SUGARBREAD

BALLI KAUR JASWAL

FINALIST
EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE 2015

A NOVEL

Praise for *Sugarbread*

"This is the most glorious mic drop moment in Singaporean Literature. *Sugarbread* is such a tender and powerful response to the many celebrated voices in Singapore that represent minority experiences through tokenism or ignore them altogether. Balli Kaur Jaswal has made me feel like my ten-year-old self could be someone's protagonist, like my skin belongs in the pages of books in my country. She's turned the mirrors on Singapore and our conversations about identity in a spectacular fashion. Her prose is delicate, precise and aching. Her storytelling lingers with you for days. This novel is triumphant and absolutely essential reading for anyone who cares about living in this city."
—Pooja Nansi, author of *Love Is an Empty Barstool*

"*Sugarbread* is a warm and wry portrait of childhood, in all its intensity and its confusions, and a deeply satisfying exploration of prejudice, conscience, loyalty and reconciliation."
—Jolene Tan, author of *A Certain Exposure*

"A beautifully written companion piece to *Inheritance*. Balli Kaur Jaswal uses the eyes of a young girl from Singapore's Sikh community to revision life in the city-state, and explore overlapping conflicts centred on ethnicity, nationalism, religion, social inequality, and gender. As the story progresses, these tensions are elaborated in the life stories of Pin and of her mother, embodied in the everyday rituals of cooking and eating, and only resolved through an accounting with a hidden past of exclusion and abuse."
—Philip Holden, Professor of English, National University of Singapore

"Pin is an earnest and enchanting child, through whose curious and clear-sighted eyes we see family life and complications and childhood cliques and racism. But this entertaining book also has touching insights into love, hope and wisdom and characters that will stay with you long after you finish it."
—Ovidia Yu, author of *Aunty Lee's Chilled Revenge*

"Balli Kaur Jaswal has written a profoundly moving story that is both a sensitive family portrait and a wild page-turner. With arrestingly vivid prose and carefully wrought characters, she draws readers into the world of ten-year-old Pin as she negotiates her Sikh faith and grapples with startling secrets. This is wonderfully crafted novel about food, faith and family."
—Pooja Makhijani, author of *Mama's Saris* and editor of *Under Her Skin: How Girls Experience Race in America*

"Movingly told, the narrative grips as it reveals the trials, tribulations and anxieties experienced by the growing protagonist as she learns secrets of her family in a multi-ethnic Singapore. Here is a powerful new literary voice in Singaporean fiction—and a voice that must be heard."
—Kirpal Singh, poet and creativity guru

"An elegant, evocative work that brings the seemingly-mundane world of everyday Singapore to magical life, drawing you in with its details and delights, inviting you to see things with the protagonist's eyes…and then insisting that you feel things with her heart though it may break your own to do so. A touching, poignant tale."
—Krishna Udayasankar, author of *The Aryavarta Chronicles*

SUGARBREAD

ALSO FROM THE EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE

WINNER

Now That It's Over by O Thiam Chin

FINALISTS

Death of a Perm Sec by Wong Souk Yee

Let's Give It Up for Gimme Lao! by Sebastian Sim

LONGLISTED

Annabelle Thong by Imran Hashim

Kappa Quartet by Daryl Qilin Yam

Altered Straits by Kevin Wong

SUGARBREAD

BALLI KAUR JASWAL

A NOVEL

EPIGRAM BOOKS / SINGAPORE

Author photo courtesy of Balli Kaur Jaswal. Used with permission.

Published in Singapore by Epigram Books
www.epigrambooks.sg

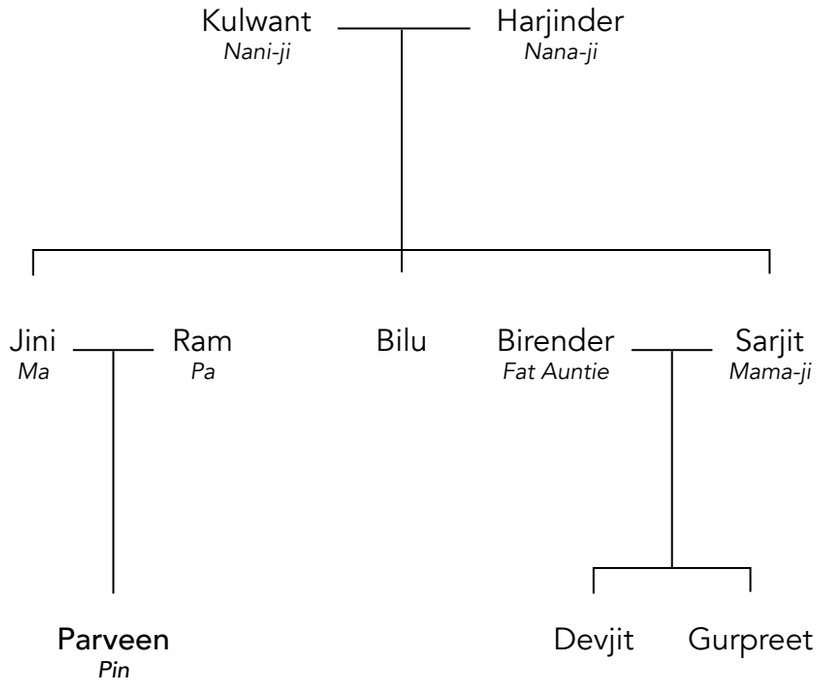
Published with the support of

National Library Board, Singapore
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name: Jaswal, Balli Kaur.
Title: Sugarbread : a novel / Balli Kaur Jaswal.
Description: Singapore : Epigram Books, 2016.
Identifiers: OCN 946808942
ISBN 978-981-4757-30-0 (paperback)
ISBN 978-981-4757-31-7 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Punjabis (South Asian people)–Fiction.
Families–Fiction. | Teenage girls–Fiction.
Classification: DDC S823–dc23

