INHERITANCE

BALLI KAUR JASWAL

A NOVEL

Praise for *Inheritance*

"A rich and gorgeous portrait of a family—and nation—struggling against history, culture, and the grief of smashed hope."
—Emily Maguire, author of *Fishing for Tigers*

"An exceptional debut. Balli Kaur Jaswal reveals the conflicts at the heart of one Punjabi family with such compassion, such accuracy, the effect is compelling. Her gifts are immense."
—Andrew Cowan, author of *Pig*

"*Inheritance* is mesmerising. Balli Kaur Jaswal's voice is rich in detail and emotional truth. I was carried away with the characters' hopes and hurts. The book reminded me of the weight of family, but also how lost we are without it."
—Simmone Howell, author of *Everything Beautiful*

"A vivid, compelling tale of selfhood, fraught blood ties and the devastating weight of change."
—Meg Mundell, author of *Black Glass*

"*Inheritance* is a moving and assured debut, a perfectly balanced allegory, where the individual struggles of a family are underscored by the larger picture of nation-building and national identity. Balli Kaur Jaswal writes with compassion, intelligence and an empathetic eye, transporting the reader effortlessly through time and between points of view."
—Leanne Hall, author of *This Is Shyness*

"Jaswal's wonderful debut didn't merely transport me to a country I knew nothing about, or introduce me to a family the likes of which I'd never meet. She made me long for her Singapore like a lost home, and miss her characters like departed friends. What an extraordinary thing for a novel to do."
—Alexander Yates, author of *Moondogs*

"*Inheritance* mimics the form of a Babushka doll, with the Singh family's tale sitting within the larger microcosm of Singapore's Punjabi community and further encircled by the narrative of a newly independent state's shifting identity."
—Tali Levi, *The Melbourne Review*

"Jaswal's prose is pellucid and evocative. It drops the reader easily into the mind of her characters and their dilemmas and captures wonderfully the paradox of order in the tropics."
—Ed Wright, *The Australian*

"This is a novel with large themes including identity and multiculturalism; repression and individuality; superstition and the stigma of mental illness; shame, disappointment and regret; desire and mania; and love and grief. Ultimately about defiance, survival and self-acceptance, it is surprisingly hopeful."
—Paula Grunseit, *Bookseller and Publisher*

"A tender and enlightening read."
—Emily Laidlaw, *Readings*

"With *Inheritance*, Jaswal makes a debut of an imaginative boldness and assurance."
—Peter Pierce, *The Monthly*

"Jaswal's complex and tender portrayal of a bipolar personality and the stigma of mental illness are the highlights of *Inheritance*. And her descriptive language, whether about character or setting—of HDB flats, of Iowa—is evocative. A dazzling novel."
—Pooja Makhijani, *Notabilia*

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EPIGRAM BOOKS / SINGAPORE

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For my parents, Sohan Singh Jaswal and Ajit Kaur

PART I

1970–1971

Narain

IT WAS AN established rule in their household that books—and all documents containing pages and words—were not to be stepped on. Magazines were tucked away under the coffee table lest somebody's feet touch them. Stray newspaper sections were always neatly arranged, folded and stacked like fresh laundry. But in the days leading to his departure for America, a distracted Narain left brochures and forms all over the floor. He got from his door to his bed by tiptoeing around the edges of the room.

One afternoon, his sister observed from the doorway, her own toes perilously close to his papers. "You look like a pondan," she said. It was a word people used to describe men with shrill voices who walked like they were dancing, hips unhinged.

Narain ignored her. Amrit sang the word and mimicked his movements. He made a sudden leap to hit her but she moved out of the way with a squeal. Stepping back to regain his balance, his heels grazed the Iowa State University course catalogue.

"I wasn't bothering him." He heard her protesting outside as he knelt to kiss the catalogue. If somebody stepped on the printed word, house rules required a tender apology. The rules were inspired by Father's view that stepping on education was the ultimate display of disrespect. It brought terrible luck to a person. In his childhood, Narain remembered watching

his brother Gurdev kneel and pray for accidentally knocking a Holy Book onto the floor. "You never put sacred words where somebody could trample on them," his father had shouted. Not even Amrit was excused from breaking this rule.

Narain gathered his papers and pulled the two old suitcases out from under his bed. He still had a week; it was not necessary to pack now, but there was little left to do. Father would enter the room occasionally to read through the brochures and murmur words of encouragement. Gurdev's wife Banu had helped by doing her own sorting—she searched the island for its weight in bay leaves, padded clothing and powdered drink mixes. Every week she arrived at the house to deposit items that would only add bulk to his already overloaded luggage. "They're for you to take there," she said. She tactfully showed little care to know the state name and, like everybody else in the family, she spoke of America only in vague terms. There.

In secret, Narain had allowed himself to be more sentimental about his departure. He had purchased a book of photographs of Singapore, and made a project of fastening family photos to selected pages. A portrait of his unsmiling parents was placed against a bare sketch of crammed shopfronts on the banks of the Singapore River. A candid family shot taken during Gurdev and Banu's wedding was clipped to close-ups of mangosteens and papayas bursting with festive ripeness.

Amrit was allowed to help fill a smaller suitcase kept in the storage closet. The night before Narain left, she came to his door and reminded him not to forget it. The note of concern in her voice was touching. She lingered outside the room, her eyes roaming over the bare walls. Narain knew he would miss her the most, but he caught himself before saying something. This was exactly the sort of weak behaviour he was expected to shed in America.

A smirk formed and spread across Amrit's lips. "When you're gone, this room will be mine." He glared at her but decided against taking a swipe. Amrit giggled and dashed down the corridor. He heard her feet slapping across the wooden floors for a while before the house settled into a gradual silence.

