

CHRISTA WITH TWO
OF HER FATHER'S
BROTHERS, UNCLE
MELVILLE (ON LEFT)
AND UNCLE EUSTACE

MEMOIR



The REUNION

After her father died, Christa D'Souza visited Mumbai to meet the family he rejected, and discover her Indian roots

It is 10pm, I am on the tarmac at Heathrow on a flight to Mumbai, and one of the cabin crew has just stowed my bag in the overhead locker for take-off. I need him to be careful with it because inside is a small Tupperware container carrying my father's ashes. Not all of them (the rest are in a shoe box under my bed), just enough to sprinkle in the place where he was born and brought up; the place he said, towards the end of his lonely, reclusive life, where he wished to die – despite a lifetime railing against it. I suppose you could say I'm bringing him home.

This will be my first trip to Mumbai, or Bombay, as everyone still calls it. My father, Stanley D'Souza, disassociated himself from his family – including seven siblings – soon after emigrating to London more than 50 years ago. He never properly explained his motives, but I think he suffered from that common generational shame some Anglophile Indians felt about their Asian roots. Such was his reluctance to discuss the

past, except in mocking anecdotes, my sister and I grew up with no sense of our heritage whatsoever. Even on getting the news that his mother, Josephine, had died, he simply shrugged his shoulders, crumpled up the aerogram and threw it away. None of which my sister and I ever questioned because you don't really question such things when you are a child, do you?

As for the urge to delve into your family's roots, well, there isn't usually much when one's parents are alive. In the six months since my father's death, though, I have felt an almost physical need to make some peace with the fact that he ended up alone, with an accent more English than the English, raging at the world. I want to reconnect; get a sense of what it is about me that is Indian. I don't look Indian, and I don't feel Indian, but – though it pains me to say it – I wonder whether the shame my father felt about his past was passed down. Now I'm only too keen to casually mention my Anglo-Indian roots in conversation but my sister and I went

to great lengths to cover it up as teens – dyeing our hair blonde and so forth.

Actually, when I say reconnect, what I really mean is connect. There is no “re” about it. The only relative from India I know is my cousin Michael, one of Uncle Eustace's eight children (oh yes, being of good Goan-Catholic stock, I've got hundreds of cousins). We were first introduced in New York, back in the Eighties. How weird it was meeting someone who looked just like me: the same shape, same colour eyes, though without the D'Souza nose (a nose I got rid of shortly afterwards, also to look more English). Michael and I have not really kept in touch, but it is through him that I have found out that his father (the older brother for whom my father had such simmering resentment), is about to celebrate his ninetieth birthday. Michael, who owns the interior design shop Mufti in Notting Hill, has been planning on flying out with his daughter, Ella, and suggests it would be a magic opportunity to introduce myself.

So, here I am, sitting in my seat, feeling... Well, how is one meant to feel? Although my English mother has been all for me making this trip, my sister hasn't been so sure. Yes, Bombay was where my father said, at the end, he wanted to die (he was always ranting on that if he were well enough, he'd just get on a plane and go), but I'm less sure he would have wanted us to be involved. And to add piquancy, Michael has not told anyone I'm coming. He says there are simply too many D'Souzias, too many factions, too much family “stuff”, not to present our trip as a *fait accompli*. Which seems fair. But what will they think of this light-skinned person, this middle-aged progeny of the, as it were, black sheep of the family, who has pitched up? And, more worryingly, what will I think of *them*?

My father first met my mother in 1954. He was 28, and had been posted to London as a military attaché to the Indian High Commission. The moment he caught sight of her (as he loved to recall, over and over again) walking her dog, Tawny, up Highgate Hill, he experienced a complete *coup de foudre*. He proposed during a screening of *A Star Is Born* at the Everyman cinema in Hampstead, pulling a wad of pound notes out of his pocket to prove he could support her; a joke, apparently, but the image still has me biting my knuckles with sadness. And they had to elope: she was only 16, already pregnant with me, and her strait-laced, repressed solicitor father was threatening to make her a ward of the court.

The marriage didn't last. Unable to handle his tyrannical, paternalistic ways – checking her every item of clothing to make sure it >

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wasn't in any way provocative and flying into a rage if any of her "bloody university" friends came to visit – my mother left him when I was four and my sister two. But, from the moment I was born, my father was nuts about me. I suspect his devotion was partly because, contrary to all his fears, I was so Caucasian looking. However, it was only when my mother started to have new relationships that I truly became the focus of his attention – whisking me away on holidays, which, despite his frugal existence, always involved flying first class and lavish clothes-shopping trips. Though it seems wrong and inappropriate now, at the time it was lovely to be the beneficiary of such largesse – imagine being taken to New York to see Stevie Wonder play the Copacabana club when you are just 10.

Michael, Ella and I are squished into the back of a rickshaw making our way along the palm-fringed promenade from the Taj hotel in Bandra to Uncle Eustace's apartment in Pali Naka, where some of the relatives are assembling for lunch. When my father was growing up, Bandra was an island filled with quaint colonial-style bungalows that overlooked the Arabian Sea but now, post-reclamation (Bombay used to be seven

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islands), it is a bustling suburb. The queen of the suburbs, in fact, much favoured by Bollywood movie stars. Coexisting peacefully here are stray dogs, ragged barefoot children, myriad designer fusion restaurants, exercise studios (yes! – they've got Bikram) and soulless high-rise apartment blocks, which, according to Michael, command the most outrageous prices. By the end of next year, Bandra will have its very own Soho House.

