



Leaving Home

Ris Brar and Kaval Bains
Surrey, BC
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By Lauren Kramer
Photographed by Robert McGee and Shannon Eckstein

RIA BRAR BIT BACK THE TEARS AND TRIED TO SMILE BRAVELY. Dressed to perfection in a 50-lb traditional Sikh wedding gown she'd purchased in India, which was encrusted in crystals, thinstones and antique embroidery, she knew her marriage to Kaval Bains, 27, was a time for joy. But she couldn't shake the knowledge that she was leaving home, the security of the family circle in which she'd been raised, and Vancouver, the city she'd grown to love.

"The hardest part of leaving home was knowing that my family wouldn't be there at all times, and that because I was moving to Detroit, I was going to be without them on a daily basis. It was very difficult knowing their lives were going to go on, but that I wasn't going to be there to share that with them," she confesses.

Ria's panic at the thought of her impending departure had begun in the months leading up to her wedding in June 2005. "I completely stopped going out, and spent all my free time at home with my family, because I wanted to pack years of memories into those few months I had left," she says.

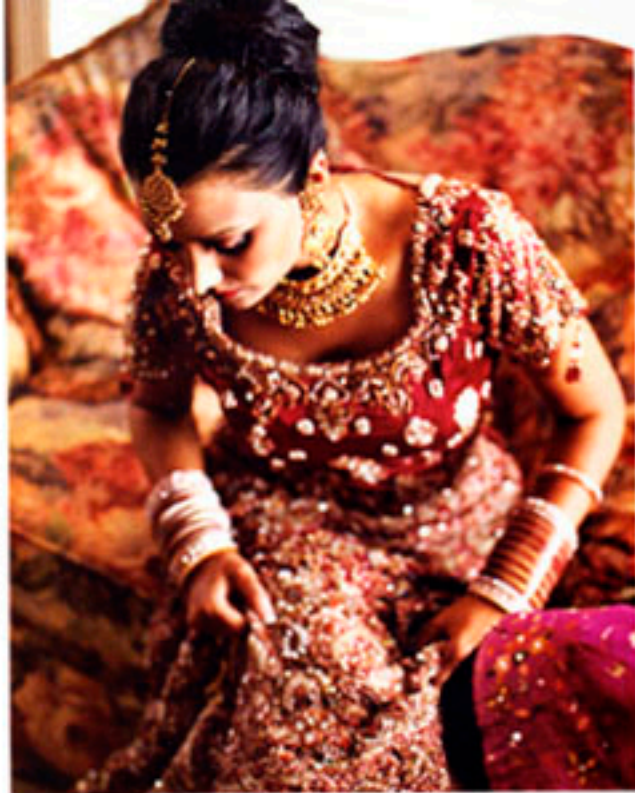
The eldest of the three children in her family, 25-year-old Ria had a special bond with her parents, who had immigrated to Canada from East India as teenagers. "My mom gave birth to me when she was 16, and she and my dad were both kids in a new country when I was born," Ria explains. Parting ways with her family would be difficult, but she deep inside, she knew she and Kaval were destined for a sweet and blessed life together—even if their relationship had gotten off to a rocky start.



(above) Kaval arriving at Ria's family home to commemorate her leaving home.
(left) A colourful procession of women arriving at the Brar home.



Ria flew to India in February 2005 for a custom-made wedding gown. The traditional Sikh dress weighed over 50 pounds and was embellished with crystals, rhinestones and antique embroidery.



Her friend Rina had been the first to meet Kaval while vacationing in Detroit. After spending some time with him, she had a gut feeling her best friend back home would love him, and became adamant that the two should communicate. "Later on, I asked her 'Why Kaval? What was it about him?'" Ria recalls. "She said she didn't know—she just saw him and thought immediately of me."

It was June when the couple exchanged their first few tentative emails, messages that quickly gave way to a slew of telephone calls as Kaval and Ria gradually got to know each other. "We started with a few calls a day, but eventually I was functioning on Eastern Standard Time, talking to him first thing in the morning when he woke up, and going to bed when he did," laughs Ria.

The fact is, both of them were ready to get serious. Kaval had been looking for Ms. Right since he graduated from pharmacy school in Detroit four years earlier, and though he'd met a few girls, "I just knew they weren't the right ones for me," he says.

Back in Vancouver, Ria was equally ready to find a marriage partner. "I was 25, at an age where I wanted to be married," she confesses. "Me and my girlfriends were always talking about what we wanted in a man."



