

MONOSWITA SAHA

JASMINE

THIRD PLACE, JENNIE HACKMAN MEMORIAL AWARD FOR SHORT FICTION

Nina checks the board every minute, strains her ear listening for the announcement. Her shoulder aches under the weight of her duffle bag. She knows what to expect and she is still shocked every time. The tube is sterile, cold metal, shiny seats, glass windows, and metro-sexual men draped around steel poles. Trains to Kolkata are not tube trains. She can't breathe. She can't move. Men use oil, not gel in their hair. Morning vendors, a whole head shorter than Nina, push in front of her with their produce balanced on their heads. Nina starts panicking about how she is going to push her way onto the train when it comes and more importantly, how she is going to push herself out when it's her stop.

A hollow female voice blares out of an unseen intercom. "Down two at platform four! Down two at platform four!"

Nina walks quickly to platform four. It's just past dawn, already sunny, and she is sweating from nervousness. She misses the convenience of London. Predictable side walks, whitewashed walls, reliable air conditioning, just—the modernity. Nina cringes at her own thoughts. India is good, too. The train rolls in. Nina uses her duffle bag as a battering ram against the crowd to get in. It's barely 6:20 in the morning, the only time slot where she can tackle the crowd. It takes 45 minutes to get to Kolkata by train and bus. If she misses the morning "empty" train, then it's a two hour taxi traffic crawl into the city.

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Monu huddles closer to her brother for warmth. At dawn the air cools for an hour or two. People with air conditioning never notice. She doesn't want to move. Every morning Monu wishes she had decided to live there. Tink, tink, Bangles clink against each other. Her mother is up, a hunched woman with a leather face. "Monu—ott—get up." Monu watches the shadow figure with her glinting nose ring and two small earrings. The teeth gleamed too, back when she had them.

"I'm getting up." Monu wrenches herself away from her brother's warm body and throws on her frock. She shivers as she runs outside to brush her teeth. Most of the shacks have small fires going, at least to heat water for tea. She's lucky. She's been working for this family for years. They are very kind to her; in fact they behave as though

they love her. Monu hears horror stories every day. She quickly finishes washing up. "Ami, I'm going."

Her mother straightens up. "When will you be back?"

"Same time as usual."

"Don't they want to keep you longer? I thought with the foreign people there, they would need more work done."

Monu puts on her sandals. "No, they always tell me to go home at the normal time." She peers back in for a moment. Her brother is still sleeping. Her two sisters are wrapped around each other. No one shows any signs of waking up. "They have to get ready for school."

"I'll get them ready. You'll be late."

"Is Bor-Di coming today?" Monu asks.

"I don't know. Go ahead; go to work." Her mother turns away. It's time to start the day. They don't have streets, just paths beaten down in whatever patterns most people decide to walk to work in. Puddles often form in the depressions and the whole walk is slightly muddy. Monu tries to pick her way around the worst parts in an attempt to keep her toes clean. People are coming out to wash their faces and fill pails of water for cooking and cleaning. In fifteen minutes the slum is behind her. The highway is almost empty at this time in the morning. Up ahead, one woman in a pink sari is walking barefoot with a basket of vegetables on her head.

Monu crosses the intersection. Traffic has become more chaotic ever since they put the signals in, but it's still early and she crosses easily. All the rickshaw-wallahs are sleeping in their rickshaws, sort of folded into the seats in various contortions; the taller ones rest their unfortunately long legs on the bicycle seat. There are eighteen rickshaw-wallahs for this street. Three in this line aren't sleeping. They're smoking their morning biris. They watch Monu as she walks by. The alley is a self-sufficient microcosm unto itself. Residents need venture out only to buy high-end food items such as chicken sausages, expensive clothes and appliances, and hire servants. Everything else, from bootleg liquor and ganja to potatoes and salt to puja flowers, is sold in some makeshift stall on the street. Most alleys around the older apartment complexes are similar. If you don't mind a little street dust mixed in with your fresh fish, it's perfect. Residents of the new apartment complexes have to venture out farther for their needs. The commute is the cost of keeping the virgin white varnish looking new.

Monu comes to the entrance and walks through the side door. The security guards are, as usual, not in their booth. The couple she works for, Mr. Dilip Dey and Mrs. Amrita Dey, are on the second floor, a blessing when the power is out and the elevators don't work. Actually

this job is a blessing all around. Mr. Dey is a retired rail officer and Mrs. Dey is a professional housewife, mother, and grandmother. The Deys are Dadu and Dida to Monu and anyone under thirty. The Deys treat her well. Dadu buys her frocks and he has tried to teach her to read a few times. Suddenly Monu's heart beats faster. The Didi and Dada from America are in India and they spend their weekends here. Every time the Didi came she brought Monu lovely clothes, different clothes from anything found there, and other things as well: chocolates, markers. One time a long time ago the Didi had brought her a white doll with yellow hair. The doll had shorts and high-heeled shoes.

