



Telltale

— POEMS —

MONICA BHIDE

COVER IMAGE BY SIMI JOIS

Telltales

Poems

Monica Bhide

Bodes Well Publishing

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Also by Monica Bhide

Fiction and Short Stories

Karma and the Art of Butter Chicken (Bodes Well Publishing, 2016)

The Devil In Us (2014)

Singapore Noir, edited by Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan (Akashic Books, 2014)

Food Essays and Cookbooks

A Life of Spice (2015)

Modern Spice: Inspired Indian Flavors for the Contemporary Kitchen (Simon and Schuster. 2009; Random House India, 2010)

The Everything Indian Cookbook: 300 Tantalizing Recipes from Sizzling Tandoor Chicken to Fiery Lamb Vindaloo (Adams Media, 2004)

Monica's essays have been included in *Best Food Writing 2005, 2009, 2010, and 2014*, edited by Holly Hughes (Da Capo Press)

Inspirational Books

In Conversation with Exceptional Women (ebook)

Read. Write. Reflect. (Bodes Well Publishing, 2017)

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Telltales

A collection of poems tackling seemingly commonplace signs and interpreting them with a poetic license.

My hope is that this collection will inspire you to look at everyday objects with a different perspective.

Silvats¹

(Wrinkles)



The maid comes to clean the room. She stares at the bed.
The bedsheet is full of silvats.
What happened here last night?
A restless night? Or a sensual night?
She flings open the sheet.
She smiles as the silvats share the secrets of the night with her.



He frowns at his teenage daughter. She at him.
Her silk shirt is full of silvats: it is telling tales.
He stares at her clothes.
She brushes the silvats down self-consciously
and wonders why he never believes her.
He watches her, this wild child,
and so wants to believe her.

¹ I heard this word when I was a child. It was in a song sung by a famous Indian singer, Jagjit Singh. In the song, he eluded to wrinkles on a bed being the sign of a possibly restless night. So restless, in fact, that perhaps someone died. That image has stuck in my head. I owe the inspiration for this poem to the great artist and his words.

The silvats know the truth.
They are not telling.



He walks aimlessly through the streets.
He knows his home is down the road on the right.
Or was it the road on the left?
He can no longer tell.
Burning tires, armless men, crushed women, and dead animals
seem to hide the way.
He begins to scream and then to run.
Death appears to run alongside.
A woman pulls him and hides him
in the silvat of her flowing red skirt.

The sharp end of his long sword attempts to move the skirt.
The silvats don't give up.
The armed man moves on.
The frightened child fights to get out from the folds of life.
The woman's grip is steel-like.
He calms down and she lets go.
They stare at each other.
Now what?



She is not allowed into the crematorium.
It's not a place for women, she is told.
She stands on the side.

They are carrying his body in to be burned.
He is covered in a white cloth.
They stop a moment in front of her. She runs her hand
over the cloth,
straightening out the silvats.

Each silvat straightens to the death of a dream.
A dream of the life they will never share,
of the baby he will never know of, of old age they will
never see,
of a future he will never know.
The silvats, now straightened,
free him of this world

and her of another.



He pulls out the clothes from the dryer.
He stares at the wrinkled shirts.
The silvats, they seem to taunt him.
He studies them, they seem to condescend.
He takes them to the ironing board and attacks them with starch.
They begin to relent. He smiles.
They reappear.

His wheelchair has chained his soul.
The silvats are chaining his last freedom.
He gets more starch, more water,
hotter iron.



Her mother-in-law enters the room
as her husband leaves.

The mother-in-law, she stares,
one eyebrow raised, at the bed.

Her brow begins to frown,
anger taking its place.
Where is the blood?

The young bride is twelve.
She is terrified.

No blood, she shouts.
Your father said you were a virgin.

The bride, pure white,
stares at the sheets.
She gently pulls one end.

A large silvat in the center of the bedspread
unfolds, revealing the rape.

The mother-in-law smiles.
The child holds back tears.
The husband returns.

The doors close once again.



The boy, he wants to be a man,
tugs at her blouse.
She closes her eyes and moves
into a different world.
A few minutes later, he leaves.

He is now a man.
She stares at her dress crumpled on the floor.
She wears it again,
full of silvats.

