

SUGAR KIDS

A NOVEL

TASLIM BURKOWICZ



Roseway Publishing
an imprint of Fernwood Publishing
Halifax & Winnipeg

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Development editing: Fazeela Jiwa
Copyediting: Kristen Darch
Cover design: Tania Craan
Text design: Lauren Jeanneau
Printed and bound in Canada

Published by Roseway Publishing
an imprint of Fernwood Publishing
Halifax and Winnipeg
2970 Oxford Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3L 2W4
www.fernwoodpublishing.ca/roseway

Fernwood Publishing Company Limited gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Canada Council for the Arts. We acknowledge the Province of Manitoba for support through the Manitoba Publishers Marketing Assistance Program and the Book Publishing Tax Credit. We acknowledge the Nova Scotia Department of Communities, Culture and Heritage for support through the Publishers Assistance Fund.



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Canada Council
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Conseil des arts
du Canada

NOVA SCOTIA

Manitoba 

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Sugar kids: a novel / Taslim Burkowicz.

Names: Burkowicz, Taslim, 1978- author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20240305221 | Canadiana (ebook)

20240305256 | ISBN 9781773636757 (softcover) | ISBN

9781773636764 (PDF) | ISBN 9781773636771 (EPUB)

Subjects: LCGFT: Bildungsromans. | LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS8603.U73776 S84 2024 | DDC C813/.6,Äidc23

BEFORE

Excerpt

ONE

One day, I got the flu and Ravi didn't. It was September 12, 1988. We were ten. For the first time in our lives, he went to school without me. On the walk home my twin was struck by a car on a crosswalk. Hindus do not cremate saints, babies, or young children. These beings did not need their sins purified. Ravi was older than the typical age children are when they are buried. But despite my mother's protests that Ravi was as innocent as an infant, Ravi was not arranged to be buried in lotus position as a holy person would be. He was cremated.

On the eve of his funeral, I felt myself become buried with the same dirt he should have been. Heavy, cool, moist soil covered me, filled with worms, minerals, and decomposed animals. Whoever I had been when Ravi was alive sank deeper into the Earth's crust, and I swallowed all his boy traits in my sleep. The next morning, the blackened soil, laced with white dots of volcanic glass that looked like Styrofoam balls, wafted away from me like the ocean's waves. I sat up in bed, sure I had consumed Ravi's spirit. It was stored in me, like a genie in a bottle. I picked up Ravi's hat and his kid-sized skateboard, ready to go to school as both twins.

Instead, my mother came into my room, packed up the unisex clothes Ravi and I had worn and told me I should wear dresses from now on. As if what Ravi and I had together was a circus act. Ravi and I had used our twinhood to bypass our Indianness, climbing the ranks of popularity in a mostly white school. Together, we had won skipping rope contests dancing to Rob Base & DJ E-Z Rock. We had been as popular as Amanda Piper with her swimming pool-blue eyes, and

golden Erik Danielson, who had been chosen for every sports team. But my mom was reshaping her reality, trying to squeeze Ravi out of me.

That very day, she transferred me to a different elementary school. At the new school, I wasn't someone anymore. The bullies spoke to me in made-up accents and put stickers between their eyes when they saw me. Girls pulled up my skirt and laughed at my Days of the Week underwear. I was nicknamed Tuesday. It could have been the ridiculous outfits my mother sent me to school in — sailor girl outfits and bumblebee dresses with sashes. Immigrant children's clothes, othering me from the get-go. That's also around the time my violent twitching started, like I was having seizures, and I really couldn't control when it would happen. Now, I was a twinless twin. I felt like I was missing a limb. Like I was barely alive. Ravi would never even return the last book he had borrowed: *Under the Night Sky*. Stolen library books became a comfort to me of sorts.

And that should have been the end of the Ravi's story; really, it should have been.

Instead, Ravi decided to visit me.

He looked exactly as he always did, black hair standing on end, dressed in plain jeans and a denim jacket, the last thing he had worn, and he calmly told me that we would still grow up together, just that he had to do most of his growing up some place else.

"I will visit you when I can, Baby, and if you tell anyone about me, they won't believe you anyway. So, let's just enjoy our time together, okay?"

"Okay."

Together, we thumbed through his unreturned library book, discovering the Leo the Lion constellation, which the ancient Egyptians used to design the famous Sphynx, located near the Great Pyramids of Giza. My parents moved apartments. And yet, Ravi found his way to me. He sat atop obnoxiously dangerous places like my bookshelf. We snuck out of my bedroom window to find an unencumbered view of the night sky.

Ravi and I became so interested in finding constellations we would map the stars out on a piece of onion-skin paper and line it up with the sky. Lying on an empty track field in our hometown in Burnaby we rested our heads on Ravi's penny board, the underbelly marked with scarred stickers. The synthetic rubber of the track massaging bits of small rocks into our backs, soon a pot with a handle appeared as if by magic, in the centre of the sky. The Big Dipper.