When Monu comes in she can smell onions frying. The cook has already started. "Dida are they here?" Monu asks as she shuts the door behind her.

"No, not yet. Only Didi is coming. She caught the 6:30 morning train, so she'll be here around 7:40 AM or so. I can't believe that crazy girl is traveling alone." Mrs. Dey comes out of the kitchen with a basket of onions and peppers. "I want you to slice these peppers and then go out and buy some fresh shinagaras."

Monu starts off to the kitchen.

Mrs. Dey puts a hand on Monu's shoulder. "Wait. You didn't have breakfast yet did you? Wash your hands. There is hot milk on the stove and bread. Have it before you go to work."

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"Hi Dida, I'm here! How are you? Smells good. How can you finish all your cooking so early? What did you make?"

Monu hears Didi's cheerful voice and peeks her head out of the kitchen door way. Every weekend it's the same. Didi tumbles through the door like a whirlwind volley of questions, energy, and smiles. "Hi Monu, how are you? Why are you hiding? Come out here." Didi always catches everything.

Monu smiles shyly. She doesn't know what to say. Finally she murmurs, "Hi," very softly, her lips barely move and she runs back to the kitchen. Monu quickly puts water to boil. She's more comfortable when her hands are busy. She knows everyone will want tea.

"Dida, why is she always so shy of me? I've been here so many times." Nina says, as she takes her sandals off.

"She's just shy. You should hear her talk about you when you're gone. It's 'Didi has such long beautiful hair, Didi let me comb her hair. Didi bought me a new dress. When is Didi coming back?'" Mrs. Dey steps back suddenly. "Look at you. How can you carry that heavy bag by yourself? And you brought it on the train and the bus. It must be the

foreign blood. Makes you people stronger than us.”

“Dida! I was born here. I don’t have any foreign blood. I’m one-hundred percent—”

Mrs. Dey waves away Nina’s reasoning. “No, but how much time do you spend here? You have foreign blood now. Put that down. Did you eat yet? Of course not. What shall I bring? Do you want shinagaras? Shall I have Monu buy some bread?”

“Dida, I’m fine. Stop worrying. I’ll just have chaa.”

“Just chaa, just chaa. Always the same answer. What type of girl has only chaa for breakfast? You’ve come all this way, carried that bag all by yourself and you’ll have just chaa. Inconceivable. Does your mother let you have just chaa at home?”

Nina arches her back to stretch. “Ma doesn’t usually make my breakfast. And I don’t usually eat breakfast at home. As for the journey. It was a lot of pushing, standing, sitting, more pushing, and then I was here. It wasn’t really much of a workout to burn calories.”

“Kii—what? You didn’t burn what?” Dida tries to absorb Nina’s words.

Nina smiles. “Nothing. I’m never hungry in the morning. Can you tell Monu—”

“No milk and sugar in your tea. I know. Go, your grandfather’s been saving the paper so you can read it to him. Monu will bring your tea. Shall I at least bring out a few biscuits?” Mrs. Dey looks hopeful.

“Two, I’ll have two biscuits.” Nina walks into the right side bedroom to read the paper. She pops her head out for a second. “Dida, I said only two, and nothing else.”

Monu listens to the whole conversation. She can’t understand why anyone would drink tea with no milk and sugar. Tea was an excuse to drink warm milk with sugar and spice. Didi does many things that Monu doesn’t understand. Sometimes it seems as if Didi doesn’t eat anything normal. Didi doesn’t take butter, dhai—yogurt, fried fish eggs, sometimes not even meat. Monu decides it must be because she is from London. Didi doesn’t eat too much of anything besides kulfi. She never says no to kulfi, which is strange because Didi doesn’t touch any other dairy product. At first Didi would insist on bringing her cup and saucer to the back of the kitchen to be, but now she lets Monu do it.

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As soon as lunch is over Didi leaves to go shopping. Monu starts her work. She washes the lunch dishes, washes and hangs the clothes, brings in the dry clothes, goes grocery shopping, mops the floors, wipes and dusts all smooth surfaces, cleans the bathrooms, takes her shower and runs

errands as they come up. It's not hard work. After her shower she rolls out a mathur and lies down for a nap. The heat makes it impossible to do physical work. The corridors are dead. The security guards are hiding in some shady spot, reluctant to keep to their posts in the stifling booth at the gate. It doesn't matter. Few taxis and cars need to be let into the compound at this hour. Monu can't sleep and she doesn't want to watch TV for once. She keeps imagining what Didi is doing, what she is buying.