Each silvat hides the name of a boy
who became a man in this room.



Mother never yells.
She never disapproves.
She just looks,
and she was looking.

The habit should never have silvats.

The novice nun stands still
alongside her visiting parents.

They could not afford a man to marry her,
so she became God's bride.

The defiant silvats show the impatience
of a daughter running to meet her father.

Or perhaps of a child
who will never have a choice
to be a woman.



Cup your hands.
See the silvats. They are there.

You just need to know how to read them.

Drops

The raindrops are red.²

No, that is not a lie.
It is not an illusion.

The red drops are everywhere.

They stain my clothes
They roll off the trees
They touch my heart.

The panhandler curses his luck.

I see the bride in her window
Looking outside.

The rain is red,
Her tears are not.

But, perhaps,
Fact is stranger than fiction.



² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_rain_in_Kerala

This tiny sphere
Transparent
Small
Life-giving

A month's wage spent
on a tiny sphere.

The mother stares at the sphere
on the spoon.

It is so perfectly shaped.

The drop from heaven
Meant to keep her child
from going to heaven.

Life is but paradox,
In a sphere no less.



He wipes his cheek,
A single salty drop.

Sweat or tears?

Both salty,
Both signs of good

Or possibly signs of misery.

The drop is.

It just is.

We decide its meaning.



The ocean

It is made up of drops,
they tell me.

So if a drop becomes
part of the ocean,
who wins?

The drop or the ocean?



With a quivering hand
She puts the drops in her eyes.

She doesn't need them to cry.

She just needs them
for people to see her tears.



She cries on the bathroom floor.

The stained cloth in her hand

Red

Why does the stain have to be

Red?

It is

a big large stain:

ugly, deeply

red.

Frighteningly real

The life inside her,

the one not born—

and now

will never be.



The drops in his hand

Those drops

aren't pretty.

He brings them to his mouth.

The rain tastes like his life,

Filled with blessings for other people.

The rain:
It brings peace and love to many,

But for him
the drops bring only relief from thirst.
There is no magic here.



The drops are cleansing.

They clear the air
They wash away my fears

My demons drown in the torrent
The tempest inside my head stops.

.

I offer thanks
To the gods of rain,
if such exist.

My heart still beats,
for now.



Cracks



You glow

He says

You are beautiful

He says

Your radiance illuminates my life

He says.

She smiles.

He will never be the one.

If he were,

He would have seen the cracks in her,

and know

They are what is most beautiful

about her.



Be brave

Be free

Jump higher
Walk faster
Live life

I see these signs everywhere I go.

No one talks about the hurt.
No one tells me how to heal.

I am brave
I am free
I walk faster
I live life.

The cracks in my heart deepen.

Am I broken?
Or am I whole?



The kids run,
They stomp on the cracks.
Do they not care?

The crack can widen
It can swallow them whole.

Yet, they are merry
As they bounce and jump

On every crack
In every puddle
In every pile of deep orange leaves.

I sit
I stare
Envy is not an emotion.

I wear well.



The fruit is hard.

I smack it with a knife:
Nothing.

I throw it on the floor:
Nothing.

I smack it against the counter top:
Nothing.

I bring out my husband's prized hammer.
I hit the fruit as hard as I can:

It loses,
I win.

It cracks open
I expect to see a luscious white interior.
It is empty.

It wins,
I lose.



Apply your makeup,
then

Gently rub talc on your face
And dunk your face in cold water.

This, promises the Korean woman,
is the way

The way to keep makeup on your face
all day

A surefire way
to make sure
That your mask stays on

Without cracking
Without fading
Without revealing

The bruises from the night before.
A surefire way

To hide the cracks.



We value

Perfection
Smoothness
Blemish-free,

A velvet feel
A feel of satin
Smooth.

Do we not know
The smoothness, the perfection
is merely an illusion

The reality are the cracks

They hold the secrets
They hold the answers
These scars of life

Are our badges of honor.

Will we ever learn
To wear them
with the respect they command?

Diamonds



It is pink.
It is tiny.
No larger than a peppercorn.

A pink peppercorn,
I say out loud.
The merchant smiles.

In the days of my ancestors, he responds,
Peppercorn had value.
Today, it is mere seasoning.