First Edition: June 2016
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my mum, aunties and grandmothers


Kulwant
Nani-ji
Harjinder
Nana-ji
Jini
Ma
Ram
Pa
Bilu
Birender
Fat Auntie
Sarjit
Mama-ji
Parveen
Pin
Devjit
Gurpreet

PART I

1

1990

IT WAS SINGAPORE and it was July. The early morning sun glowed orange and rose between the high buildings; streams of light poured through the still branches of trees and heat rose from the pavement. Ma and I walked in the shade under rows of canvas awnings. All around us, tin grilles were released and unfolded. They rattled loudly, like trains running right over my ears. Shopkeepers grimaced as they dragged out shelves and crates filled with Gardenia bread, jars of coconut kaya, sweet pandan bread, sticky pink cupcakes called huat kueh, packets of prawn crackers, buns plump with red bean filling, and Twisties snacks. These few things could endure the sun.

The shops were shadowy and cool caves inside. There were refrigerators for milk packets, and freezers for popsicles and Paddle Pop ice cream. The first few customers shifted sideways like crabs through the narrow aisles. Tall sacks of rice lay slouched in the back as if taking a break from the morning heat. Above them, red altars on the walls glowed with offerings of oranges and burning joss sticks. Some display cases were still chained and padlocked because it was early. The shopkeepers sighed as they squatted to fit their keys into the locks. They were always sighing; they were always tired.

Ma walked in brisk, long steps and I struggled to keep up. I had short legs. I was the smallest girl in my class. I thought she should understand

this but whenever I reminded her, she became impatient and said, "You'll grow, Pin." She had always been long-legged and elegant, so she could not sympathise. But being a little slower had its benefits. I noticed things while Ma just hurried along, and this was why she took me with her to the market. There were less crowded routes through the void decks of housing blocks but Ma preferred passing the shops because I could spot discounts. I had good eyes, and I added and subtracted quickly. Daddy called this "having good senses", and I liked to think that God gave me good senses deliberately to make up for what I lacked in height.

I looked out for deals from the shops, hoping that Ma would remember that she needed something and we could delay our trip to the wet market, even if it was only for a few minutes. "They are selling clothespins," I called out. Ma slowed down. I pointed to a basket sitting outside one odds and ends shop. This one was not as organised as the others. The old couple that owned it always looked puzzled when customers asked them for a set of anything. They sold every item individually—hangers, nails, pencil lead, paper towels, Tiger Balm. Ma called it the One-By-One shop, although its actual name, as printed on the sign above the stall, was Lee's Goods. I pointed at a tray sitting outside, filled to the brim with wooden and plastic clothespins. CLOTH PEG ONE FOR FIVE CENT.

"We don't need any," Ma said after reading the sign. Then she picked up her pace, leaving me to skip again to catch up with her.

"I like Twisties," I said, eyeing the bags on display outside another shop.

"Twisties are rubbish," Ma replied and I knew then that there was no more delaying. We were going to the wet market and we were going now.

On Sunday mornings, Ang Mo Kio smelled faintly like smoke and something sweet. On the short walk to the market, it was always these two smells—something burning and something tempting. The heavy smell

of burning came from the smoke that rose from woks in nearby 24-hour coffee shops where red plastic chairs lay strewn around lopsided white tables. The smoke carried the aroma of onions and garlic sizzling in oil, rice noodles being fried in oyster sauce, softening vegetables stewing with chopped garlic, eggs and butter and dough, watery coconut gravy and fish curry. The sweet smell did not necessarily come from food, although it was overwhelming when we passed the Happy Garden Bakery with its gleaming display cases filled with chocolate mousse cakes and multi-layered kueh lapis. There was another kind of sweetness in the Sunday air. It came from the potted bougainvillea lined neatly along the paths, body lotion and deodorant mingling with sweat, morning greetings from one woman to another, the money being counted at the 4D lottery shop, the new rubber and leather at the bicycle shop. There was nothing else in the world like our neighbourhood on a Sunday morning. I had lived there my whole life. I was ten years old.

As we approached the wet market, both scents gave way to something else, a bitter taste that started in my throat. It was like this every time. Fear tightened my insides and turned my limbs into lead. I couldn't move or call out to Ma as she continued walking. Eventually, she looked over her shoulder and backtracked, her features crumpled with irritation.

"Come now. You're not going to get lost," Ma said.

I always clutched Ma's hand whenever we entered a crowded place—the shopping malls in the city, the rows of hawker centres in Ang Mo Kio Central, the bus interchange—but sometimes, without realising it, she lost me. She never admitted it. A year ago, we went to the pasar malam down the street. Lanterns filled the ink-black sky like small moons and Chinese music crackled from loudspeakers. Shopkeepers shouted out prices for dresses, toys and cotton candy everywhere we went. I remem-

bered feeling Ma's hand slip from mine as she drifted towards a good bargain. People filled the small space between us the way floodwater rushes into a gutter. She found me within a few minutes but in my mind, it had been hours, a lifetime. When I told her that she had let go first, she grew cross and asked, "Why would I do a thing like that?"

I could already feel the heat on my back now, sweat gluing my thin T-shirt to my skin. Around us, customers moved in different ways. Some sped past us in clapping sandals, others roamed heavily. There were straight backs, stooped backs, loose blouses and clinging T-shirts. I saw every shade of skin colour and the fine green veins that decorated the backs of knees. I saw jutting anklebones and flimsy rubber slippers. "Aiyah!" a man cried as his slipper came loose and skidded across the wet floor to land in a shallow corner gutter. I caught a glimpse of his eyes as they searched wildly for the person who had tripped him. I hid behind Ma in case he thought it was me but the fury only lasted a few seconds; he seemed to realise that if he did not keep moving, he would not get anything done. He ran to the gutter, pushed his foot back into the slipper and hurried along as if nothing had happened.