Narain had already picked out an outfit for the aeroplane and Father had made arrangements for a bus to bring family and friends to see him off. Leaving for America would be a grand occasion but Narain could not feign pride or excitement. The only reason he was going so far away to study was because of what happened when he was in the army. There was no way to undo that shame but he could disappear for a while and return with a degree, a form of recompense for the damage he had caused to Father's reputation. "You will go to America to study engineering." Father had pronounced this fate with such certainty that Narain could only accept it.

Evenings mellowed the Naval Base streets. Palm trees hunched closer to the ground, burdened by heavy shadows. In the distance, stray voices flashed through the air like lightning, followed by the hum of crickets gathering to a steady harmony. The wind sighed through a crack in Narain's window, making the loose pages of the catalogue skitter across the floor. He picked up the pages and brought them to the living room to add to the stack of old newspapers. The karang guni man would arrive to collect them tomorrow, the coins in his pouch jiggling to the staggered rhythm of his walk.

Narain had to arrange the papers carefully, placing thicker stacks on top of the single sheets to avoid scattering. On his hands and knees in the dark of the living room, he glimpsed two feet, darting like fish beneath the curtains. "Who's there?" he called. No answer. He inched closer to the window and saw the shape of a teenage girl. "Amrit, come out."

Amrit stepped out from behind the curtains, grinning. "I'll get to keep all the money from the karang guni man when you go," she said. A streak of moonlight illuminated the panic she failed to disguise. She had been trying to sneak out of the house through the window again.

"You have to stop this," Narain said, quietly. "Whatever you were about to do, you have to remember you're only fifteen. You're a *girl*." He looked away, embarrassed by this fact.

Amrit brushed past him, leaving behind a trace of jasmine perfume. It was a gift from her girlfriends, she'd insisted when he caught her spraying it at her throat. He had seen her sneaking off into the night to mingle with boys who smoked cigarettes and pinched her tiny waist. Since she turned fifteen, it was disturbingly clear that she enjoyed the stares of men and the taste of the night air. She had become less discreet as the family's concern shifted to Narain, but he was still the only one who had noticed.

He followed her into the room. "Amrit," he said. "You're old enough to take care of yourself now. If you need anything while I'm away—"

"What will you do? Fly back here?" she challenged. Spinning to face him, her heel squeaked against the floor. She began to giggle at the awkward sound.

"No," Narain said firmly, remembering the man he was expected to become overseas. He straightened his back and looked past Amrit's shoulder. "I have to focus on my education. You have to learn to take care of yourself." As he turned to leave, he was about to say something to soften the harshness of his words but then he noticed she was still laughing at her feet. Her shoulders were shaking and her hands were cupped over her mouth so that nobody would hear.

• • •

While Narain was in America, Father wrote long letters, which Narain kept scattered about his dorm room. Father's careful English script betrayed the attempts of an adult learner trying to perfect the roundness of his o's and sharpen the edges of his e's. As Narain read the letters, he ran his hands over the words in search of traces of forgiveness but Father's only intention was to provide updates on recent events. The only tenderness apparent was when Father enquired after his feet. "Keep them warm. You'll get sick otherwise." And then, "Do well, son."

The same three words concluded every letter and as the first months passed, Narain became increasingly irritated with Father's assumption that success could be so easily attained. He was ignored in Iowa, just as he had been all his life in Singapore, for his slight frame and effeminate gestures. Although he had spent his primary school years reciting every idiom, synonym and gerund in the *Comprehensive Guide to Queen's English*, the language spoken here seemed foreign. He drew curious looks for his turban and his beard. As a young boy in Singapore, he used to complain that people stared and his classmates made jokes, but Father never tolerated whining. "You are Sikh and you are showing this to the world. Be proud." But pride was measured no differently in America. Classmates didn't invite him to parties or include him in their study groups. They cleared their throats and lowered their voices when he passed them on the quad or in the library.

One day, Narain had to go to the university registrar's office to confirm a change in his elective subjects. The plump, red-haired clerk cheerily asked for his surname. "Sandhu," he said absent-mindedly, watching a fog settle on the tops of bare branches through the window.

The clerk chatted about the weather as she pulled out a heavy metal drawer. "It's getting colder out there," she said. "It's a shame we didn't get

to savour fall this year." Her smile faded as she picked through her folders. "Would you spell your last name again?"

Realising his error, Narain apologised. "It's Singh." He spelled it out.

Exasperation rearranged the clerk's features. "I don't understand why it has to be so complicated with foreign students," she muttered. By reflex, Narain nearly launched into the explanation he had repeated so many times back home: "Sikhs are all supposed to have the same surname, for the sake of equality. Kaur for women and Singh for men. But it becomes confusing, with so many of us, so we use a family name specific to our region in Punjab. Officially, my surname is Singh but informally I use Sandhu." Generally, this speech was received with indifference, with more astute listeners reminding him that there were too few Sikhs in Singapore for identities to be confused. The clerk would likely say the same thing about his existence here in Iowa so Narain offered another apology and hurried off, feeling the familiar shame of an intruder.

The weather became similarly unfriendly. A rusty autumn turned into winter and stripped Narain's surroundings of colour. He dreaded going outside. A pair of thick-soled shoes that he thought he remembered packing had gone missing and when the temperature dropped in the evenings, his toes felt like blocks of ice. Engineering classes were difficult; he found himself drifting in and out of his own thoughts and thinking about home. Amrit's suitcase remained unopened under his bed. He knew what was inside—he had seen the other foreign students. Thin sweaters that began to unravel and stretch the minute they were worn. Packets of Ovaltine, which looked and tasted like sand. Dial soap and Darkie toothpaste. Mint oil to soothe those headaches from studying all night. A box of tea leaves that tasted bitter unless mixed with condensed milk and spices that he would never find in Iowa.