I stare at the sparkling pink diamond
he has placed on my palm.

That little piece can pay for a house, a car.
It could erase all my debt.

But his words make me think:

Will my granddaughter hold this someday
and say the same?

How this pink stone had value
in another day,

But today, it is
mere rock.



It is our twenty-year anniversary.
We are at a local jewelry store.
He is buying me a diamond ring,

My first one ever.
When the jeweler shows it to me
He offers an apology
along with the stone:

Your husband says
you would rather have a vacation,

But, perhaps, this will change your mind.

I look at the ring: a stone as a sign of love?

Then I accept:
I will have something to pass down to my girls.

A symbol of understanding,
Of marriage, of compromise.

As we left,
the jeweler said:

Besides,
this has a resale value.



I am in line at the grocery store
A tabloid catches my eye
A beautiful blond is on the cover
The headline screeches:
Look at her diamond
It is the size of a golf ball.

Of course, I exaggerate
Perhaps more like the size of pea on steroids
The magazine extols the virtues of a woman
with big diamonds
We are judged by our stones.



War was upon us.
I will never forget
I heard him call his office

We were in a land far, far away
His office was in the midst of the war zone.

Go to the bank
And withdraw all the money
There is more money in the office safe

He continues to give directions
while both of us watch the TV in horror
There are bombs
Sirens

In places where I thought the worst
that could happen would be a cold-weather day.

He stops talking on the phone.
I see the sweat on his brow.
He signals for me to turn the TV off.

I know the look on his face.
It is the same look he had
when he heard his mother had died.

He speaks in a quiet, centered, kind voice.

“They won’t let you take cash out of the country right now.

Go to my jeweler,
Tell him
to give you a stone in exchange for the cash.
Take the stone and leave the country.
When you get home,
use it for yourself and your family.”

A man should also be judged by stones.
Shouldn’t he?

Petals



I love to photograph flowers.

I am a terrible photographer,

But my flowers photos are amazing.

They mesmerize me.

I feel guilty when I photograph flowers.

I have contributed nothing to nature

Yet, everyday it gives so much.

I stopped feeling guilty a few years ago

When my son, on his walk back from school,

Started bringing me a flower

every single day.

To his young eyes

Nothing was more beautiful than a flower.

Every single day I have on my desk –

A dandelion

A wild rose

A closed tulip

A bud of an unrecognizable flower.
It doesn't stop there.

On my table are gifts of photos, paintings
From global friends
All of them are flowers

Each one tells a tale

My favorite
A beautiful blue flower
sprouting in a snow-covered ground.
The photographer titled it, "Adversity."
I call it resilience.



Lotus

A harsh name, I have always felt,
for a gentle flower.

I prefer it in Hindi:
Kamal.

So much sweeter to the ear,
yet strong

With roots in the dirty, filthy ponds
where it blooms.

The flower closes each night
and reopens in the morning.

It is said that the lotus always blooms twice.

Dirt rolls off its soft petals.
Treacherous waters cannot mar its beauty.

A symbol of purity
A symbol of rebirth
A symbol of hope

And yet

My own pettiness struggles
with the sound of its name.

A rose, I know, by any other name
is still a rose.
But a lotus?

It will always be
Kamal to me.



Dried, dead flowers
In the folds of an old notebook

Signs of times
when youth blossomed
A time when a heart believed in romances
A time when “happily ever after”
Actually sounded
like everyone’s guaranteed future.

Dried, dead flowers
Sitting on the dining table
in a crystal vase

Signs of times when a heart
agreed with the brain.

Youth, it is said,
is wasted on the young.



PATHS



A broken twig
A crushed flower
A path filled with pebbles
A broken toy truck
A glimpse of a dead deer

A nature walk
should nurture,
it is said.

Past the twig
I see the tree
glorious and bold,
standing tall.

Past the flower
I see the roses,
red and shiny
after a moment of rain.

I pick up the truck
I move it to the side
I say a prayer for the deer
I keep on walking.

It is time to cook dinner.

I can try to be nurtured again
tomorrow.



The path is clear
The air is moist
The rain, that persistent rain,
has finally stopped.

He steps out slowly.
It is hard to walk on one leg.
The other one was payback
for drinking and eating the white powder
of our times.