"Hold my hand," Ma said. I did as she told. "Now, what do you do?"

"Keep holding your hand."

"And what should you not do?"

"Panic."

"Or?"

"Cry," I said, a little bit softer because I was embarrassed.

"Ready?' she asked

I nodded and she brought me in. As the market rushed towards us, my first instinct was to twist away from Ma's grip and run away. Ma knew this—her grip tightened. There was no escape. The world became a stir-

ring sea of people, voices and colours. It took time for my eyes to adjust to the dim lighting and for my nose to adapt to the dampness and the smell of blood mixed with flowers mixed with incense mixed with ripe fruit. We had entered through a narrow lane between a makeshift orchid shop and a poultry stall where skinned chickens hung by their beaks on C-shaped hooks. The greyish-pink shade of their pimply skin was sickening so I rested my gaze on another stall selling incense and paper money for burning and offering to ancestors. Further down, an elderly woman stood on a short stool and pointed at a tank crowded with grey crabs, their claws tightly bound with pink raffia string. They flipped and tumbled over each other, tapping steady threats against the glass. Their eyes were black beads.

There was no order here. All of Singapore was tidy and clean but the market was another world. I preferred the neat aisles and air-conditioning of the NTUC supermarket in Ang Mo Kio Central but Ma insisted that nothing was good unless it was fresh from the wet market. She glided through the lanes with ease. At each stall, Ma negotiated with the swing of her hips. I could deal with the chaos of the market if I just followed her movements but I had to be careful not to let her see. Ma worried most when I walked like her.

That morning, Ma had woken me up by opening the door of my room and calling my name. "Pin," she said softly. I was already awake. Sunlight entered the room through the slats of my blinds. She closed the door and I listened to her feet moving quickly through the flat. My bedroom faced the main corridor of our building and on weekend mornings, I liked to watch the shadows of passers-by and match them to the neighbours. There was the young Malay woman who lived with her elderly parents. She was tall and bony, with short spiky hair. A family of four lived all the way at

the end of the hallway. The mother always carried the baby who added a lump to her silhouette. The toddler was too short to reach my window but I recognised the father's slouched figure as he guided him along.

"Pin." Ma opened the door again and was at the foot of my bed. "Wake up. Shower. Get dressed. I'm buying a lot of things today. I need you to help me carry bags from the market." I peeked at her through the thin sheets. Slender waist, hips jutting like narrow shelves—the shape of Ma.

"Five minutes," I mumbled.

Another shadow passed the window very slowly. I had to sit up to determine who it was. A sudden breeze pushed the blinds and distorted the outline. Ma came bursting into the room again even though it had not yet been five minutes. "Pin!" she exclaimed as though she had just caught me stealing. The shadow paused, startled by Ma's voice, then continued on its way. I pushed myself out of bed and got into the shower before I began to grumble so the water would muffle my words.

As I sat in her room and watched her powder her face and smooth out a small crinkle in her blouse, my irritation faded. Ma was too glamorous for the market. She insisted on wearing proper clothes; nothing fancy, but nothing she would only wear at home either. Most of the housewives who went to the market wore rubber sandals and baggy batik shorts with T-shirts. They did not comb their hair. Ma flipped her hair over and brushed it until it rested about her face like a dark cloud. When she disappeared into the bathroom, I tried to do the same but the brush got stuck in my curls. Another attempt didn't work—I had Daddy's hair and none of Ma's grace.

Now Ma's grip shifted away from my hand. I tugged her skirt to remind her. She nodded as if to say that she hadn't forgotten me, she was just looking in her purse for something.

"Fish stall first. Get it over with," Ma said. I let out a soft groan, then tried to hold my breath, but it was pointless. The fishmonger fanned his face with his hands as he called out prices. Fish with open mouths and glassy eyes lay in rows on trays filled with ice. Their fins fanned out like the ends of brooms. There were larger fish, whiter fish, fish with what looked like sharp long beaks. The sharp metal smell of blood was everywhere.

When the fishmonger saw Ma, he grinned and asked her in Malay, "Hello, would you like some fish?"

"Yes. Two first then tell me the price."

The man weighed two limp pieces of fish. "Eight dollars."

Ma squinted at the man to see if he was being truthful. After a moment, she said "Okay, then one more."

I made a face. I hated fish and this meant Ma would be frying some for dinner soon. The man caught my expression and laughed. "Your daughter," he said, more as a statement than a question. I smiled at him. I liked it when people recognised I was Ma's daughter.

"Yes," Ma said. "Thank you." She took the plastic bag from him and handed it to me. I slipped my wrist through the handles and let the bag sag from the weight, not caring if it broke. Ma trusted me with meat and vegetables; she carried eggs and heavy fruits on her own.

All four major languages were spoken at the market. The air was filled with Chinese syllables, swift as brushstrokes. Some of the older stallholders could speak in Malay. The dark-skinned man who sold chopped mutton negotiated in rapid Tamil. Some stallholders spoke uncertainly in broken English while others were forceful in their bad grammar. My family spoke Punjabi—a language that most people in Singapore didn't even know existed—and we used this to our advantage. At the fruit stall, Ma instructed me in Punjabi to inspect the redness of the apples

while she tested the oranges for firmness. I was short enough to reach for them without having to bend towards the basket. Ma didn't like to show too much interest; to lean was to show need, and we didn't need to pay more than necessary for good fruit.

"They are ripe," I confirmed softly, even though I was speaking in Punjabi and the fruit seller wouldn't understand. We encountered very few Punjabi people unless we were at temple; if we saw them anywhere, we pretended not to because Ma didn't like to stop and chat. She said that most Punjabis were always looking for some gossip to bring home and even the most harmless bit of information could become national news in their hands.

