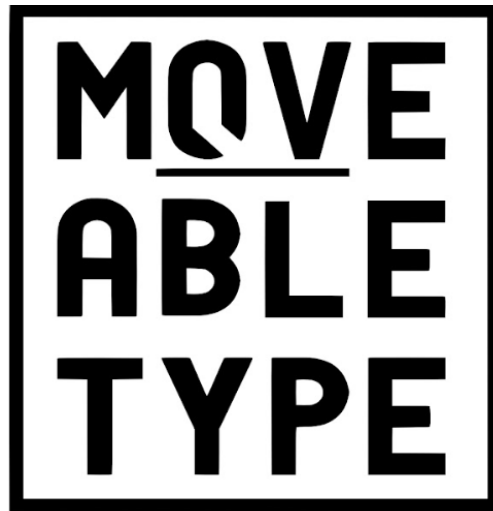




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Author: Kushali Mahajan

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Fear is Not an Heirloom

KHUSHALI MAHAJAN

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There is a particular kind of grief that comes not from loss, but escape. But when escaping from family, does the grief grow when it is from filial duties, or does it subside knowing the escape from your roots is essential when the roots turn into a noose? More importantly, in the end, who holds more grief: the one who promised themselves to break away from a tyrannical family unit, and succeeded at the cost of never returning, or the one who failed to provide the comfort of a family, forcing their own child to flee from them? It is this theme that the 2025 Strega Prize winner, Andrea Bajani, explores in his heart-wrenching autofiction, *The Anniversary*. The novel is a celebration of an important date: the tenth anniversary of the author's success in deliberately cutting ties with his parents. It is a novel that breaks a taboo with barely a raised voice, a heated confrontation, or the delusion of arrogant pride; quietly insinuating the exacting nature of the devastation it makes the reader feel. Translated from Italian into English by Geoffrey Brock and set to be released in July 2026 as part of Penguin Press' new International Writers Series, *The Anniversary* is a devastating narration of a dysfunctional family. The prose is spare and exact, and every sentence is load-bearing, with nothing decorative. The restraint mirrors the narrator's own emotional containment, the hard-won self-discipline of someone who grew up in a volatile household and learned early that feelings were best kept to a minimum. It is writing that trusts its reader and believes the weight of what is described does not need amplification.

This novel is a visceral narration of the memories of a controlling, abusive father and a deeply passive mother, which led to the destruction of the emotional and physical being of the narrator: Bajani himself, in all but legal acknowledgement. These memories rise like flood water, slow and unstoppable, carrying debris, through which Bajani reconstructs the architecture of a deeply patriarchal Italian-Catholic household, the existence of which depended on the mercy of a temperamental patriarch. Yet as the story progresses, the porous foundations of this architecture become apparent when the pretence of the oldest and most seductive promise of the patriarchy, that the man who controls, in exchange, provides and protects, falls. The father is rendered with the cold precision of someone who has spent years studying the wounds he's created. He is not villainous; he is just a man. But he is a man whose tyranny operates through petty acts of domination, setting a constant ringing of terror in the backdrop of his household. However, like most stories arising from the patriarchy, it is most powerfully told when the victim is placed at the centre.

The character of the mother is what makes the novel so complex and painful. Bajani does not grant her the dignity of victimhood without complication and is even resentful of her passiveness. Yet she does evoke the striking image of a woman who's alive only because she's not dead. She carried with herself a giant alarm clock around the city to ensure punctuality when meeting the father; she let go of her only friend when the latter was forced out of her life because she was instrumental in uncovering the father's affair; she allowed herself to be controlled when they finally got a telephone in the house, which was only picked up under the scrutinising eye of the father; she even minimised herself to the extent to brush her teeth with toilet water when she could not find the courage to tell the father that she had not brushed before he had switched the

supply off. She had rendered herself near invisible, even though she was never too much to begin with, but this self-erasure seemed like a glimmer of hope in the peace she was promised, and a bargain for the agency she lost.

Bajani presents the frustration he felt with his mother's submission in a very haunting manner, because till the end, she remained a woman who based her life on a false promise over evidence. He does not pity her because she also failed in her maternal duties when turning a blind eye to his father's anger and violence directed towards him. What is the most devastating moment in the novel is at the end, when Bajani concludes that he now only meets his mother in the reflections of her features in the face of his own child. He did not save her, for she had accepted her fate of a sinking ship. But he does save himself, and that is what germinates a new promise of breaking generational trauma. The author refused to accept fear as an heirloom not just by cutting ties, but also by not assuming the role of a tyrannical patriarch himself. He rose to question the system that destroyed his family by not accepting the benefits. In a simple promise of neither becoming like his father nor accepting the fate of his mother, the author did not commit a selfish act of abandonment, but a selfless act of non-participation, and can even be argued to be revolutionary.

As an Indian woman who has spent much of her life navigating the same structures, I found nothing foreign in Bajani's account. The patriarchy promises that surrender will be rewarded and obedience will produce safety, but Bajani's act of defiance stands as a fairly unexplored challenge. That he can share it in Italian, in a household an ocean away, and have it land with this kind of precision, is exactly what great translated fiction is capable of and what this series seems committed to delivering. This is a testament to the ethical values of Penguin Press' International Writers Series in choosing this novel to launch their list: their understanding that the architecture of patriarchal family is not a local or historical phenomenon but a blueprint that has been followed across cultures and centuries with devastating consistency; the failures and promises arising out of it echo indiscriminately.

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Khushali Mahajan is a lawyer from India residing in London after completing her Master of Laws (LLM) from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). She has specialised in criminal law and is passionate about human rights advocacy, especially for the rights of women across the world. Khushali believes that her experience as a lawyer has introduced her to countless lives that she was destined to witness.

She takes a deep interest in literature arising out of conflict, dystopia and mysticism. She has two major goals in life: to successfully attempt reading all Penguin Modern Classics, and to weave all the memorable people she's met into characters of a book she aims to write one day.