Narain vowed not to turn to the bag to remedy his homesickness. As a child, his cousin Karam had teased him about being a mummy's boy. Karam said that Mother had wanted a girl so badly that when Narain was born, she treated him as one. When he was a toddler she allowed him to keep his long hair loose and she took more time grooming him, wrapping his soft curls around her fingers and calling him her little darling. Narain knew this was true. There were photographs of Karam and Gurdev squinting at the camera, their hair neatly braided and piled on top of their heads in round buns, and then him, squatting next to them, long black tresses hanging from his shoulders. He had a hazy recollection of her disappointment the first time he told her he wanted to join his brothers playing football outside, although he had been just as relieved as she was to see him return in tears moments later with two fresh wounds on his kneecaps, bright declarations of his unsuitability for sports.

Childhood memories of his father always accompanied those of his mother, trailing like smoke from a lit mosquito coil. Father had always been brooding and impatient with her, injecting any silence between them with harsh criticism. Any longing that she expressed for having a different life angered him. "Accept your new country," he would say in disgust. Years after his arrival to Singapore, Father still reminded her that he had known nothing then. "No English, no experience, no money. Nothing. And I made something out of it. If you want to keep complaining, then just go. Just disappear." Nobody expected that this would happen, but one morning when Narain was six, he woke up to find that Mother was gone and that he had a new baby sister, Amrit.

In the long stretch of winter, the skies were the same clay colour each day. Narain didn't care to look out of his window at the warted tree branches clawing at the wind. It became more difficult for him to pull himself out

of bed for his morning classes. Letters continued to arrive from home and he read them with the detached interest of somebody listening to music that drifted from another room's speakers. However, whenever Father wrote about politics, something stirred in Narain. Father was enthusiastic about developments in Singapore—he quoted from the Prime Minister's speeches: stricter laws, extensive housing projects, and more schools to build their fledgling nation. "Independence from Malaysia made us weep at first, but it is a good thing," Father wrote. "I hope you also have faith in our country because it is going to be important to the world."

Back home, Narain would not have contradicted Father, who read the newspapers from cover to cover every evening, stopping only to look up words in the *Oxford English Dictionary* that was displayed prominently on the dining table between meals. Now Narain dared to disagree. He did not think progress would arrive so swiftly, if at all. He had seen Singapore on a map pinned to his room-mate's wall and compared to most countries, it was a mere speck. His belief that Singapore did not deserve a longing of such magnitude helped to alleviate his homesickness. He fiercely reminded himself of what he did not miss: the sticky heat, the waft of stale fish skins that drifted through the open lanes beyond the Naval Base gates, and the stares and whispers of the Punjabi community.

In a reply to Father, Narain listed every sceptic's reasons for believing that Singapore would not manage to sustain itself. *No natural resources. Mass unemployment*. A lack of housing, land, sanitation. In his first genuine drive at scholarship since arriving at university, Narain pored over papers and books in the library and quoted experts whose opinions were not featured in *The Straits Times*. *We won't make it*, he wrote, forcing out the words as he convinced himself of a more fulfilling future in these blank Midwestern horizons.

Narain decided not to send the letter right away but he kept it in his room and read it often, proud of his own definitiveness. One day, as he was opening his post office box, a group of fraternity boys came barrelling through the hallway. The sheer wind of their entrance made Narain stumble back against the wall. Scattered around him on the floor were flyers for pizza delivery restaurants and credit card advertisements. He made a move to step around them delicately when he noticed that his left foot was pinning down a letter from Father. He picked it up, closed his eyes and brushed his lips against it. As he began to whisper an apology, he heard laughter and his eyes flew open. "Miss your mama?" one of the boys called out. The others chuckled. Narain responded with a blank stare, embarrassment stiffening his limbs.

That was the moment he decided to be less vigilant about where he stepped. Over the next few weeks, he became more aware of how he walked and paid less attention to where his feet landed. He practised making himself look wider and taller, gauging his progress by watching his dim shadow on stony November mornings. Scant sums of pocket money sent from home were spent on a new wardrobe—winter boots and bulky cable sweaters with smart V-neck collars. He took a campus job in the library and saved his wages to replace his thick frames with contact lenses. Reading passages from his textbook into a mirror, he practised deepening his voice. During lectures, he doodled in the corners of his notebooks and didn't bother completing assignments. He despised the other foreign students for their simplicity and eagerness. He strived to be their exact opposite—disinterested in his studies, witty and self-assured.

In the process of planning his transformation, Narain had to consider his hair. In Singapore, when passing another turbaned Sikh man, Narain would initiate a customary nod. His father had taught him and

his brothers to do this because it represented religious solidarity. Despite teasing from Chinese and Malay children, Narain never once dared to think about cutting his hair. But now the turban felt bulky and awkward, making him stand out even more.

He focused on his face first. Hair had taken its time to sprout on Narain's cheeks and chin. It was such a delay, in fact, that Father accused him of shaving when he was fifteen. Narain had to convince him that he was just developing more slowly than the other boys, a fact that Father was willing to accept all too readily. At the time, Narain had been mortified, but now he saw advantages to having only a thin spread of beard. It didn't seem wrong to eliminate what was hardly there to begin with. He felt little remorse as he dragged the razor across his cheeks, even when he nicked his skin. However, the thought of his next task made his heart race.

Narain unravelled the fabric of his turban and loosened the pins and rubber bands that held together his fat knot of hair. It tumbled down his back in waves, releasing the light, flowery fragrance of Johnson's Baby Oil that he used to smooth it down after washing. He pictured his home in Singapore—a modest bungalow like the others that housed local officers for the British Police. In his imagination, it expanded to the proportions of an enormous old mansion with creaking corridors and hidden sections constructed for concealing secrets. He shut his eyes and manoeuvred his way around the house. Perhaps if he was careful, he could cut his hair to a shorter length and somehow conceal it from Father's view when he returned home for the summer.