"Sure? Look carefully." Ma replied. She eyed the stallholder.

"I'm sure," I said. The apple in my hand was round and ripe. I pressed my thumb into the skin and made a small dent.

Ma nodded and bought a few. The fruit seller was a delicate woman with a mess of short curly snow-white hair. As she handed the change to Ma, I could see her knuckles poking out of her pale skin.

"I'm tired," I announced to Ma as we moved to the next stall. The end of the market was still far away. There were leafy vegetables to be inspected, beans to be handpicked and chicken thighs to be weighed and packed. "I'm very tired," I said.

If Ma heard me, she pretended not to. I watched her bargaining like a Singaporean. "Give me same price but bigger one lah," she told the man who carefully cut slim slices of tofu from a larger slab. Ma was like my teachers at school—she didn't approve of Singlish but she couldn't help but use it sometimes. Usually when she spoke to strangers, she was crisp like a Channel Five newscaster. But proper English impressed nobody at the market—it made the prices go up. I had pointed out to Ma once that

her nice clothes probably made the stallholders think we were wealthy, but looking tidy was something which she would not compromise.

The handles of the bags dug into my wrists. The voices of stallholders and customers all melded together to become one loud buzz. I told Ma once again that I was tired. "And thirsty," I added. We were close to a set of stairs that led to a hawker centre upstairs. The first stall at the top of the steps sold ice-cold sugarcane juice. I was about to suggest a break but I knew the danger of this. It was not good to annoy Ma while she was buying groceries. It clouded her mind and made her forget important items.

After the tofu was the baby spinach. After that, tomatoes and carrots. I helped Ma to pick each item. "Don't rush," she warned me. "Choose carefully." But the air around me was becoming heavier, making it harder to breathe.

The night before, I hadn't slept much. My mind was full of numbers. "Four digits," Daddy had said, sitting on the edge of my bed. "Think carefully." Coming up with numbers sounded easy but they had to be lucky or he'd lose the 4D lottery. "Use your good senses, Pin," Daddy always said, his eyes locked into mine.

Every Sunday morning, he stood in the queue at the 4D shop fidgeting and hoping somebody hadn't already taken his combination. He had never won before but always came close. On my first day at school, I had given him my classroom number, which actually only contained three digits. I had added a random number at the end, making it 1123 because I thought it sounded likely. The winning number that week was close—1121. Every time Daddy scanned the newspaper to find out that he almost won, he clenched his fists, gritted his teeth and said, "So close!" When none of his chosen numbers appeared, he kept quiet and worked longer shifts at the hotel. Ma didn't believe in the lottery and called it

a huge waste of money. Although she knew that Daddy queued up for tickets every week, she hardly mentioned it so the lottery was our secret, something only we could understand. Daddy truly believed that he would win one day. But Ma liked to say that gambling was as useless as praying when you were in trouble.

There were four more stalls to go but my legs felt rubbery. Ma did not tolerate such excuses. "Buck up, Pin," she'd tell me in English when the market overwhelmed me. We were at the durian stall when I knew I needed a different excuse, something more severe. A stallholder squatted on the wet floor in front of a wooden block and chopped through a durian's tough shell with a large knife. The two halves fell away, exposing the cream-coloured fruit, round and fleshy like a heart. For a moment before the pungent durian odour rose into the air, I was mesmerised by the stallholder's handling of the large, spiky husk. Most of them wore gloves but this man didn't bother. He grabbed each durian out of a straw basket as tall as I was and, after making a short slit with his knife, he pried both sides of the shell apart with his bare hands. I searched for calluses on his palms—surely they had to be rough from pressing against those sharp spikes. This was when I had my idea.

I started by fidgeting first, just a bit, then I stopped. Ma continued to look at the durians, deciding if she would buy them. These fruits were her specialty. I did not know how to check their barbed skin for ripeness. When Ma turned towards me, I squirmed again.

"Stop it," Ma said. She thought I was just being impatient, but I was working up to something larger. I stopped for a moment and then, when she moved on to the next stall, I continued. This time I raised my leg and scratched it until there was a long red mark. Ma still did not notice. Our next stop was the chicken stall. The stallholder there was a young woman

with a son who clung to the hem of her shorts and stared at us. She shook the boy off her leg, gave Ma the prices and pulled a lumpy purple mess out of a skinned chicken all at the same time. I squatted on the floor and buried my fingernails into my flesh and dragged them across until I could hear the scratching noises.

Ma, in the middle of her negotiation, looked down at me. "Pin, what are you doing? What's wrong?" I made a face to show I was in pain and continued to scratch. Normally, when Ma tended to her own scarred skin, the noises were as sickening as the market smells. But now she was paying attention.

"Itchy," I said, shifting uncomfortably. I was starting to convince myself.

Ma squatted on the floor in front of me. She dropped all of her plastic bags. Water seeped through the hem of her ankle-length skirt, darkening the edges. She didn't care. She examined my leg, where I had built up an alarming rash. "We'll go home after this one," she told me as she rose to pay the stallholder, who quietly pocketed the change.

Ma ushered me out of the lanes, out of the drowning sounds, the yellowish lighting, the raw smell of blood. Outside, the dampness of market air was replaced by the familiar pressing heat. People rushed around in the bright morning and melted into the white air. We stepped out onto an even pavement and flowery bushes and rumbling buses slowing down to make stops. I let out a long sigh of relief. This was Singapore again—or at least, Singapore as I knew it.

• • •

A secret: I let Ma believe that I didn't like accompanying her to the market because I was scared of getting lost, but the truth was this was not my biggest fear. The market wasn't my favourite place in the world but I

could pretend I was underwater or that I was a tourist interested in buying exotic fruit or I was a Martian coldly observing life on another planet. Eventually, I could even block out the smell of blood and the shouts from stallholders and I could walk carefully so I didn't slip on the wet floor. What I dreaded about our trips to the market was what Ma always said to me afterwards on the walk home.