Part of me gets why people fall in love with metropolitan India: the magnificent explosion of colour, the brightly painted trucks, the kohl-eyed street urchins, and so on, but oh, the intense mugginess and the chaos and that omnipresent stench of, well, shit... Call me ethnocentric, but that might be a block.

We continue past Chapel Road, where my father lived during term time with his aunts, relates Michael; past St Andrew's Church, where all the D'Souzas assemble for novena, and by countless shrines to Mother Mary, before drawing up finally to the Grosvenor, a functional Sixties-style apartment block where, for the past 20 years, Uncle Eustace has lived with my cousin Vikram and his family. I take a very deep breath.



CHRISTA ON CHAPEL ROAD, WHERE HER FATHER ONCE LIVED. LEFT, UNCLE MELVILLE AND AUNT GLADY'S WEDDING DAY. CHRISTA'S FATHER, STANLEY, IS ON THEIR LEFT

The flat is small, light, cluttered and comfortingly curry-scented, just as the little mews flat my father rented used to be. It is also a much more modest affair than you'd expect of a major general of the Indian army, as Uncle Eustace was, but my father lived so monastically I decide it must be a family trait. The walls are plastered with family portraits, army memorabilia and photographs of Uncle Eustace – he fought in Burma in the Second World War. In pride of place, I notice a snap of Mother Teresa, taken in this very flat when she came to visit my late Aunt Noelle.

Squashed into the living room, meanwhile, are what seem like scores of people, all of whom I am apparently related to. Vikram, Deepak, Rohan, Shively, Nisha... I have a lot of names to remember. Some are eating, some are watching TV, some are gathered on a tiny balcony, smoking, and Vikram's daughter, a pretty little girl with a long black plait, proudly wheels her pink scooter up and down, up and down. The door is left ajar, again reminding me of my father, who always kept the door of his little flat on the latch (although nobody besides us and the Ocado man ever visited towards the end).

Everyone seems quite pleased to see me – baffled, probably, more than anything else, which is only natural since they didn't know I was coming. Me, I can't help feeling both overwhelmed and a bit of a sore thumb. Perhaps they intuit the deep-seated fear of extended family that my sister and I have

inherited. Perhaps that is why nobody is making a particular fuss. Perhaps I should be the one making more of a fuss, and have dressed up a bit, given the occasion. But then no one else is, dressed as they are, like me, in trainers and jeans. It is a comfort that my cousin Deepak's wife, Christen, is a blonde, blue-eyed American. Somehow, I don't want to be the only white person in the room...

Unperturbed by the mild chaos around him is Uncle Eustace, hunched silently and deliberately over his lunch. He looks so very much like my father, with that aquiline nose and that sloping chin and that preternaturally smooth skin, it almost takes my breath away. Like my father, too, he is stone-deaf and Michael has to shout my name. "Stanley's daughter, you mean?" he finally says, his rheumy eyes lighting up as he tightly clasps my hand.

After an elaborate lunch of fried pomfret (my father's absolute favourite), homemade dal, and a Goanese speciality called pork soppotel (consumed in rotation because there aren't enough places for everyone to sit down simultaneously), Uncle Eustace (nobody, but nobody, is allowed to call him "Eustace") beckons me with his stick to the bedroom and carefully pulls out some old photo albums from a cupboard. There's my grandfather, Edmund, a purser in the First World War, and my grandmother, Josephine, daughter of the man who held the Singer sewing machine franchise in India in the late nineteenth century (obviously Edmund married up). I hope to see some snaps of my father when he was a little boy – I know he had curls, just like my nine-year-old – but >

no such luck. “Stanley was the best-looking of all of us,” says Uncle Eustace, “such a shy, good boy, too. He was the jewel of his mother’s eye. It broke her when she was cut off.” Uncle Eustace seems a kindly old man and is very nice about my father, telling me what a good student he was, how shy he was, how he never gave their parents any trouble. He also describes how sad it made him that the few times he came to London and tried to see my father – “Not to ask for anything, you understand, just to see him” – my father refused. I’d like to prod him further but, as his daily nap beckons, I bottle out.

It’s the next day, the day of the party, and Michael takes Ella and me to a little strip-lit sari shop to kit ourselves out. The actual putting on of the sari doesn’t exactly come naturally, and the lady from the shop has to come out to the hotel later to bandage me into it. No charge. And there is no charge by the Taj to get someone to go down to Linking Road to buy me a couple of pairs of gold sandals to go with it. The desire to please, inherent in this culture, the time everyone has for you, the apparent lack of ripping you off, is mind-boggling. How cold and unhelpful and alien London must have seemed when my father first arrived in the Fifties.