As he searched for a pair of scissors, his enthusiasm quickly diminished. The weight of his hair and the daily routine of oiling, combing, braiding and wrapping were too familiar to eliminate so suddenly. Changes were necessary but a haircut would be too drastic, so he kept all of his hair but

exchanged the turban for a baseball cap under which his braid sat coiled like a millipede in terrified defence.

At his first party, Narain was disappointed to find that nobody noticed the difference. He expected classmates to approach him with congratulatory smiles, warmth restored to their eyes. Deciding that going unnoticed meant that he blended in, he pushed through the crowds. Music throbbed through the walls of a three-storey brick house. Students leaned against the walls and nodded, sharing a familiar secret. Girls in tight skirts writhed and gyrated against boys they didn't know. He smiled at them and they smiled back, their dances a lazy trance to invite him into their world.

A blonde wearing heavy green eye shadow allowed him to put his hand up her skirt, then she led him up the stairs towards an empty room. Pausing at the threshold, Narain was struck with a profound and dizzying sense of despair—at that moment, he was sure of who he was, but this certainty brought back memories of the army and everything he meant to repair. Narain recalled the officers' grim faces as they explained to Father that Narain would have to undergo a psychiatric evaluation. As the girl shook off her clothes, Narain watched her and relied on the distant throbbing music to pump away his past. *Behaviour management. Removed from duties handling sensitive information*.

This is America. This convenient phrase, which came to him that night, obliterated his sins over the next few months. He began smoking cigarettes, but this was America. He wasn't studying, but this was America. He did not respond to Father's letters *because* this was America. The accumulations of all his misgivings—even for acts he was preparing to commit—occurred to him with an electric jolt.

The parties continued and the girl became Narain's first girlfriend. She was Jenny, a Philosophy major from Fairfield. She was near-sighted

but hated wearing her glasses. Her parents had divorced each other and then re-married five years later. She had joined every activist group on campus and she confessed to spending more time at their meetings than in her classes. Her skin was so pale it sometimes turned blue in the eerie winter light.

Jenny was not ashamed to admit that she did not know where Singapore was. "Tell me more about it," she said to him one night, as they walked past a row of college bars. She backed herself against a brick wall in a narrow alley and drew him to her, pressing her thighs against his. "What's it like in Sing-a-pore?" she drawled, making the city's name sound like a scientific term. She planted a loud kiss against the side of his neck. The acrid mix of stale cigarettes and beer was wet on her skin.

"I'll show you," Narain said. He took her hand and led her back to his dormitory. From his shelf, he retrieved his book of photographs. The first page contained pictures of decrepit kampongs flanked by the thick trunks of coconut trees and gnarled bushes. Children with legs like twigs stared into the camera, their expressions solemn. A pick-up truck was parked at an angle on a street corner and the driver stood nearby drinking juice from a clear plastic bag. Groups of women squatted among tall stalks of grass and grinned as they dunked their laundry in basins at a public standpipe. Narain felt a flash of panic. Nothing about this world would be familiar to Jenny. He hastily flipped to a picture of the modest city skyline.

"This is what it looks like at night," Narain said. "See how the buildings light up?" He traced his finger over the buildings and the calm river below. The city looked glamorous at night. Not a trace of the broken bottles and plastic bags that clogged the river could be seen in the shadows. Instead, lights melted across the water's surface.

"It's sort of like Chicago," Jenny said.

"Yes," Narain said, wishing he had the nerve to deny this. Singapore was nothing like Chicago. The air was sticky all year round and crickets filled the dusty kampongs with mournful songs after the rain destroyed their nests. There were people who slept on thin mattresses above the shops of their trades, their skin soaking in the smell of preserves and herbs. His favourite place to eat was not a restaurant or a diner but a street stall with only one dish listed on a handwritten sign. The facade of his local cinema betrayed its age with smears of soot and dust but nobody cared as long as the snack man was outside to serve sugar-coated nuts in paper cones. As Jenny shifted closer to turn the pages, Singapore came back to Narain in a rush of tangled telephone cables, houses with slanting tin roofs, vendors pushing wobbling trolleys, incense sticks glowing in the night like stars, men racing barefoot across coals to prove their faith to cheering crowds outside a Hindu temple.

Jenny smiled and pointed to a grainy photograph. "Here we are," she said. "That's how I pictured it." In grey and white, a bony Indian man wearing nothing but a loose piece of checkered cloth around his waist stood next to a lopsided rickshaw, gesturing to the camera, his mouth open wide, mid-speech. Behind him were the dark entrances to provision shops where bulging gunnysacks filled with rice, seeds and dried fruits leaned against each other. As Jenny tipped her head and cast him a dreamy gaze, Narain understood what they needed from each other. One day she would muse about her foreign boyfriend just as he would always remember the American he dated in college. Both would keep this relationship as a souvenir of the people they had once dared to be.

"Tell me more about where you're from. Tell me everything," Jenny said, lying across his bed. She was clumsy at being sexy, drawing a slow circle low on her tummy with the tips of her fingers.

That day, Narain showed Jenny Singapore's place on the map. He told her how families had crowded around their television screens the day Malaysia announced it wanted Singapore out of its union. Tears nearly sprang to his eyes when he described their fear at watching their own leader cry on the screen. He told her about the race riots, and the odd calm that descended over the island after curfews were imposed to keep the Chinese and Malays from clashing in the streets. Jenny responded with a mixture of sympathy and approval, encouraging him to continue. Then he accidentally mentioned the army.