"Promise that you will not become like me."

The first time Ma had said it, I waited for an explanation but there was none. I asked her why and she said, "There are many reasons, Pin. You're too young now to understand it all but you can avoid making my mistakes. I just want you to keep it in mind. I was a little bit older than you when everything went wrong."

The second time she had warned me, I reminded her that she had told me the previous week. She gave me a sharp look. "And I'm going to keep saying it until you learn, Pin," she snapped. "Do not become like me." I felt embarrassed. Ma would not have had to remind me if she hadn't seen me imitating her walk or trying to style my hair like hers. I thought that maybe this was just how it was—daughters and mothers were not supposed to be alike. It did not make sense to me, but Ma was adamant, and she repeated this only on Sundays, so it became our weekly after-market ritual.

I didn't like it because it sounded like I was in danger, and I wanted to know more, but Ma did not like questions. She rarely gave answers, and only when she wanted to. I was only certain about a few things with Ma. I knew that she had a beautiful face but scarred, wrecked skin on her arms and legs. I knew that she liked watching Hindi movies and she sometimes cooed to the potted plants outside our flat. If I wanted to know anything else, I had to look for clues in her cooking.

We walked towards our flat and Ma slowed down so I could keep up. She looked worried. "Let me take that," she said, pulling the bag of tofu from me. Going back to our block, we always took the route that led us away from the strings of people shuffling on their way to the market. "Good thing we went early. Look at all of these people going now. It'll be madness in there," she said.

Our block was Number 549. Daddy had bought a ticket with those digits before, combined with one new number each week. Directly opposite our block, the void deck of 547 was crowded with rattan birdcages. A few men helped to hang the cages from hooks in the ceilings, then they placed numbers above them. Inside the cages, brown songbirds chirped shrilly, as if trying to overpower each other. There was a sign in Chinese characters with the English translation scrawled underneath. It was for another community songbird contest. There was one under a different block every week. Old pot-bellied uncles, wearing white singlets and black shorts, sat underneath the cages with their heads cocked, listening for the sweetest song.

"They all sound the bloody same to me," Ma muttered as we walked out of the lift and down the corridor to our flat. We could hear the birds from our floor—the shrill whistling would filter in through our kitchen windows all day until a winner was announced.

Ma went into her bedroom and emerged with a bottle of ointment. She rubbed it on the rash I had dug into my leg. "Okay?" she asked, but before I could answer, she said, "Yes, you'll be okay."

I felt so guilty about pretending to have a rash that I lined all of the plastic bags neatly against the kitchen walls. Ma paced the length of the counter a few times, an army general. I opened the door of the fridge and moved a carton of milk to make space. There was an order to how the

food was arranged in the fridge, and it all depended on the week's menu. I watched as Ma stacked spinach and bean sprouts in the vegetable drawer, put the chicken thighs and steely fish in the freezer, and the slab of tofu in a bowl of water. I tried to guess the food combinations for the week the way I searched my mind for Daddy's winning numbers, but nothing came up. Nothing made sense. Only Ma knew the plan. By the time she had finished, the fridge was crammed and blurred with colour, and it was almost noon.

I went back into my room, turned on the fan and stretched out across the cool tiled floor. Fierce sunlight softened as it entered in shreds through the slats of my blinds. In our small living room, Ma arranged the furniture as an excuse to watch television, and eventually she slouched onto the rattan sofa. The blurry shadows of neighbours continued to pass and I guessed the owner of each one, knowing I was correct. I could guess at the events of the rest of the day as well. Daddy would come home soon from his night shift at the hotel and poke his head into my room to tell me about his lottery numbers. Ma would cook a simple lunch, nothing too filling, because it was Sunday and she liked to cook big meals for our Sunday dinner. I would eat, help to clear the dishes, then go into my room while Ma and Daddy sat on the couch together and watched television. I would drift in and out of sleep, songs from the afternoon Hindi movies trailing into my room as the sun set and light escaped our home.

• • •

In our house, food was not just prepared and eaten to satisfy our appetites. Ma created meals based on her mood, the weather or unusual events. I always chewed my meals carefully, tasting for clues. Cabbage leaves soaked in sweet coconut gravy told me that Ma was feeling mellow. Perhaps it had

rained that afternoon and I hadn't noticed it from the classroom window at school. Bay leaves and sour sauces were signs of sophistication—Ma was inspiring me to leave the narrow hallways of this block of flats where neighbours eavesdropped and tripped over each other's shoes. Cinnamon sticks were Ma's way of comforting me when she noticed a flaw in the way the world worked and she was softening the blow. The sharp tang of cumin added to any dish meant that Ma was bothered about something. There were many cumin dishes.

Daddy was the one who taught me how to find the hidden meanings in Ma's food. He said that it was a useful skill, especially when she was upset. The first time he told me about it, I was excited. I thought I would finally be able to figure Ma out. But all I discovered were her emotions. I could taste anger in the amount of red chilli powder and mustard seeds she sprinkled in a curry and I could tell that she was happy when she roasted chicken with light soy sauce and anise seeds, and served it over white rice. But I ached to find out more about Ma. She was full of secrets. I had known that from the very first time I saw her standing at the window, gazing intently at the buildings in the distance and the sky beyond that. She did this often, becoming oblivious to everything but the wide sky ahead of her. I was never sure if she was looking *at* something or looking *for* something. "Your Ma does not always say what she's thinking or feeling," Daddy said. "But when she cooks, she puts her whole mind and heart into the food and you're bound to learn something about her." So I searched for Ma in her spices and sauces, her mixed vegetables and her sweet desserts.