It doesn't hurt to walk.
It hurts to see the pity in people's eyes
when they see him.

He merely smiles
And walks,

To gain strength in the leg that remains.
To restore his faith in himself.

Willpower has never been his strong suit.

He pats the luscious chocolate bar
in his jacket pocket:
Breakfast for walkers

And for those
who just don't care anymore.



The waves are strong
Confident
Fierce

Yet they bring serenity.

A walk on the beach
Always brings to mind
The one simple thought

That saves me each time:

We are but a grain of sand
On this mighty land.

All the fears melt away.
All the demons die a quiet death.

As I walk on the beach and ask for strength
The ocean laughs.
It sends a sign.

I step on a shell
Unlike any I have seen.

I pick it up.
I pocket it.

I will place it
next to the 150 others
I have at home.



Connections



More connected than ever today

Yet

More alone than ever before.

Why?

Even the question is painful to ask.

A touch can buy

a car

or a plane

And yet

There is nowhere to go.

A touch can buy

tickets and food

And yet

There is no one to share it with.

It isn't as bleak as it seems

some days.

A touch can bring in
stories of love and faith
and healing.

A reminder
that, maybe, just maybe
a miracle is
merely a touch away.



No one knows
No one suspects
No one needs to know
In the depths of my body
Deep inside my soul

I can feel the kicks
of a new spirit.
We are one, for now.

She kicks
when I move
when I eat
when I lie down
when I laugh
when I cry.

Never have I been so close
to another.

She and I
are the only two who know
That she is here.

Soon everyone will know.

They will offer advice and opinion.
They will judge my love for her
and her love for me.

They will never understand

The bond
To my unborn child
Is a miracle
A solace

A gift.



The science is irrefutable:
We are all connected.

I vibrate
with the energy of my emotions.

She vibrates
with the blessings of her heart.

He vibrates
with the passion of his work.

The couple vibrates
as they breathe through their grief.

The group vibrates
with the words of hate,
weapons in hand.

We are all together.
Science tells us so.

We affect each other
with each thought
each word
each action.

Is it a blessing
or a curse?



Shoes



A walk down the aisle
Or, more aptly,
The walk down the aisle

Is fraught with anxiety.

Will this be it?
Will it last?
Will this be her beautiful forever?

Just as she reaches him
The heel of her sandal breaks.

The sandal that cost as much as the wedding dress.

It is a sign that all will be well,
She hears her mother whisper.

Her groom grins.
They exchange vows.

A broken heel is a sign of times to come,
Her friends say.

No matter what happens,
he will support you.

She walks unsteadily with her broken sandal,
Then takes them off and walks barefoot.

He doesn't blink.
He doesn't stop.
He doesn't ask what is wrong.

She thinks he doesn't care.
A broken heel prophesies a broken marriage.

After the vows,
an hour goes by.

The best man approaches,
mended sandals in hand.

The groom beams.
A fixed heel prophesies a happy marriage.

Food



I stare at the bowl.
It reminds me of days
Filled with vegetables
and worry,
With cilantro
and the fears of a heartbroken child.

I stare at the bowl.
The noodles float free
In a broth that was, in my childhood,
seasoned with hints of misery.

It was said to heal.

The taste of an innocent childhood
that was never truly mine.

I lift up this broth to serve it to you
but
I cannot feed you my fears.

The broth and the lies
must not have a life

in us.
You stare at me
for the fool you think I am.

But you do not see

The reality inside
My bowl.

What you see
is a need to symbolize.

What I see
Is the need to Be:
not lies.



Those smells
Of sizzled cumin
roasted mustard
charred eggplant

boiled rice
sweet puddings
pungent garlic

Those smells
Assault my nose
Seep into my skin
Bleed out as my sweat,

Those scents:

I pretend to respect them.

I pretend to adore them.

I lie.

Those scents
Make me weak
Drain my resolve

Those scents
Make the bile rise up

I try to stop
I beg it to stop
I pray it stops
It isn't the smells,
he tells me.
It is you.

How does he know?

How does he see that
I am a prisoner of my own memories?



Breath

There are books that teach us to breathe
A concept that sounds strange
How can someone teach us something
We are born knowing how to do?

