar.<sup>8</sup>

Soon the bands of cloth regained all their colour, filling the room with sheer lightness. Their splendor arched upwards, insisting upon notice, refusing the drabness, refusing the obscurity, wielding the curtain rod like the strut of a defending champion.

From the windows over my head came the sounds of a Montreal afternoon, and the sure step of purposeful feet on the sidewalk. Somewhere on a street named in English where the workers speak joul<sup>9</sup> I imagined your turban making its way in the crowds, bringing you home to me.

Once again I climbed on a chair and let your turbans loose. One by one, I held them to me, folding in their defiance, hushing their unruly indignation, gentling them into temporary submission. Finally, I faced them as they sat before me.

Then I choose my favorite, the red one you wear less and less, and I took it to the bedroom. I unfurled the gauzy scarlet on our bed and it seemed as though I'd poured a pool of the sainted blood of all the Sikh<sup>10</sup> martyrs there. So I took a corner and tied it to the doorknob just as you do in the mornings instead of waking me to help you. I took the diagonal corner to the very far end of the room just as you do, and rolled the scarlet inward as best I could within the cramped four walls. I had to untie it from the doorknob again to roll the other half, as I used to do every day for my father, then my brother and now you. Soon the scarlet rope lay ready.

I placed it before the mirror and began to tie it as a Sardar<sup>11</sup> would, one end clenched between my teeth to anchor it, arms raised to sweep it up to the forehead down to the nape of the neck, around again, this time higher. I wound it swiftly, deftly, till it jutted haughtily forward, adding four inches to my stature. Only when I had pinned the free end to the peak did I let the end clenched between my teeth fall. I took the saliva-darkened cord, pulled it back to where my hair bun rested low, and tucked it up over the turban, just as you do.

5. pallid (adjective): pale

6. a popular folk dance in parts of India and Pakistan

7. a long length of material worn around the shoulders and head

8. a type of tree found in Europe and Asia

9. a popular form of Canadian French, influenced by English

10. a monotheistic religion that was established in India

11. a person of high rank in India

In the mirror I saw my father as he must have looked as a boy, my teenage brother as I remember him, you as you face Canada, myself as I need to be.

The face beneath the jaunty turban began to smile.

I raised my hands to my turban's roundness, eased it from my head and brought it before me, setting it down lightly before the mirror. It asked nothing now but that I be worthy of it.

And so, my love, I will not let you cut your strong rope of hair and go without a turban into this land of strangers. The knot my father tied between my chunni and your turban is still strong between us, and it shall not fail you now. My hands will tie a turban everyday upon your head and work so we can keep it there. One day our children will say, "My father came to this country with very little but his turban and my mother learned to work because no one would hire him."

Then we will have taught Canadians what it takes to wear a turban.

Source:

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