"Dida?"

"Hm—ki?" Mrs. Dey doesn't move. Her knee-length hair, magically still black, is unbound and spread out to dry over the bed.

"What did Didi go shopping for?"

"She needs shoes for this evening. She's going to a wedding. Make sure you are there to help her get ready."

Monu has been to two weddings so far, her Bor-Di's and Chor-Di's. Bor-Di's wedding was alright, but the marriage turned out worse than her parents expected. It was her bad luck. You can't help who you marry. It's done for you. Monu wondered how long her parents would wait before marrying her off. Would she still work here? "Dida?"

"Hm—ki?"

Monu sits up to look at Mrs. Dey. She runs her fingers through Mrs. Dey's hair. "Will I still be able to work for you after I am married?"

"That depends on your husband. Now go to sleep."

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Nina comes back from her shopping trip and drops five bulging hemp bags at the mouth of the doorway. Her shirt is clinging to her back from sweat. "I need a shower."

Dida glances at the bags. "Did you buy out all of Gorla Haat?"

"I barely bought anything. It was too hot to sit in all those stores. There isn't any shampoo in the bathroom."

"Monu, run to the store and get Didi a few packets of shampoo. Sunsilk?"

Nina sits under the fan and flips her hair over so the air hits her exposed neck and back. "Doesn't matter. I just want a shower. I feel disgusting."

"Buy five packets of Sunsilk and hurry up. Didi needs to shower."

Monu nods and runs out.

"I bought Monu a salwar kameez." Nina grabs one of the bags and shuffles through it. "Look. Do you think it will fit her? I thought she would like this instead of a frock. It's more grown up. What do you think?" The salwar kameez is a deep maroon with a delicate rusty gold

and black pattern that snakes around the body. The neck is a scoop V-shape with a distinct gold border.

"She'll love it. Monu loves salwar kameezes."

"Really? I hope so. It's not too dressy, you don't think? I figured she could probably use something that was a little fancy. I've never seen her in anything too dressy. I hope she'll like it. I didn't bring her anything this time. How old is she now anyway? I can never tell by looking at her. She seems so shy all of a sudden." Nina folds the salwar kameez and puts it aside.

"Fifteen." Mrs. Dey riffles through the bags.

"Really? She looks like she's twelve or thirteen. She's so tiny. I guess it's the frocks, they're little girl frocks. They make her look like a child. Are her parents anxious to get her married?"

Mrs. Dey smooths out a few wrinkles in the folds of the salwar kameez. "I hope you didn't pay too much for this."

"No, I bought it from a street vendor. I just hope it fits her."

"It will fit. They've been trying to get her married since she was thirteen. We keep telling her to wait a few years more."

Nina looks surprised. "How many brothers and sisters does she have? I mean, once she's married, her parents will lose her income."

"She has three siblings at home and her two older sisters are married."

"Are they doing well?" Nina puts her head on Mrs. Dey's lap.

"One sister is happy. The other one has a horrible husband. She comes home crying and beaten up all the time."

"Has Monu learned to read and write?"

Mrs. Dey runs her fingers through the tangles in Nina's hair.

"No."

Nina frowns and lifts her head up. "Does she want to learn?"

"No, she has no interest in those things. We've tried to teach her. She'd rather watch TV serials and movies on TV." Mrs. Dey strokes a few strands of sweaty hair out of Nina's face. "You need a hair cut."

Nina pushes the hand away and draws her knees to her chest. Her voice is annoyed. "So she can't read or write. She'll be completely dependent on her husband. Why doesn't she just live here? She's here from six in the morning till after six in the evening anyway. We could find her a husband in a few years, and he wouldn't be a drunkard."

Mrs. Dey smiles at Nina, as if explaining a new concept to child. "It's just as well that she goes home to her family. She should see her brothers and sisters and her parents. She's quite clever, although she doesn't show it."

"I know, but—"

“You can’t interfere too much into their lives. It doesn’t do any good. Her sisters married at thirteen and fourteen. She’s fifteen. The best we can do is add something to her dowry.”

“It’s sad. I don’t know. I’m so used to seeing her here and— she does still look like a child. I can’t see her married. She’s worked here forever since I can remember, six years, seven years? Won’t you miss her?” Nina jumps up at the sound of the door. “Shampoo, thank God. They turned on the generators when the power went out, so I got blasted with hot air the entire walk back. Dusty hot air blown right at you in a hot muggy day. So gross.”

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“Dida, I need bobby pins.” Nina is standing in front of the mirror, trying to put her hair up. The car will be here in an hour and she is just now starting to get ready.

Mrs. Dey comes up behind Nina and starts twisting her hair into a bun. “I can’t find any bobby pins. Monu, can you run to the corner store and buy a sheet of bobby pins?”