"Wait. Start again," Jenny said. "You were in the army?" Betrayal flashed across her face. "You never told me that."

"No, no," Narain said. "I mean, yes, I was, but it's different over there. It's National Service. It's compulsory," he was quick to say. "I was in the country's very first cohort."

"I'm against the military," Jenny replied.

"I know," Narain said. One of the few times Jenny had interrupted one of his long stories about home, she went on a rant against the draft and the war in Vietnam, where her friend from high school had been so badly wounded he would never walk again. "What they're making our boys do over there is wrong—it's so fucking obvious," she said, slapping her hand against her head. "Why don't people see it, though? You know how long it took me just to get twenty signatures on my petition the other day? Nobody wants to believe the government's a bunch of lying bastards." Her forwardness was titillating. Back home, people had become more cautious about voicing such strong opinions.

On another occasion, Narain showed Jenny pictures of his family. She pointed out the strong resemblance his cousin Karam had to Father, and remarked that he was handsome. Narain laughed. "My brother Gur-

dev would not like to hear that." Jenny nodded and placed her fingers lightly on Gurdev's image, a gesture of consolation. A hint of his belly pressed through his shirt and his cheeks retained his baby fat even in his late twenties.

"You must be very close to Karam," Jenny said. "He's in all the pictures."

"He's close to the family," Narain said carefully. "His own parents died on their way to Singapore. There was a problem with the ship and it capsized but Karam was saved and brought over. He was raised by a distant aunt in Singapore—his father's cousin. She and her husband didn't have any children and they were happy to adopt Karam but I don't think they knew how to raise a child. They treated him like a guest. He started coming over to our house every day. He and my father had a special bond. By the time he was about ten or eleven, he was practically living with us."

Jenny cast a sad glance at Karam's picture. "It's like you have two brothers then."

"Not really. More like two fathers," Narain said. Jenny probably thought he was only referring to physical appearance.

Jenny commented that Narain's mother was pretty, with her pale skin, her sharp nose and those tiny, pursed lips that made her look even younger than her sixteen years in his only photo of her, balancing a baby Gurdev on her lap. "I bet she still looks like that," she said. Narain said nothing, but pointed out that daughters often resembled their mothers. He showed her Amrit. Jenny smiled. "The boys must be after this one."

"She's too young," he said, tersely.

"What, fifteen? I started dating around then," Jenny said, with a shrug.

For days afterwards, Narain found himself thinking about Amrit. Amrit dashing past his room. Amrit sprawled on their rattan furniture. Though he never admitted it out loud, he had always sought her approval

more than anybody else's. For her age, Amrit had a surprisingly acute knowledge of relationships. He wondered what she would say if he told her he wanted to bring home this pale-skinned girl with her accent that widened every vowel. Would Amrit welcome the idea? Would she be disappointed? Would she explain that what he felt was not love? He could not see it any other way—Jenny was unwittingly helping him to become more like other men, and for this, he loved her. His love for her was so strong that it overrode those impulses that had led to his troubles in the army. Yet whenever he thought of asking Amrit about love, he imagined her leading him through an uncharted passageway in their house, laughing at him for not knowing it existed.

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The morning Father called, Narain was still half asleep. Jenny's arm rested across his chest and she stirred slightly when he reached for the telephone. "Hello," he mumbled into the receiver.

"Narain? Please speak up," Father's voice gripped him. He sat up in bed and pulled the sheets over Jenny's bare shoulder, as if Father might be peering into his room.

"Sat sri akal, Father," Narain said.

"Sat sri akal. How are you?"

"I'm well."

"I said speak up."

"I'm doing fine," Narain said loudly. Jenny rolled lazily to her side.

"Have you read my letter?"

"I haven't received it yet," Narain lied, eyeing the envelopes scattered across the dresser.

"Well, what are you doing now?"

"Nothing. I mean, I was just waking up," he said. A soft moan escaped Jenny's lips. Her eyes blinked open. "Who is it?" she mumbled as he leaned away from her.

"Narain, I want to see copies of your exam results. You have no idea what this education is costing me."

"Results haven't come out yet," Narain said, keeping his panic from edging into the conversation. "I'll send them to you as soon as I get them."

"Yes, please do this," Father said. "Also, when is your summer vacation? You are coming back to Singapore."

Narain glanced at Jenny. "I'm not sure, Father. I might have some things to do here. Summer classes."

"No, you must come back," Father said.

"But it will save you a lot of money if I just stay here. I thought I could get a summer job as well."

"I am paying your school fees and transport. This was the arrangement so you could return home every year and see the family. Please do not argue," Father said sternly. "Your sister needs you."

There was a short silence. Narain found himself fighting the urge to listen to the noises in the background. On the phone with Father once, when the connection was poor, he had mistaken the static for Singapore noises—the buzz of midday traffic, sparrows chirping their uneven greetings, oil hissing on a hawker's wok.

Father told him to read his letter and with a curt goodbye, he hung up. Narain reached for his dresser. There were four envelopes from home. He saw the most recently dated stamp and ripped the envelope open. After the usual formalities, Father's letters always contained a paragraph on latest developments in the country, followed by a few words of advice.

This letter was different. It launched into a subject that Narain no longer felt equipped to handle from such a distance.

I must inform you about Amrit. She is out of control. Twice I have caught her outside chatting with boys near the shops. She wears very red lipstick and does not study anymore. One day, I could smell cigarettes on her clothes but when I asked Amrit about it, she said she had lunch at a coffee shop where people were smoking. You should know what to do in this situation—she needs to be disciplined. You are to return as soon as your term is over so you can monitor your sister. Remember, this is an important year. Her exams are coming up, and she must do well, as should you.

