

EXCERPT FROM

MR. SINGH AMONG THE FUGITIVES

BY STEPHEN HENIGHAN

I walked back through the snow to my dormitory, not barbered as I had planned, but carrying an enormous piece of blue fabric and a white turban cap in a plastic bag. How fortuitous that my surname happened to be the same as that used by Sikhs! Was it a sign, an indication of the path I should take in Canada? I imagined myself wearing my bright blue turban as confidently as Seema wore her navy-blue Toronto Maple Leafs sweater. Her garment was a declaration of Canadian belonging; my destiny, paradoxical as ever, was to forge belonging by establishing myself as separate and apart. But the thought of masquerading as a Sikh, even for an evening at a party, in the hope of eliciting female attention, made me pause. As I paused, I felt my heart sicken. A man of Victorian inclination, I had come to the West because I felt Western. Even if marking myself off as Eastern and foreign stimulated Western curiosity, and especially female curiosity, I was reluctant to participate in the charade. A Sikh! What would my father say? He had brought me up to see Sikhism as a reforming strain in the great tradition of Hinduism. Sikhs, he had stressed, were not really different from us, they had merely chosen to exile themselves to a kind of borderland.

These memories swarmed over me as I closed the door of my miniature dormitory room, more like a space capsule than a living area, and dropped the plastic bag on the bed. I thought of S. A.'s warmth and hospitality. He did not seem to care that we came from different religious backgrounds, only that we were both Indians in the frozen north. And if the Sikhs lived in a borderland, so did I, with an education more English than Asian, a present in which I was learning about hockey rather than cricket. Against my will, I was gripped by the thought that the intermediate zone of Sikhdom might match my present state better than any declaration of purity.

I sat down to think about this.

I considered wearing my turban to the party in the lounge of my dormitory that Saturday night. In the end, I slid the plastic bag under the bed. I gathered my hair into a ponytail, went downstairs, and peered in the door, where titanic quantities of beer were being chugged. Enormous hockey players—in my eyes, all white Canadian men were hockey players—stumbled around the lounge as though they had ventured onto the ice without their skates. It was not the place for a hippie, or an Indian, or anyone who was not six feet tall. As I trailed back to my dormitory room in loneliness, I told myself that I must find my way, my means of asserting myself. I decided to lay Sikhdom aside and polish my reputation as a man of culture. If I could not chug beer, I would find an alternative. I settled on wine. I would present myself as a connoisseur of wine. I had never tasted wine. But, where I knew I would make a fool of myself if I tried to match the hockey players' slaking of beer, wine was linked to culture. It was part of the world I wanted. I was confident that there were young women who also yearned for this sophistication. I borrowed books on viticulture from the university library—the scant reading for my courses did not occupy me for long—and soon became knowledgeable. Knowledge, alas, is not visible. I felt ashamed at having to learn this lesson again. In truth, I'd known it already: I had arrived in Thunder Bay possessed of far more reading than my fellow undergraduates—was I not *B.A. Bombay, M.A. Bombay (failed)*?—yet neither my classmates nor my professors gave me credit for this learning. I needed to announce my difference. I needed an identity which, as my history professor said of the identity of the French province of Quebec, was *distinct*.

I sat down on my bed, reached beneath it, and pulled out the plastic bag. I stood before the small mirror on the wall and concentrated on replicating the movements S. A. had shown me. They weren't difficult to recall: as I had told myself, they were simply a series of gestures. Within ten minutes, my turban crowned my head. I looked like an illustrious fellow. I paraded back and forth across my room until walking that way felt natural. On Sunday night I again practised being a Sikh. On Monday I wore my turban to my lessons. Professors who had ignored me now treated me with cautious deference. My classmates

stared. Many of these stares—particularly female stares—were stoked by curiosity.

In the halls after class, in the cafeteria, and in the corridors of my dormitory, I received questions not only from the blank-eyed oddballs who had asked me if I was a guru and knew how to glimpse the infinite, but also from young women who liked to read, were majoring in English or History, and were interested in foreign countries and cultures. My turban did for me in Thunder Bay what the magazine with photographs of girls had done for me at the Academy: it made me normal. As the only brown-skinned person in a class of straw-haired pale-faces, I was abnormal; my turban acknowledged the abnormality, smoothing the way for strangers to approach me. It opened the door between me and them, making it easier for everyone to speak with me. With girls whom I liked, I edged the conversation away from meditation or transcendence to the subject of wine. As I did so, I felt the young women relax. I was exotic but not too exotic: like other men, I offered the opportunity to drink and cavort. I merely did so in a way that was steeped in culture. As we bantered, I discovered that my initials, R. U., flowed easily from Canadian lips.