(left) Kaval arrived on horseback at the Aston Pacific Hotel, the site of their ceremony, feeling like a movie star.



(below) Tears of joy and sadness as Ria prepares to leave her family and join Kaval as his bride.





(left) The anticipation mounts as the ceremony begins.



After two months of telephone calls, they agreed it was time to meet—though their first few dates would be anything but ideal. When Kaval first flew to Seattle, Ria was two hours late picking him up from the airport. “I was acting crazy too, because I was so nervous,” he says.

“That first day we spent together was chaotic,” Ria agrees. “First we got separated in different cars, then he got a flat tire and found that the spare was flat too. To top it off, our cellular phones weren’t working! Anything and everything that could go wrong, did!”

The next day would prove to be more encouraging. Ria drove Kaval back to Vancouver to meet her family, and a few weeks later, flew to Detroit to meet his, who resided in Windsor. “It was super-scary, especially meeting his four older sisters,” she confesses. She left with a promise ring from Kaval, a token that “symbolized Kaval’s commitment to me and our relationship.”

“We both knew what we wanted in a life-long partner and were ready to make that commitment,” Ria explains. “When we met each other, we knew it was meant to be. We found substance in one another, and we shared each other’s ideals, values and morals. We felt that this was it and there was no reason to wait.”

Things moved fast. In October, Kaval’s parents flew to Vancouver to meet Ria’s family. “In our culture, we believe marriage is a joining of two families, and you can’t get married to someone unless the two families meet and agree on the union,” says Ria. “Our families liked each other, and the next day they returned and gave me gifts, money, gold bangles and sweets. At that point, I was spoken for, and we were engaged.”

But Kaval had another, more Westernized proposal planned for his bride. He sent her ring-shopping at Tiffany’s in Detroit, and a day later, whisked her off to Mexico, proposing on bended knee by the water’s edge.

“He completely blew me away,” says Ria, who responded with an emphatic Yes! To Kaval’s proposal. “He told me all the things I meant to him, and had me serenaded by a saxophone player as we dined in a private gazebo overlooking the water.”



(right) The petals of roses, Ria’s favorite flower, lined the aisle as Kaval awaited his bride.





The wedding planning ensued apace. Initially, the couple considered marrying in summer 2006, but opted to wed a year earlier instead. "Our phone bills were insane, as were the flights we were taking once we decided we wanted to get married, as we were seeing each other at least once a month," says Ria. "Neither one of us thought we could wait two more years to get married—besides we were miserable when we weren't together."

In February 2005, Ria flew to India with her mother and grandmother to shop for custom-made gowns for herself, her wedding party, Kaval and his family. By June 2005, a year since the couple first exchanged emails, their Sikh wedding ceremonies, which would last a total of 13 days, span two cities and include some 700 guests, were about to begin.

"Our wedding on July 1, 2005, at the Aston Pacific Hotel in White Rock, was the most meaningful of all the ceremonies for me," says Kaval. "I had dreamed about it, and knew it would be an outdoor wedding in a big tent, surrounded by flowers. Ria and I wanted this ceremony to be the most precious, extravagant part of our wedding, and it truly was."

The outdoor garden wedding was held beneath billowing, white tents, with a central aisle lined with roses, her favourite flower, and a gazebo covered in garlands of roses, Catalpa lilies and orchids. Kaval arrived first, on a white horse. "I felt like a movie star," he confesses.

He was seated by the time a veiled Ria made her entrance, led by her parents. "When I entered, it took my breath away and brought tears to my eyes, as there sat Kaval, looking as regal as I had imagined. Nothing around me mattered anymore, other than the fact that we had finally made it to this moment. All else was forgotten," she says.

Even the pain of leaving home subsided, as Ria looked directly into the eyes of her groom. "In our culture, we believe there's no bond stronger than a husband and wife," says Ria. "I had the wedding of my dreams, and Kaval and I are ecstatic about this union. We couldn't be happier." ■

(above, left) Ria and Kaval held their Western-style reception at The Wall Centre. The table centerpieces were ostrich feathers in silver trumpet vases from Art of the Party. The five-tier chocolate and vanilla wedding cake, made by Barbara Walker, was topped with fresh roses. (below) Ria purchased a jewel-coloured gown with a long train at The Bridal Gallery in New Westminster.