Narain re-read the letter as he paced the cramped quarters of his dormitory room. He glanced at Jenny and found it easier to dismiss Father's words. This was the problem? This was the reason he was being pressured to come home—just because his sister was *dating*? In his mind, he drafted a letter telling Father all the things he wished he had the courage to tell him. Father was overreacting. Father was distracting him from more important matters with these trivial complaints. But the letter was never scripted. Instead, Narain retrieved the other letter expressing his doubts about Singapore's progress and mailed it to Father that very afternoon. He hadn't mentioned Amrit.

The next day, Narain went to the library and applied for extra shifts over the summer holidays. He began searching the newspapers for apartments available for rent. Jenny was planning on waiting tables all summer and he wanted to be close to her. Lately, he found himself wanting to spend every moment with Jenny. When they were together, he was always touching her—stroking her hair or grasping her hand, walking her to her classes—and he became unable to concentrate on his own work without her presence. At times, he felt as if he needed to be within

Jenny, hidden away from the doubts that could spring without warning into his solitary moments.

A few weeks passed before another letter arrived from Father, reminding Narain to send his grades home once he got them. To Narain's surprise, there was no mention of his argumentative reply.

Narain pretended not to receive any more of Father's correspondence, wedging letters between a stack of unopened Engineering books. He decided to avoid telling his family that he was planning to stay in Iowa over summer until two weeks before he was due to come home. It would be too late then for Father to persuade him, and then maybe Father would realise that Amrit was not Narain's sole responsibility. He took it as a practice step. If he could disobey Father in small doses, perhaps one day he would muster the courage for a graver disagreement about his life choices.

The weather became warmer as spring finally took hold. Tiny buds appeared on trees and began to blossom, spreading colour through the university campus. There were more people walking about now, riding bicycles, lying on blankets on the front lawn. Jenny prepared a picnic and they lay sprawled on their bellies. They made plans to attend an anti-war protest that Jenny had helped put flyers up for around campus. The sun was bright and a light breeze rustled Jenny's hair, bringing strands into her mouth that Narain constantly had to pull away. "You're not listening," she complained after he tried to kiss her mid-sentence.

"The weather's too nice," Narain said.

"We have to go. There aren't enough people out there who are willing to fight for the truth anymore. It's important to show our support," she said.

"Of course," he told her. Evening was too far away for him to even consider. This was the happiest he'd been since arriving in Iowa. He said this to Jenny but she thought he was only talking about the weather.

"It's like this in California," Jenny said. "All the time. I went there one year for Christmas when my dad was living with this woman in San Diego. The weather was amazing."

"Let's move there," Narain joked. He laughed with surprise when she responded enthusiastically. Kisses suddenly rained on his cheeks and neck.

She asked him if he wanted to take a road trip to Los Angeles at the end of summer. "We'll save up and go see where all the movie stars live." She let out a delighted squeal and listed the celebrities they would see. "Okay?" she asked.

Narain closed his eyes for moment. "Of course we will," he replied. The farther away from home he was, the more things seemed possible.

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Two days later, Amrit left the house in the middle of the night and didn't return. Narain was the last to know because he had become so difficult to reach. It took a phone call from his father to the Dean, who sent a resident advisor to tell him in person.

"Come home right away," Father said gravely when Narain returned the call. His heart pounded. He could not think about refusing. Too many questions spun through his mind. Where was she? Was she safe? What was he expected to do?

As he packed his room for the return home, he pulled out the suitcase from under his bed. Thoughts of Amrit, her mangled body abandoned somewhere, flooded his mind and made it hard for him to focus. His hands shook as he struggled to open the suitcase. It contained items that he could throw out to make room for what he had acquired in America. Shot glasses. Photographs. Magazines that were banned back home. A clock radio.

Tears stung his eyes as he emptied the suitcase. He hadn't expected the smells of his home to remain so well preserved in this bag. Sandalwood and cardamom drifted into the air and tinted the skies a rich orange.

Narain spotted his thick-soled shoes. Amrit had done most of the last-minute packing. Probably out of mischief, she'd removed the shoes from his other suitcase and placed them in this one. He sat cross-legged on the floor and pressed his head into his hands. Fellow students peered anxiously from the doorway asking if he needed anything but his cries only grew louder when he picked up the shoes and found them sitting flatly on a dictionary, a Holy Book and a popular novel.

Father

AFTER MAKING THE phone calls, Harbeer returned to his room, sat at his desk and waited for his wife. She would surely arrive soon, sensing the first signs of trouble with Amrit. Her secret visits had become so frequent lately that Harbeer became nervous the children would find out. He always kept his voice low and their conversations brief. Whenever she lingered and tried to offer advice, he reminded her bitterly that it was she who left. *If you know so much, why don't you come back to raise your children? Why don't you let them know you are here?* To this, she never had a reply.

On the corner of Harbeer's desk was a fresh stack of loose-leaf paper for his writing practice. Twenty-five years ago, during his first months in Singapore, he had practised writing in English, imitating the extensions and swoops of his British officers' penmanship. Graduating from single words, he focused on sentences and then paragraphs. Soon he was able to write lengthy letters without having to consult a dictionary. He still wrote letters often. These were different from the letters written to Narain in America or to his father in India. These letters remained unsent—they were not addressed to anybody in particular but somehow the format allowed him to articulate thoughts that he could not otherwise. Perhaps there was a worthy recipient out there to whom he would eventually send

his thoughts, a person who would read them with sympathy as well as appreciation for his experiences and ideas. It was a far-fetched idea, of course. Harbeer could not imagine entrusting anybody with the contents of his mind, particularly his deepest disappointments. The letters sat in the bottom drawer.