I sashay as best I can (you really need that innate Indian elegance to carry off a bared midriff and your skirt attached to your wrist) into the open-air courtyard of the big, modern hotel where the event is being held. It was the right thing to do. Almost all the women here are dressed in saris or salwar kameez and, according to at least a couple of relatives, it really brings out the Indian in me – although, in the back of my mind, I can’t help but feel the ghostly wrath of my father shouting at me for so brazenly embracing my roots like this.

Ruefully avoiding the salad (I haven’t had any jabs, and the D’Souzas have notoriously delicate stomachs), I hit the buffet. God, real Indian food is delicious. I sit with my cousin Marianne, a Miss Asia runner-up in 1977, and her husband, Anil, who is big in pest control. I also meet my Uncle Melville, a spry, partially deaf, partially toothless eightysomething, whose finger-wagging, slight stutter and part-arrogant, part-obsequious manner brings back my father so clearly it’s almost as if he were still alive.

Melville was probably the brother closest to my father, and it is truly mesmerising hearing him talk about the good old days. He recounts how cross my father got, for example, when he flew over with an entire pomfret fish

in his suitcase because he knew my father loved it so... and then ate the lot; how much my father doted on me; how much he wanted Melville to come to work with him in London and was so disappointed when the offer was turned down. He cannot explain my father’s later refusal to see him. “I only like to remember the happy things,” he says, waving his hands in the air before insisting on taking me back to his flat to meet his wife, Gladys (Gladys, Stanley, Melville... what’s with all the *Coronation Street* names?). Walking straight into the oncoming traffic with a quivering finger aloft, his baseball cap slightly crooked, he hails us a rickshaw. Marianne tells me he’s already been knocked down a couple of times but that doesn’t stop him walking absolutely everywhere by himself. He’s like a cat prowling the streets – old, battered, but very much alive.

They last, the D’Souzas. When they sent Uncle Eustace to Hiroshima after the bomb was dropped, he was the only one who didn’t get leukaemia. My father had a dicky heart, like they all do, but in the end I think

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loneliness killed him. The infrastructure here is such that old people aren’t *allowed* to become lonely. That sense of family, that vast extended communal tie, was part of his DNA, whether he liked it or not. No wonder my father wanted to return. Coming back would certainly have prolonged his life. It makes me feel guilty that we didn’t bundle him up earlier and take him in with us – me, my partner and two children. But even with the romance and sentimentality of hindsight, I can’t see how it would have worked.

Here, there is a huge sense of familial obligation, of doing the right thing, underpinned by a heavy layer of religiosity. So too, though, can I see how my father might have thought this huge, all-consuming Goan-Catholic family might cramp his (somewhat delusional) vision of himself as an eccentric, dashing gent; the idea of being encumbered by this vast, very Indian family terrified him. It’s a feeling I understand only too well. Any time my other half gives me the merest whiff of a nice big family get-together, I’m off like Road Runner to do a story in a different country. Meaning, have I handed out my telephone number to my new relatives here and invited them all back to London? Forgive me, everyone, it’s like a nervous tic, but have I fuck.

By the third day, I am getting used to the Indian way of things, or at least the D’Souza way of things: musical chairs at mealtimes, the deference to elders (however they might behave), the love of food, the love of music (oh yes, one night we all gather round the electric piano for a good old sing-song). But do I feel more Indian? Is the head wobble getting more proficient? Do I feel as if I have come home, as I half hoped I might feel the moment the plane touched down? God, no. The stench of sewage overlaid with jasmine, the giant dead rats on the boardwalks, the public crapping on the beach – frankly, it’s too much of an assault on the senses *not* to outweigh the charm.

And that mixture, too, of obsequiousness and arrogance, of humility and imperiousness, so perfectly illustrated by Uncle Melville (you should see the spartan, strip-lit, stone-floored apartment in which he and his wife live – and the temper he flew into when the security guards at the hotel asked him to take his mobile phone out of his pocket: “You bloody buggers! I’ll have you all put in prison!”), why does *that* have to be part of my heritage? But one cannot change what is. You cannot be what you are not. My father, who had that “superior worm” complex par excellence, tried to do this, and it tormented him his whole life. I had such high hopes for this trip being a sort of epiphany and yet, instead, it has been strangely prosaic.

Part of me feels anxious about leaving his ashes here. I am not allowed to sprinkle them at Government House because it’s hard for non-Indians to get access while the governor is in residence. I had an idea to take them to Ganeshkhind in Pune, about four hours’ drive away, the one place my father always described as absolute paradise. But, according to my relatives, it is not as it used to be, much of it torn down in favour of those anonymous, money-spinning apartment blocks.

In the end, I decide to sprinkle them at Mount Carmel Church, on the grave where his parents are buried. My father was very disdainful of religion after emigrating but as a young man, according to Uncle Melville, he nearly became a Jesuit priest.

Father Drogo, the priest whom Uncle Melville has asked to bless the “ceremony” is having a nap when we arrive, and has to be woken up to be reminded. It’s a very modest churchyard filled with other D’Souzas, De Silvas, Fernandezes, De Cunhas, and so on. Modest and impromptu as it all is, it somehow feels right, with the ashes pitching and swaying slightly in the almost imperceptible breeze. If you are watching, Daddy, I hope you approve. ■