Ma had only started making the market a part of our regular Sunday routine when we stopped going to the Sikh temple. I couldn't decide which one I disliked more. I didn't mind wearing a salwaar-kameez or keeping my head covered and my feet bare. I liked the quiet peace of the

prayer hall with its separate sections for men and women. I pretended I was a celebrity when I walked down the strip of dull red carpet and bowed low in front of the large Holy Book and the bearded priest who loudly read the script and never looked up. I could bear with the service—sitting cross-legged under fans that chopped the air, listening to the creaky accordions leading the hymns. But I dreaded eating at the temple, and for this I was sure that God would punish me.

Temple food was charred roti—wheat flour and water rolled into a soft dough, flattened and cooked on a flat iron stove. Cauliflower and potatoes mixed with spices and lumpy dhal were stirred in massive pots and pans over huge blue flames that flared like upside-down skirts. Thin, runny yoghurt contained strips of carrot and cucumber. They hadn't been cooked by Ma. The women in the back kitchen lived on gossip, trading stories about their friends' children and marriages. I always heard them talking when I walked in to put my plate in the sink. Once, one of them had caught my eye as I passed her and nudged her friend. "Isn't that…?" she asked. Her voice wasn't low enough. On the way home, I recalled the taste of their food in my mouth, dry and sour like their hushed gossip, and I told Ma I could no longer eat at the temple.

"It's God's food," Ma always said firmly, like that was an explanation for anything. I was to be thankful for being Sikh, she reminded me, because in our religion, everybody was treated equally when it came to eating. "Old and young, poor and rich—as long as you believe in Him, you are welcome to dine at the temple." I had to admit that it was quite generous of God to feed everyone. But I still wished He would make His food a bit more appealing. Whining around Ma was not a good idea; she didn't tolerate it. I never attempted the scratching trick at the temple because it was too risky with so many people watching. They weren't

supposed to know about Ma's skin trouble. It was something the three of us kept to ourselves. She had a condition that made her skin itch and become frighteningly red. She went to a doctor who gave her a special ointment and advised her not to scratch, but she said it was unbearable sometimes. If she was upset, her skin got even worse. The rashes grew and spread, and took over her skin completely. Ma wore long sleeves to the temple, even on the hottest days, and pulled them over her hands if anybody stared. People were always staring—needle-nosed ladies with their large eyes and greying hair, younger women whose glances darted away only to look back again. The men held their looks longer. I had asked Ma once why they always looked at us. She shrugged and said, "When all of my skin trouble started, they all had their own ideas about it. A stupid superstitious lot they are."

To get me to eat at the temple, Ma had coaxed. She had pleaded. She had threatened. She had even allowed her voice to rise to a near-shout once, but so many people had looked up that she had to lower it, defeated. Finally, when I was about six years old, she came up with an idea. In her handbag, with napkins and a purse heavy with coins, she carried a small jar of sugar. Glancing around first to see if anybody was looking, she allowed me to sprinkle the sugar onto the hot roti. I always watched and waited until it melted into the dough before I tore off a bite to test. Every time Ma let me eat this sugar bread, she shook her head and muttered, "This is the last time." But she brought that jar with her every Sunday, to every temple programme. She told me once that roti was the only thing her own mother cooked when they were growing up. This was no surprise to me because my Nani-ji still ate roti for every meal.

"Sometimes we had to modify it too. Just for a change," she had said, a smile playing on her lips. It was the kind of smile she wore when she was

remembering something that made her happy. It wasn't a look I noticed because often, the past brought shadows to Ma's face.

Nani-ji was at the temple every Sunday, sitting in the ladies' section, wearing her widow's white. Her hair was so thin that small pink strips of her scalp showed through the gauzy material of her scarf. Every time I walked in and noticed her, I quickly reached up to make sure that my scarf was covering my head, concealing my short ponytail. From the corner of my eye, I noticed Ma doing the same thing. Nani-ji knew that we cut our hair and she didn't like it, so we tried our best to hide the sin so she wouldn't notice and comment. Sikhs are not supposed to cut their hair or shave; the girls and women have plaits that hang down their backs like ropes, and the men wear turbans and thick beards that swallow their faces. Ma and I were modern with our short hair and Daddy too, with those faint dots of stubble on his cheeks. He managed to escape the temple most of the time because he took Sunday shifts at the hotel. He wasn't very religious, he admitted to me. He said that he had nothing against God, but he didn't think it was necessary to sit and drink tea in His home every week either.

Nani-ji was too old and slow on her feet to go to the temple on her own. Ma's brother, Mama-ji Sarjit, drove her early in the mornings. She always sat up front with his wife, my Fat Auntie, which was why we sat in the back. Ma and her brother only spoke few words to each other, and to Fat Auntie, even fewer. There had been an argument a few years earlier during which Fat Auntie had called Ma a disgrace for not attending her housewarming prayers. I knew this because Ma had said some unpleasant words about Fat Auntie's figure, specifically about her bum. After that, we avoided the temple for a few weeks, then Nani-ji got sick and had to go to the hospital, so they were forced to speak again. They politely said

hello and gave awkward side hugs as we queued up for food. The tension between them lingered in the air and settled in the milky tea I was forced to sip to push the hard bread down my throat.

"I don't like it," I told Ma, shaking the cup at her. The black dots of tea leaves rose to the surface. "It's…unfriendly."

"Bitter," Ma corrected me but she had failed the test. I wanted to see if she, too, could taste emotions. "There's no such thing as an *unfriendly* taste. It's the cardamom that kicks you a bit, takes away the sweetness." So she was not aware of the clues she gave away every day.