When Harbeer first designated a place to store such letters, he was certain that just one drawer would be sufficient. There had been a promising future ahead. He and Dalveer had arrived in Singapore a few months before his sister, Rashpal, her husband and their toddler, Karam were due to follow. He had a dignified and respected post with the British Military Police so he had not arrived in Singapore as so many migrants did, as labourers and construction workers from China and India. His job was to protect the citizens, and there were opportunities for promotions to higher ranks in the coming years. He and Dalveer lived in a modest but comfortable bungalow on the British Naval Base in Sembawang.

The day Harbeer heard the dreadful news of Rashpal and her husband's deaths, he sat down to write a letter, intending to inform his officers that he had to take a leave of absence to tend to some family matters —the last rites in India, the question of what to do with young Karam. Instead, Harbeer began to write a list of questions. He asked his unknown recipient how Rashpal's ship could have capsized. He asked where her body was now and how to carry out a funeral with only a memory. He wanted to know how Papa, having only lost his wife two years before, would cope with his grief. He asked, pleadingly and with hope, if the fact that Karam had been saved by surviving passengers was a sign that goodness existed.

This letter was tucked away in the bottom of the drawer. Harbeer hoped to read it again one day and feel a sense of peace but over the years, more letters were piled on, burying those early regrets with more disappointments.

His first son, Gurdev, born three years after Karam, was not athletic or confident; he pouted constantly and had outbursts of unnecessary emotion. His second son, Narain, was meek and always in tears. In his letters about these two, he speculated on the ways in which he might model another son to be more like him. When Dalveer was pregnant with a third child, Harbeer thought God himself might have been peering over his shoulders and reading his words as he wrote them. Then the child turned out to be a girl and no sooner had she arrived than Dalveer exited, leaving Harbeer with the baffling task of raising a girl. Letters overflowing with Harbeer's despair filled the drawer. Over the years he had to fold them into tiny squares to make room for more, determined that only one drawer was sufficient for all of his disappointments. He stopped writing for a brief period while he decided where to keep all of his old letters to make space for new ones. This period extended as Harbeer became busy with the task of raising the children on his own, and soon he had abandoned the letter writing altogether, considering it an indulgent pastime. There was plenty to be grateful for in this new country and he had allowed himself to succumb to the same melancholy that he had criticised his wife for.

Only two more events gave Harbeer reason to open that drawer again and both occurred in the same year. It was 1967—the year Harbeer began studying for the written test to be promoted to Police Inspector, and the year Narain was conscripted into the army. Nothing turned out as expected. The British announced they would be withdrawing from the country, leaving Harbeer's aspirations suspended. He wrote furiously, scribbling out the practiced answers to the test, unloading them onto the paper until his mind was blank. Months afterwards, there came the phone call from an officer at Narain's base camp. Harbeer was called in for an interview—a standard procedure, they assured him, for identifying Narain's type of

problem. They had sounded so confident, as if they had been handling these cases for years, but Narain was in the first cohort of National Servicemen in Singapore. He was supposed to make history in this country but instead he was probably the first case of…what did they call it? Sexual deviance. Evidence of effeminate behaviour. Homosexual tendencies. They had asked if any signs had existed when Narain was a child and Harbeer had said no. The officers must have thought the puzzlement and grave disappointment on his face were genuine signs that he had suspected nothing over the years. Actually, Harbeer wasn't entirely surprised but he was confused as to why Narain would admit to that filthy behaviour. Why hadn't Narain denied it? Why was he trying to destroy his family's reputation? There were Punjabis in all ranks of the army who would look at Harbeer now and know it was confirmed. His son was a homosexual.

After that meeting, Harbeer spent entire nights writing letters, recounting everything he had witnessed in Narain over the years: the left-handedness he had tried to correct by making the boy sit on his left hand while writing with the right; the nervousness; the posture; that girlish walk. The pages overflowed with regrets and so did the drawer. Only when Harbeer bade farewell to him at the airport did he feel his despair subsiding. America would change the boy, and four years away would buy some time for Harbeer to rebuild his reputation. "My son is studying to be an engineer," he would pointedly tell those Punjabis who had heard the rumours from their army friends. Surely this detail would be enough to appease them—no young boy went overseas unless he was serious about becoming a man.

Now Amrit was gone. Now more letters would have to be written. Harbeer cringed at the thought and reminded himself not to get carried away. She was probably playing an elaborate prank on the family, nothing worse. It was good that Narain was returning for his summer break—he

would watch over Amrit and pass on some of the discipline he had learned in America.

The hinges of the back door creaked slightly—or was it a sound from outside? Harbeer strained to listen. Sometimes it was impossible to tell whether Dalveer was entering. Rain dripping on the roof could be mistaken for the patter of her feet. A gate opening, her languid sigh. A rustle in the trees, her fingers raking coconut oil through her hair until it was soaked. The only way to be sure was to see her. He waited until he caught her shadow, then her slight figure making its way through the corridors. Her questioning eyes darted at the doorways. Harbeer called out that nobody was home, just him. She entered the room and brought with her the hard scent of freshly-churned soil. Harbeer looked outside. Clouds were huddled in the sky. Somewhere on the island it had already begun to rain.

He informed her that Amrit had gone missing. "I checked her bed in the morning and she was gone," he said.

Dalveer let out a cry and tore through the house. Harbeer went after her, pleading for silence. The neighbours would hear her. Did she want that? Did she want the neighbours to come rushing over? She went through all of Amrit's things—her schoolbag, her clothes, her books. Harbeer sat and watched her. He had gone through these same actions this morning when he noticed the empty room. Amrit was nowhere to be found in those things.