Ravi and I did grow up together, and he took up smoking. On his travels, Ravi also picked up a charming Camden Town accent. The tip of his spliff burning like some fiery, distant planet, he would say to me in his tight London way, "You know, Baby, with everything you see in the galaxy, you're getting a delayed look at things, innit. Even the sun you're looking at is what it was eight minutes ago. Nuffin's ever as it seems."

By way of dying young, Ravi was freed from all his religious duties. And I was forced to participate in Diwali, Holi, Navratri, Ugadi, Shivratri. What I hadn't factored into my system of playing along was that my mother herself wasn't up for it. Even her childhood pictures from Ahmedabad depicted her as a slight girl, with matchbox-stick legs and an odd-angled bob too big for her face. These photographs always appealed to me because I wanted nothing more than to be her mother when I saw them. But when I was sixteen, she had a stroke.

Just like with Ravi, I couldn't save her.

PART 1

WINTER 1995 / 1996

EXCERPT

TWO

It had been a year since my mom died, and I had to attend a *shraadh* held by my grandmother to commemorate her death. We were smack in that magical little pocket of time after Christmas but before New Year's. My father and I had driven there together covered in a tarp of silence. All the traditional foods were present: coconut curry, *bhindi sabzi*, pumpkin curry, cucumber *raita*, deep fried puffed pastry called *kachori*, and a rice pudding called *kheer*, made with milk. I wondered if funeral *kheer* was made differently than celebratory *kheer* — perhaps topped with fewer nuts. Yet, there was not one small bowl of *gajar ka halwa* or *mutter paneer*, two of my mother's favourite dishes. That broke my heart a little. Her soul was supposedly visiting the house today, after all.

As the adults sipped too-sweet chai served from tiny cups, I tried not to make eye contact with my mother's portrait. Like a ghost, the milky caramel tea smell floated over the scent of the food. My boy cousins were wearing white Gap khakis and some variation of the white Club Monaco sweater. The girls, white Indian suits. Knowing this, I probably shouldn't have worn my cropped blue Yankees shirt (kid's size 5, nicked from the thrift store). To be fair, I no longer owned any *shalwar kameez* that fit me.

When one of the men my grandmother had hired tried to hand me the same sparkling waters my cousins were sipping, I refused.

"No, thanks," I muttered.

"One glass, have one," the waiter said.

"No." I wasn't trying to be rude. I just couldn't stand the idea of swallowing bubbles in water at that moment.

I felt one of my female cousins staring. I had shoved my long hair in a hat while she had one of those Jennifer Aniston haircuts, layered in steps and dyed a sandy colour, like an ancient Mayan ruin.

“Is that a baseball team or something?” she asked, pointing at my top.

I shrugged, pulling out my pager.

My grandmother’s house was stupendously large, guarded by two stone carved lions. It was all white couches and marble floors. My late grandfather had owned a successful soda factory in India, leaving my grandmother money. My grandmother was used to hiring staff. In Ahmedabad, the servants would pummel your jeans and T-shirts clean with a stick and stretch them out to dry so they would grow stiffer over time, as if one day, they would be prepared to walk off the clothesline and leave you for another life. She’d always looked down at my father for being a bus driver and thought my mother could do better. And my mother, likewise, had wished for a house like this.

Carlie hadn’t paged.

“Why did you come here dressed like this?” my grandmother said in her Gujarati accent, bringing with her a cloud of Eternity perfume. “People are talking.”

“It’s my mother, not theirs.”

“This is about respect. Your mother liked you dressing feminine.”

I wanted to say Ravi would approve of my clothes. Instead, I looked down at the translucent skin on my wrist, fascinated with the little blue highways rushing things to very important places.

“A girl without a mother needs guidance. Your father alone cannot control you.”

“Why do I need to be controlled?”

“Today of all days, you should not wear vagabond clothing.” She herself was wearing a white tailored Indian outfit designed to look Western, which modern hybrid Indian people thought made them look continental.

“She isn’t here to say, is she?” I bit back. As I watched her lips curl, I started to feel my body shake.

“Shame on you, Baby. I’ve had enough. Get out of my house. Come back when you have decency.”

This was my mother’s one-year death anniversary. *My* mother’s.

Everyone looked on. Still, I did not move right away, trying to control my shaking. I thought of the options I had carefully recorded in my journal:

1. Run away.
2. Kill myself.
3. Do something so great with my life that what was left of my family would be proud.

“Fuck all of you,” I said when my body woke up. Because if I didn’t spit that out, I would have cried. And crying in front of these dickheads was pointless. I could never make them proud.

Quietly, without grand display, I picked up the skateboard sitting next to a wide vase filled with golden spray-painted twigs.

I never wanted to be like these people.