Beneath his thick beard, my Mama-ji's mouth was set in a permanent frown. He greeted by nodding. He allowed Fat Auntie to talk as much as she wanted. At the temple, she was always the loudest. From across the women's section, I could hear her shrill voice bouncing between the steel plates and the pale yellow walls. She got along well with the temple ladies. I wasn't sure if my grandmother liked her because Nani-ji didn't like anybody, but Fat Auntie was always on her side. Every time Nani-ji stood up, Fat Auntie rushed to help her. Every time Nani-ji coughed, Fat Auntie patted her back with a look on her face that seemed more like concentration than concern. These gestures made Ma's lips become thin as if she had to swallow them to refrain from saying something nasty. Because she felt this way, I did too. I spent my lunches at the temple focusing on hating Fat Auntie, and couldn't eat the sweet rice pudding and greasy golden rings of jalebi because of the anger that coated my taste buds, stinging my mouth with bitterness.

We stopped going to the temple because Ma had had an argument with Fat Auntie. I did not know exactly what they had disagreed about because there was nothing they didn't disagree about. It happened about a year ago in the dining hall after a long service.

I had just finished eating my lunch and was staring at the portraits on the wall. There were five portraits of the Gurus and I tried to figure out the stories they told. One portrait showed Guru Nanak atop a horse, a gentle halo illuminating his long robes. Another showed three men charging towards an army with spears. In another portrait, all nine Gurus sat cross-legged in a line, a temple towering behind them. I let my legs swing under the table. Nani-ji and Fat Auntie sat opposite us. Fat Auntie's niece was there—a girl named Harpreet with long hair and a pointy chin. "We are cousins," she told me matter-of-factly. "My Auntie is your Auntie." I worked it out in my mind and we were not really related. Fat Auntie's sister was Harpreet's mother. But Harpreet was friendly enough and when I accidentally kicked her under the table, she cheerily said, "Never mind!" before I could even apologise.

Ma and Fat Auntie were speaking in English and Nani-ji was slowly eating her food, mashing the roti up with her fingers and shovelling it into her mouth. She frowned as they spoke because she did not understand what they were saying. The conversation was about her. "She's too old to be staying on her own," Fat Auntie insisted. "She can't live in my house. I've got my two boys to look after." She gestured to her two sons, my cousins Devjit and Gurpreet. They were teenagers and didn't look like they needed to be looked after at all. I only realised I was staring when Devjit scowled at me, so I turned my attention to Ma.

"We have no room in my flat," Ma said. "It's too small. At least there's a spare bedroom in your home. You know I want to take care of my mother in her old age. But it's just not practical."

"Do you want to take care of her?" Fat Auntie countered. "Or are you just making excuses?"

Ma stared at her and I could feel her boiling rage. "What is that supposed to mean?" she asked quietly.

"Nothing. It's just very typical of you. You don't like to take on family responsibilities. And it's hard to know when you're telling the truth." She looked pointedly at Ma's wrists, which poked out of her long sleeves. The sun had been strong that morning on our path from the block to the bus stop and Ma's skin was scarlet.

"Want to go outside and play?" Harpreet asked me. I wanted to say no but Ma turned to me and said, "Pin, go with your new friend." She gave Harpreet a warm smile.

"Your mother is very pretty," Harpreet said as we searched the racks outside for our shoes. I had placed mine on top of Ma's but then more people had arrived and kicked their shoes off and the floor was a mess of black leather shoes, sneakers, high-heeled sequined sandals and flat slippers. I finally found my shoes but Harpreet said, "Don't put them on. We're going to play a running game." We left the temple building and descended the stairs that led to a courtyard where I met the other children. Ma and I had never stayed at the temple for very long before, so I didn't know the other kids. "This is my cousin Parveen!" Harpreet said, clasping my hand. "I'm Pin," I corrected her. Nobody called me by my full name. Daddy liked to joke that it was too long for me.

The courtyard was a wide open space with high grey walls covered in moss and creeping vines. The ground below my feet was rough and uneven but Harpreet assured me I'd get used to it once I started running. She was in charge of choosing the game because she was the oldest. "Can we play catching?" a boy asked.

"Later," Harpreet replied, then I saw her turn her head to the side. "Choos," she said under her breath. She saw me looking and she looked around before she quietly explained it. "I learnt it from my friend at school. If you say something but it's not true, you have to say

'choos' afterwards. Otherwise God will punish you for lying." I kept this in mind.

We played "What's the time, Mr Wolf?" One person was named Mr Wolf and they had to stand against the wall with their back facing the rest of us. "What's the time, Mr Wolf?" we cried out, and Mr Wolf would call out a time. We crept closer to Mr Wolf according to the number of hours he called out. If he said it was three o'clock, then we took three steps. The moment anybody got close enough to Mr Wolf, they had to try to touch the wall and run before he tagged them back. The person who got tagged became the next Mr Wolf.

We played rounds of the game until a cluster of clouds briefly blocked the sun and cast shadows on the courtyard. "Rain!" Harpreet called out, dancing around as though it was already pouring. In the distance, we heard rolling thunder. A strong gust of wind carried the smell of damp earth from some other part of the island where it was already raining. I expected Ma to come out of the temple already but there were no signs of her.

"Let's play some more. I want to be Mr Wolf," one boy named Jaswinder said. It was not actually his turn to be Mr Wolf but everybody was tired and we were only half-heartedly playing anyway. He ran to the front wall. "Ready?" He called out. "Okay, ask me."

The adults began to trickle outside, looking up at the tin-coloured sky. "What's the time, Mr Wolf?" we asked. He did not answer.

"Oi! What's the time, Mr Wolf?"

Still nothing.

"WHAT'S THE TIME, MR WOLF???" we all screamed in unison.

Jaswinder turned around slowly and gave us a grin. And then he said "fuck". A hush fell over the group. Some boys began to giggle. The girls were appalled. "I'm telling your mother," Harpreet scolded him. She

looked at me and shook her head. "I know his mother," she said to me. He did not seem to care. He announced the word again between giggles. The other boys shrieked with laughter but nobody dared to repeat what he had said. The girls huddled together.