The books with all their wise words
just remind us
To do what we already do
but with a little more
Oomph

Breathe
Deeply
With purpose
With gratitude
With a full heart
With a clear mind

Don't breathe in toxicity
And don't, for the love of God,

breathe it out.



Is breath visible?
Yes! On a chilly day.

Then where does it go
when it is hot outside?
the child asks.

The mother laughs it off.
The child persists:

When someone dies on a cold day,
can you see their breath
leaving the body?

This little person.
Such big questions.

Why do you ask?
She finally says.

The night father died
It was cold outside.
I saw his breath
when it said
goodbye.



All that ails us
All that blesses us
Is but one breath away.

The monks, the yogis, the outliers,
the enlightened ones

All say the same thing:
The breath blesses us
each moment

Until it goes.

Love

What is this love you speak of?

Where does it reside?

Have you seen it?

Have you felt it?

I am told it is available to all

Yet, it makes its presence felt

only to a few.

Are those who experience love

the lucky ones?

If you don't know what you are missing

Is life easier?

Broken hearts don't heal.

They stay broken.

From each cell in the broken heart

Love speaks.

The broken heart

loves more than one that hasn't been broken

Which would you rather have?



There is no other way.

Love and gratitude,
I am told, are the answers
To all that ails us.

Can love win against despair?
Can gratitude really pay the bills?

To find the answers,
Look inside, they say.

Sometimes, in doing that,
I forget what I was asking.



My pain is deep.
It isn't yours to bear.

It is mine
and mine alone.

It shows me that
I cared.



Stars



The sky is dark.
My heart despairs.

I close my eyes
I try to rest

Tomorrow all will be well
So they tell me.

I asked for a rainbow
To prove them right
But, alas, no rainbow appeared.

Now, I try to close my eyes.
I wait for the inevitable.

Tomorrow, they cut me up.
They pull out
the cancer-crustled parts.

I wake up and stare
at the magnificently white ceiling.

Does it know whether caregivers speak truth?

Tubes are running up and down my arm.
Pills of all colors sit in a bowl next to my bed

Those are my Skittles,
I tell my children.

The night nurse appears
and asks if I am okay.

I nod,
But tears betray me.

All will be well tomorrow,
She repeats.

I ask her to draw the curtains
so I can just look out.

She begins to say something
But doesn't.
Pulls back the curtains
and leaves.

I look outside the window
Expecting my darkness
to reflect back at me.

And then
There it is
In the middle of the night
Spread across the dark sky

I see a shimmering moonbow.

I close my eyes.
I fall asleep
With a peaceful heart.



My dear reader
May you have as many blessings
as there are stars

May the stars always guide you home
When you are worried, anxious, upset
Or
Just plain scared

Please look up
There is a power bigger than us
Bigger than all of us

A power filled with unconditional love
A power overflowing with abundance.

Please look up
There is always hope.
The stars will never let us down.

Death



Death is cheap in my town
Life is cheaper
I stare out my window
The rotting livestock
The stray dogs covered in blood
The failings of my father
The faults of my fate

The sun burns the earth
The earth eats its own
Paradise or abyss
It is both, I am told

She is dying
No shroud
No fire
No sandalwood for her pyre
Hers was deemed an inconsequential life

I stare out my window
As the rain begins
Each drop embraces the earth
As it begs for less pain

She dies as she lived
Quiet and frail
Nothing owed, nothing gained

I look out my window
The rain is gone
The earth, it smells
Like it has hope again
An illusion or truth
Only time will tell

Her pyre still burns
Inside my heart's hell



God



I dance all night
To the rhythm of faith
In a place of worship
In a place of grace
The words, they pour out
They mean nothing to me
I am looking for God
Where is he?

He is here, they say, as I dance all night
To their songs of faith and their beat of right
I close my eyes as the music seeps in
I am in a trance

I just want to come alive
Be faithful & He will find you, says the Qazi
Be giving & He will find you, says the priest
Be loving & He will find you, says the saint
Where are you, my God, I seek and don't find
I look for Him high and low

In every step I take
In every place I fall
In every smile I smile
In every song I sing
In every grain I share

In every tear I cry
In every bruise I bear
Then, one night, He appears in my dreams
and laughs and asks
Why do you seek what you've already got?