Monu finishes laying out Nina’s dress and asks, “Black pins?”

“Yes,” they say simultaneously.

“Wait, is it raining outside?” Nina asks. “Don’t send her out in the rain. I can wear my hair down.”

“Don’t be silly, it’s fine. Now hold still.” Mrs. Dey fits a gold ornament on Nina’s hair. “I need to comb a part in the middle to hook the chain in your bun.”

“Ow!” Nina grabs at the comb.

Mrs. Dey forces Nina to look forward. “Stop it. Hold still. This won’t do. We need to comb your hair out.”

Monu returns. “They didn’t have any hair pins.”

“What? None?” Nina looks exasperated. “Now what do I do?”

“I have some,” Monu whispers.

“Dida, I don’t know what to do with my hair. Dida, are you listening?”

Monu whispers again. “I have some.” Nina doesn’t hear her. Monu grabs Nina’s hand and lets go immediately. She looks down. “Didi, I have some hair pins you can use. They are black.”

“Really? That’s so sweet of you. Are you sure I can use them?”

Monu smiles. “Yes. I’ll get them right now.”

Mrs. Dey looks at Nina critically. She rearranges the folds of the dress at Nina’s shoulder and steps back. “You need jasmine. Yes, I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before. It’s not too late, although they won’t be as fresh. Monu, can you go to the flower stall on the next alley

over, the one at the very end and buy two medium jasmine garlands? Try to get the freshest ones.”

“Hmm, I’ve never worn jasmine garlands before.” Nina turns to look at the back of her head. “Are you going to drape them around my bun? It might actually work, since we finally have hair pins.” Nina puts on the rest of her jewelry as she waits for Monu to come back. Her necklace covers almost all of the exposed skin at the neck and collar bone. Her earrings drop halfway down her neck and a chain at the back of each ring hangs back and weaves through her hair. All that’s missing is a nose ring, but Nina hasn’t pierced her nose and she complains that the clip-on ones hurt. Nina shimmers in her dress. Its gold weave covers the colors—deep purplish azure, navy blue, and green—all fading together. The folds drop with a painstaking carelessness behind her shoulders to wrap around her waist and fall down from her naval to her toes. Nina twirls a few times in the mirror, inspecting the fall of her dress. She’s on her tip toes, so she doesn’t trip on the length.

Monu finally comes back. She stops. “Didi, you look beautiful.” Monu takes two white garlands out of a wet black plastic bag and places them on the bed.

“Thank you.” Nina scoops the garlands in her hands and brings them to her nose. “These smell so sweet. I can smell the rain on them. Monu can you—”

Monu nods. “She drapes the garlands around Nina’s hair and pins them in.” She lingers, stroking Nina’s hair, making sure each lock falls as it should. Finally Monu removes her hands. “It’s done. I’ll get your shoes. I saw the car waiting downstairs. You should take an umbrella. It’s raining outside.” Monu comes back with a pair of sequin gold slippers with pencil heels. She kneels down and holds them out one at a time, so that Nina doesn’t have to bend down as she slips her feet in.

“Thank you, so much.” Nina breathes as she skips out of the bedroom.

Monu looks at the dresser. They didn’t use one of her pins, the bent one. The sweet jasmine scent hangs heavy in the air, rain, earth, and in the smell of Nina, her sandal wood soap and her new clothes. Monu looks out the window. Mrs. Dey is holding an umbrella over Nina’s head as she gets into the car. Nina looks like a princess. Monu turns away and starts picking up the scattered clothes, jeans, t-shirt, wet towel, and a few scattered sequins.

Mrs. Dey comes into the room. “Monu, it’s nearly 7:30 pm. You should have been home an hour ago. You can go now. Leave those until tomorrow. Oh Monu, come a little early. Didi has something she wants to give you.”

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Nina is rummaging through her travel size toiletries kit looking for chap-stick. I know it's here somewhere. Her fingers reach the bottom and come up with lint and a bent black hair pin. She stares at the pin on the palm of her hand. Nina dumps the whole bag onto the floor. There are a bunch of pins scattered amongst lotion, hair ties, travel-sized soap, lipstick, eyeliner, and perfume. Nina crouches over the jumble like she's been given a task; separate out the lentils from the ashes before you can go to the ball. There are ten bobby pins. That's a whole packet of pins. She never gave them back to Monu. She never thanked Monu. Nina clutches the pins. Her cell phone rings. She ignores it. For once Nina is still, really still. Nina sits with her back against the wall. She wraps her arms around her knees and puts her head down. Nina feels cold; her arms, her spine feels cold, and her throat hurts like she can't speak. Monu will probably be married and gone before Nina goes back to visit.