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Up at Oxford
1993

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A EUROPEAN
PRELUDE

OXFORD IS AUTHORITATIVELY DESCRIBED IN MY 1901 edition of Baedeker as "on the whole much more attractive than Cambridge to the ordinary visitor," so the traveller is instructed to "visit Cambridge first, or to omit it altogether if he cannot visit both." Certainly the University of Oxford was much better known than the University of Cambridge in the British India of my childhood. Indeed, my father's friends who had studied at Oxford used to say that without going there one could have no idea of its place in English literature, British history, and British philosophy—in British society. They spoke of Oxford as the home of clever people, the training ground of the governing class, the nursery of Prime Ministers. It was as though Oxford were, in its way, like the Hardwar of the Hindus, the Mecca of the Muslims, the Golden Temple of

the Sikhs—the holiest of the holy places of pilgrimage. Even when I was a child, there was no place I wanted to go to more than Oxford. Instead, when I was fifteen I came to America for education, and when I finished high school in Arkansas I ended up as an undergraduate at Pomona College, in Southern California. But there Pomona and its associated colleges were spoken of as the Oxford of the Orange Grove. Half a dozen of my professors at Pomona had studied at Oxford, and so had Pomona's president, E. Wilson Lyon. They all spoke about Oxford, making me even more determined to go there. But how was I to get there? At Pomona, I was being supported almost entirely by scholarships and grants, and sometimes even being able to finish college seemed impossible. At one point, my college was planning to nominate me for a Rhodes scholarship. But it turned out that as an Indian citizen I was ineligible to enter the American competition, and, at the same time, as one studying in America I was ineligible to enter the Indian competition for the single Rhodes scholarship available to all of India each year.

Nevertheless, in the spring of 1955, my third year at Pomona, I began to try for admission to Balliol. One of my history professors, John Gleason, had gone to Balliol and was a great champion of my going there. Founded in the thirteenth century, it was thought to be the oldest college at the university. It was also the most international, and was reputed to have been the first Oxford college to admit "blacks and wogs," in the nineteenth century. It was the birthplace of the Indian Civil Service and the alma mater of a number of India's leading civil servants, and, like some other Indians, I had grown up thinking that it was the whole university, rather than one college among more than a score of Oxford colleges. In May, I wrote a letter to the Master of Balliol, Sir David Lindsay Keir, inquiring about my chances of admission, and I soon got a letter back from K. J. Dover, Senior Tutor. "The Master has passed on to me your letter of May 30th, as I deal

with applications for admission to the College," he wrote. Saying that the college would be able to give me its decision before February 1st, he concluded, "Would you please send me (before January 1st, 1956) three testimonials from those who have seen most of your work at Pomona."

At my suggestion, my father, who happened to be in Europe, had made several trips to Oxford, had stopped by Balliol, and had called on, among others, Mr. Dover and T. H. Tylor, Fellow and Tutor in Jurisprudence, who was one of two blind tutors at Oxford. Mr. Tylor had immediately taken an interest in my application to Balliol. "Mr. Tylor said that at any one time there are three or four blind undergraduates at Oxford and that there has been an unbroken tradition of blind students at Oxford for half a century," my father wrote me in June. Admission to a college was handled primarily by the tutor (or tutors) of the subject that the applicant proposed to read, and the senior tutor took it for granted that if I came to Oxford I would be reading law. That was what most blind people read. (I had been blind since I was almost four.) Indeed, Tylor assumed that, like him, I would go on to do the advanced law degree, the B.C.L., and that afterward I would teach law in India. It never occurred to my father to question the assumption, because most of the Indians he himself knew who had studied in England were successful barristers at home. He couldn't imagine a better qualification than law for any career in India.

Soon after I received my father's letter, I was on my way to Harvard, where I was to attend the summer school, beginning in July. I was studying at Harvard for the first time, and I was much excited. I threw myself into work, taking a course in the twentieth-century American novel and one in short-story writing, with a view to perfecting the skills I needed to finish an autobiography that I was working on with the guidance of Edward Weeks, the editor of the *Atlantic*.

At Harvard, I also wrote a stream of letters to American,

British, and Indian organizations, telling them I expected to be admitted to Balliol and inquiring whether they had grants for which I might be eligible. At the same time, Dr. Lyon at Pomona, Mr. Tylor at Balliol, and other friends wrote on my behalf to their friends at various foundations. (I applied for admission and scholarships to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, too, but merely as a fallback.) All the letters got the same sort of reply—that I did not fit the classification for the organization's scholarships. It seemed that there was indeed no scholarship that was designed for someone like me—someone who, as it were, fell between two continents and wanted to study on a third, and was also blind.

As it happened, my application to Balliol was specially discussed at a college meeting in October, and I was notified immediately that I had been admitted, provided that I could obtain six hundred pounds a year in financial support. But November, December, and January came and went, and I seemed no closer to getting to Oxford. I had all but given up hope of ever getting there. Even people I knew well to whom I had written, seeking to advance my cause, had stopped answering my letters, as if I were making a nuisance of myself, as if I were asking for the moon.

Then, in February, I received a letter from Mrs. G. J. Watumull, the head of the Watumull Foundation, in Honolulu, who was one of many family friends I had appealed to. She said that she had not answered my letter for nearly four months, because she had been working behind the scenes: that she had sent my appeal to Paul Braisted, the president of the Hazen Foundation, in New Haven, Connecticut; that, although Braisted had agreed to present my case to his board of trustees, he had not been very hopeful; and that then the board-of-trustees meeting had been postponed.

I didn't want to write any of this to you [she wrote], so I decided to bide my time instead and await a report of the meeting of the Board

of Trustees in January. This morning's mail brought the letter, and I enclose a copy because they will grant you a fellowship.

I can't tell you how happy I am over this decision. I have waited with great anxiety for this date, and I can assure you it is a very rewarding one. The Hazen Foundation has been interested in students from India and in the readjustment of Indian students, after study abroad, to their homeland. I also know Paul Braisted personally and I must say I did my best in pleading your cause. That it was effective gives me great pleasure and satisfaction.

Now I hope you'll forgive me for not writing for such a long time.

I was elated. A scholarship from her foundation had helped me to get to Pomona; soon a scholarship secured through her efforts would get me to Oxford. Now there is no question—I'm actually going to Oxford, I thought. I'm actually going to study in Matthew Arnold's "sweet city with her dreaming spires."