Dalveer sat in a heap on the floor and wept softly into her hands. Harbeer crouched next to her. He waited for her breathing to slow, for the sobs to subside, and then he promised to find Amrit. He paused, and then softly told her that Karam and Gurdev were arriving soon. She understood what this meant and she picked herself up. She did not tell him when she would come back but he knew to expect her soon. He had

stopped trying to follow her years ago, and so when she left, he went back to his desk and began to write.

• • •

The sharp rap of Karam's knuckles was familiar—he always made an announcement of his presence rather than a request to enter. Harbeer beamed when he saw the boy. He couldn't help it. People in the neighbourhood used to mistake Karam for his biological son, and if Harbeer had to correct them, he did so with great reluctance. Their surprise was not unusual—Karam's broad shoulders and confident stride mirrored Harbeer's, and his sharp features gave him a strong resemblance that Harbeer's own sons did not have. Somewhere in his letters of disappointments, Harbeer had written that Gurdev and Narain had taken after their mother.

"Any news?" Karam asked. "Have you heard anything?"

"I've only called you, Gurdev and Narain," Harbeer said. "I don't think it's a good idea to let anybody else know at this stage. It might just be mischief."

"You're right," Karam said, reassuringly. "I wouldn't worry."

"I've asked Narain to come back, though," Harbeer said. Karam looked a bit surprised at this. "I need him to be here to look after Amrit. The girl has no sense of right and wrong anymore because her older brother hasn't been around. This is their home and there are rules to be followed. They can't just run off like that. Both of them must learn this."

"Where do you think she might be?" Karam asked. "Does she have any friends that she might have gone off with?"

Harbeer could only recall the last time he lectured Amrit, after he spotted her in a coffee shop during his evening rounds. He had been with two

fellow police officers, one of them a Punjabi man, and so he could not make a scene. By the time Amrit came home, his fury had subsided and he chose instead to appeal to the girl's sense of pride. "Amrit, you are the smartest girl in your class," he said. "If you want to keep that title, you should be studying after school instead of running around with those half-past-six characters." He had borrowed this term from a Chinese colleague who used it to describe boys with tobacco-stained teeth and dyed hair like burnt grass, who gathered in coffee shops. They were aimless with their days, unaware of the passing time, only interested in the crackling radio music to which they bobbed their heads and clapped. Amrit had cried, said she was sorry. Within days Harbeer saw her at the coffee shop again.

"No, no friends," Harbeer said quickly. Surely those coffee shop boys were not friends of Amrit's.

"Do you think she's gone to school for something? Should we check there?"

"The gates are always locked. She wouldn't be able to get in," Harbeer replied. "If she wanted something from school she would have told me. She was gone very early this morning, when it was dark. There's no reason for a girl to be out at those hours."

Karam gave Harbeer's shoulder a pat. "We'll find her," he said. They both fell into their usual comfortable small talk, the type of banter that Harbeer had never enjoyed with his other children. When he heard the creak of the gate opening outside, Harbeer felt a twinge of irritation that their conversation would be interrupted.

Gurdev arrived in his usual manner, huffing and puffing, wiping the sweat from his neck, his eyebrows furrowed in complaint. "I could have picked you up," Karam told him. "I drove over here."

"That's okay," Gurdev said. His tone contained more than the usual dose

of coldness towards his cousin. He sneaked a glance at Harbeer. "It would have been too much trouble," Gurdev added more generously. Harbeer nodded approvingly. He had little tolerance for jealousy. It had no place between brothers. This was how he had always told Gurdev to regard Karam—like a brother. *Learn from him*, Harbeer had always said, but Gurdev always insisted on continuing a petty rivalry that stemmed from their childhood.

Karam filled Gurdev in on the details concerning Amrit's disappearance. "We're not calling anyone," Karam said. "Once people start to hear that Amrit's gone missing, they'll just start gossiping."

Gurdev's eyebrows bunched together. "Not calling anyone?" He directed the question at Harbeer. "Not even the police?"

"This is not a matter for the police," Harbeer snapped, glaring at Gurdev. Imagine if he had left all of his problems in the hands of this boy—where would his reputation be? Harbeer was a policeman himself; if his colleagues found out that he had no control over his own daughter, he would be a laughing-stock. And with all the cutbacks happening in the force lately, with only a few years before he would be forced into retirement, did Gurdev want his last few years to be spent in disgrace?

"I doubt she's in any danger, Gurdev," Karam said. "We'll just hold on for now."

Gurdev looked back and forth between Harbeer and Karam as if he did not know who was who. "Hold on? This could be serious!"

Harbeer felt his anger mounting. "Gurdev," he said, warningly. "You're becoming too emotional."

Gurdev scrunched up his face and shook his head. He was overwhelmed now, Harbeer could see. "You're telling me that Amrit's gone missing and we're just going to sit and wait for her to return? What if she's been kidnapped, or worse?"

About the author

Balli Kaur Jaswal is also the author of *Sugarbread*, a finalist for the 2015 Epigram Books Fiction Prize, and a story about fitting in and confronting the past. Born in Singapore and raised in Japan, Russia and the Philippines, she studied creative writing in the United States. She has received writing fellowships from the University of East Anglia and Nanyang Technological University, and was named Best Young Australian Novelist of 2014 by the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

"A rich and gorgeous portrait of a family—and nation—struggling against history, culture, and the grief of smashed hope."

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In 1971, teenaged Amrit disappears from her house in the middle of the night. Although her absence is brief, she returns a different person, and the event causes fissures that threaten to fracture her Punjabi Sikh family.

Over the next two decades, as Singapore's political and social landscapes evolve, the family must cope with shifting attitudes toward castes, youth culture, sex and gender roles, identity and belonging. *Inheritance* examines each family member's struggles to either preserve or buck tradition in the face of an ever-changing nation.

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