Acknowledgements

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Monica Bhide

Monica Bhide is an internationally renowned writer known for sharing food, culture, love, and life with a lyrical voice and universal appeal. She has built a diverse and solid audience through the publication of three cookbooks, her collection of short stories, her website, MonicaBhide.com, and articles in top-tier media, including *Food & Wine*, *Bon Appétit*, *Saveur*, *The Washington Post*, *Health*, *The New York Times*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *AARP The Magazine*, *Parents*, and many others. Her books have been published by *Simon & Schuster* and *Random House (India)*. *The Chicago Tribune* named Bhide one of the seven food writers to watch in 2012.

In April 2012, *Mashable.com* picked her as one of the top ten food writers on Twitter. Her work has garnered numerous accolades and has been included in four Best Food Writing anthologies (2005, 2009, 2010, 2014). Monica is a frequent presence on NPR, and serves as a speaker and teacher for organizations such as Georgetown University, the Association of Food Journalists (AFJ), London Food Blogger's Connect, and the Smithsonian Institution. Her seventh book, *Karma and the Art of Butter Chicken*, released in 2016. Monica was just profiled in "Those Immigrants: Indians In America, A psychological exploration of achievement," by James Beard award-winning Dr. Scott Haas.

Simi Jois

The beautiful cover photograph for this book was shot by Simi Jois. Simi uses photographic images as her canvas and the lens as her brush. Her passion for creating flavors in the kitchen provided her with infinite permutations of expression. Painting with ingredients, pairing exotic spices for mutual enhancement and richness of flavor, Simi narrates her stories through the play of light and bold strokes of color.

Simi's portfolio: <http://www.simijois.com>

Simi's blog: <http://www.turmericnspice.com>

Praise for Monica Bhide's *The Devil In Us*

“Monica Bhide’s short story collection isn’t impressive because it’s a first-timer’s effort—it’s impressive, period. The stories, each filled with strong, feisty characters and exquisite details of people, places, and things, will keep you riveted. There are plenty of Indian Americans writing novels these days, but far too few writing short stories and even fewer writing stories of this caliber.”

Sree Sreenivasan, co-founder of the South Asian Journalists Association and Chief Digital Officer at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

“Monica Bhide’s excellent collection will transport you to unexpected places, moving you between America and India, hospitals, college campuses, ancient temples, a devastated train station. You will be entranced by the wide spectrum of characters she has created—a newlywed doctor learning to love his wife, a cancer survivor hoping for a second chance, a dying old man filled with hate, a transsexual who adopts a young orphan. Filled with surprises and heart, this book will pull you in and not let you go.”

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, author of Oleander Girl and The Mistress of Spices

“This book and its characters will haunt you long after you finish reading it.”

Kathleen Flinn, author of the New York Times bestseller

The Sharper Your Knife, the Less You Cry

“Monica Bhide’s wonderful, internationally flavored collection is full of spice and life. The beguiling voice of a true storyteller will lure you out of yourself into her intriguing, fictional world. Enjoy!”

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“Monica Bhide’s beguiling writing takes us into the rich tapestry within private, intimate worlds that we don’t want to leave.”

Shoba Narayan, James Beard Award finalist, author of the memoirs Monsoon Diary and Return to India

Also by Monica Bhide

Fiction and Short Stories

Karma and the Art of Butter Chicken (Bodes Well Publishing, 2016)

The Devil In Us (2014)

Singapore Noir, edited by Cheryl Lu-Lien Tan (Akashic Books, 2014)

Food Essays and Cookbooks

A Life of Spice (2015)

Modern Spice: Inspired Indian Flavors for the Contemporary Kitchen (Simon and Schuster, 2009; Random House India, 2010)

The Everything Indian Cookbook: 300 Tantalizing Recipes from Sizzling Tandoor Chicken to Fiery Lamb Vindaloo (Adams Media, 2004)

Monica's essays have been included in *Best Food Writing 2005, 2009, 2010, and 2014*, edited by Holly Hughes (Da Capo Press)

Inspirational Books

In Conversation with Exceptional Women (ebook)

Read. Write. Reflect. (Bodes Well Publishing, 2017)

Monica's books are available through Amazon.com,
BN.com, Kobo, iBooks and her website,
MonicaBhide.com