Harpreet didn't have to tell his mother. She was one of the parents who came outside when the sky began to darken. She rushed towards our group like a lightning bolt. "Say that again?" she challenged before slapping him hard across the face twice. I winced. Harpreet put her hands on her hips and looked satisfied. Jaswinder howled and whimpered as his mother dragged him off by the ear. "Saying vulgar words in the temple in front of everybody. Just you wait till I tell your father about this. He'll give you a bloody thrashing at home. Just *wait*."

We stood there in silence for a moment, as if mourning the loss of a soldier. "Maybe we should play catching or hide-and-seek," suggested a bony girl named Neelu. Harpreet agreed and asked me if I wanted to play too. I was about to say yes when I spotted Ma coming out of the temple entrance with my shoes in her hands. She was walking quickly and something was wrong. I could tell because of the way she looked at me, almost as if she was looking right past me because her mind was full of other thoughts.

"We're going now, Pin," she said sharply.

"We're playing hide-and-seek," I told Ma.

"No. Get your shoes. We're going now."

I turned to Harpreet. "Okay, next week," I said apologetically. I liked the temple more now that I knew the other kids. Running around and playing made me forget God's bad food.

"No. We're not coming back next week. We're not coming back here any more," Ma said. Harpreet's eyes widened.

After I put my shoes back on, Ma took my hand and led me out of the courtyard. The group of adults stepped aside quietly to let us pass. The children looked confused. Harpreet waved but Ma was pulling me along so hard, I did not have a chance to wave back.

At the bus stop, I noticed that the backs of Ma's hands were raw with scabs. She wringed her hands and bit her lower lip and tried to blink back tears that poured down her cheeks anyway. I put my head against her shoulder and my hand in hers but she shrugged me away. "God sees everything, Pin," she said finally as our bus approached. "You just remember that." I immediately felt a wave of guilt for playing "What's the time, Mr Wolf?" with that foul-mouthed boy Jaswinder now. God had seen the whole thing.

The following Sunday, we started going to the market and Ma made a religion out of buying food and transforming it into delicious dishes with her recipes. I knew that Fat Auntie must have said something terrible to make her so angry but I did not dare to ask her what it was. I just accompanied her to the market and when she first told me that I should never become like her, I said, "Okay." Then I turned to my side and said, "Choos, choos, choos." Thrice, because it was likely to be stronger that way.

• • •

I woke from my nap to the sound of the front gate yawning as it opened, the padlock snapping open. "Hi Daddy," I murmured as he stepped into my room.

"Hi Pinny," he said, a grin in his voice. "Not playing football today?"

"I don't play on Sundays," I told him. The boys in the neighbourhood sometimes let me join them in playing catching and football. I had a

powerful kick and I was little enough to fit into the spaces in shallow drains where the balls sometimes ended up. I was also a girl, which made the neighbourhood people complain less if we had accidentally hit them, because I was good at looking sad and sorry when I was scolded.

"I saw the boys downstairs," Daddy said. He folded his legs into a pretzel and sat on the floor, then he looked around as if to check for spies. He lowered his voice. "Promise you won't tell anyone?" I nodded. "Promise? Promise, *promise*?" He took out a stack of tickets from his pocket, folded like dollar bills. My eyes widened. There must have been over 20 lottery tickets.

"So many?" I asked, grabbing for the tickets. I spread them out on the floor and surveyed the numbers. Four of them were digits I had given him and the rest were unknown to me. I pointed to random tickets and asked about them. "Where is this one from? Why did you pick this one?" Daddy's explanations were varied. His numbers were like Ma's dishes—full of stories and combinations. 4402 was the license plate number of a wealthy hotel guest. 2421 was the cost of his new shoes, $24.21. 6748 had just occurred to him during a late shift and he took this as a sign that he needed to use it.

"There were so many important numbers this week, Pin," he said. "I couldn't just buy one or two." He didn't need to explain to me. If Ma found out, she'd be furious. She thought the lottery was a waste of money that we didn't have. "Why don't you get a better job instead of putting all of your wages in stupid 4D tickets?" she always asked in a tone that meant it wasn't a question.

"I won't tell," I told Daddy as he counted and stuffed the tickets back into his pockets.

"Thanks, Pinny," he said. He smoothed down the messy curls in my hair, but they sprang up again.

About the author

Balli Kaur Jaswal is also the author of *Inheritance*, a universal story of family, identity and belonging, newly re-released by Epigram Books. 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*.

The Epigram Books Fiction Prize promotes contemporary creative writing and rewards excellence in Singaporean literature. The richest literary prize in Singapore is awarded to the Singaporean, permanent resident or Singapore-born author for the best manuscript of a full-length, original and unpublished novel written in the English language.

The closing date for submission to this year's prize is 1 September 2016. The winner will be announced in December and have his or her novel published by Epigram Books.

For more information, please visit **EBFP.EPIGRAMBOOKS.SG**

FINALIST FOR THE
2015 EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE

"This is the most glorious mic drop moment in Singaporean Literature. Absolutely essential reading for anyone who cares about living in this city."

—Pooja Nansi, author of *Love is an Empty Barstool*

"Here is a powerful new literary voice in Singaporean fiction—and a voice that must be heard."

—Kirpal Singh, poet and creativity guru

Pin must not become like her mother, but nobody will tell her why. She seeks clues in Ma's cooking when she's not fighting other battles—being a bursary girl at an elite school and facing racial taunts from the bus uncle. Then her meddlesome grandmother moves in, installing a portrait of a watchful Sikh guru and a new set of house rules. Old secrets begin to surface but can Pin handle learning the truth?

ISBN-13: 978-981-4757-30-0
9 789814 757300
www.epigrambooks.sg