

A SHORT STORY

MOTHER



MONICA BHIDE

COVER IMAGE BY SIMI JOIS

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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)

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

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In Conversation with Exceptional Women (ebook)

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

MOTHER ⁱ

Kallang

The Merdeka Bridge became Edward's home after the killing. He spent hours on it watching people go by. Nothing in this lonely city was his anymore; even the sky was different. But the water flowing gently under the bridge provided solace. The sound of the small waves, heard only when traffic disappeared, the gentleness of the ripples, those were the only things that reminded him of home. The home he left after the killing—or suicide, as some called it. He knew better, the kill was neither a simple murder nor a suicide. But no one would understand that; they couldn't. They did not love her like he did; you had to love someone to the degree he did to understand why it had happened.

At the moment, though, he felt bad at having said something to the young woman—Ms. Ana, as he liked to call her—who had been running by him on the bridge. He saw her almost every night. She ran around the same time. Normally, she would stop and speak to him but today she seemed distracted; she even tripped and fell. He could see she was bleeding. He offered her a hand and was hurt when she recoiled. He was tall for his fifteen years, really tall for a Chinese kid. His time on the streets showed in the dirt caked in his ears. He had pulled several tufts of hair out of his head after finding lice crawling down his forehead and into the small, festering sores on the sides of his cheeks.

He knew what she was thinking; his friends told him: *Homeless man wants my money.*

He did not want her money; he liked her.

"Ms. Ana, it's me, Eddie," he offered, "Don't you remember? You gave me twenty dollars last week."

"Yes, of course I do. How are you? Did you eat something?" Ms. Ana asked, wiping her chin with the edge of her T-shirt.

He smiled. "Yah, three times! Thank you." "How do you feel today?" "My friends, Ms. Ana, they are back. They went away and now they are back. I don't know why. I say to them to go away. Tell them to leave me alone, Ms. Ana, tell them to go away," he said, beginning to weep.

Gently, she sat down next to him and gave him a hug and then reached into her sock and pulled out a twenty.

"Keep this, Eddie, eat something." He smiled at her.

"The jacket you gave me keeps me so warm, Ms. Ana. It is so cold out here at night sometimes."

The jacket is so warm.” “Come tomorrow, I will bring you some more clothes, but now I have to go.” Eddie tried showing Ms. Ana his friends. No one could see them. It made him so mad. They constantly talked to him. Never let him sleep. His brain tried to stop them from talking. But no, they knew better. They knew how to sneak up on him when no one was looking. Yah, they were sneaky, those friends.

He held onto Ms. Ana’s hand as she stood up. She was so kind and warm. “Can you stay with me for a few more minutes?” “I have to go, Eddie, I have to go,” she said, tugging at her hand.

Let her go, Eddie, she won’t stay. Your hands are ugly, filthy. You smell. Let her go. She belongs in a different world.

Truth was, he was hungry; he could not stand too well, his head was spinning. He let her hand go and she turned to run and then stopped and came back to him.

He looked up at her surprised that she had returned so quickly. She bent down and gave him a gentle hug, then quickly turned around and ran off.

Most of the people he met could not get away from him fast enough and she had given him a hug.

Be careful, Eddie, she may want something. You should watch her.

Eddie pulled some more hair out; his friends were definitely back. The mean one had not started speaking yet. It was just a matter of time.

Look around you, Eddie, you don’t belong here. These people have perfect lives, big houses, shiny cars, lots of money. And they have good families. Not like yours. Their families care. They don’t run around and let the kids fend for themselves. Don’t listen to him, Eddie. He is a goondu! She was a good woman, your ma. No, you tell him to stop, now. You wouldn’t be in this shit if you listened to me and not him.

Two older aunties were walking by now—Eddie watched as they moved carefully to avoid him. He felt lousy. He hated being on the streets. It was pathetic. He was homeless even though he had a home. He did not want to go home—the warmth of it reminded him of his mother. He did not want to be reminded of her. He missed her. No, he was better off outside.

You know it is easier to be outside, Eddie. The house will be full of her things and there, they . . . they will be looking for you . . . they know what you did, they will try to get you. You need to stay out of the house.

Eddie got up from the bridge and began to walk toward the lights of Kallang, away from the river, peering at the reflection of the setting sun as it glinted on the water.

A light breeze was rolling in. Luckily, Ms. Ana had given him the jacket a week earlier. It was gray and blue with the word *Singapore* on the back.

You know, Eddie, Ma would have loved your jacket.

No way, Eddie, she would be ashamed, you were her dream and now here you are wearing people's garbage.

Eddie paused when he got to the bus stop. His hunger pangs had become an accurate indicator of time and they told him that Uncle Teo would be driving up soon in bus number 26 and Eddie would spend the next hour in its comfortable air- con before returning to the streets for the rest of the night. He thought for a minute about going home. But the house stifled him.

Each time the phone rang, his heart jumped—maybe it was the police looking for him, or perhaps, just perhaps there was a miracle and his mother had come back. Neither ever happened.

The streets were better. No one knew him.

Uncle Teo opened the bus door and pretended not to notice that Eddie offered no fare—again. This was an older bus, one that wended a well-traveled route, and Eddie could always detect the familiar smell of dirt, sweat, and sometimes vomit lingering just beneath the scent of chemical sprays.

This is what being unwanted smells like, Eddie, get used to it. This is the rest of your life.

“Go to the last seat,” Uncle Teo casually said, “someone left a McDonald’s bag. Maybe inside got some *makan*.”

It was the same routine each night.

Maybe he poisoned the burger, Eddie. Who would want to feed you? You are such a waste of flesh.

No, no, Eddie. He loves you. You can repay him someday. Don’t listen to that man. You are a good boy, Edward. Eat the Big Mac.

Eddie clutched at his head. It was pounding, and the voices were getting stronger and louder.

He found the bag on a crackled cushion in the back of the bus and inhaled the two burgers; his first and last meal of the day. If only Ma had told him the truth. He stared out the window at the spectacle of purpose on the street. People were busy, had places to go, things to do, goals to accomplish. He’d had it all too until Ma’s rape. The rape changed everything. The voices, his friends, had shown up that day.

The day that changed everything was an ordinary day, a sunny one. After school, he had headed to the East Coast lagoon as usual, spending the afternoon helping tourists and schoolkids carry kayaks and canoes in and out of the water. The tips were good. Eddie headed home only after the last of the canoes was put away.

“Ma! Ma! I home already,” he’d called, as he entered their tiny ground-floor flat that sparkled on the outside thanks to his mother’s hot-pink bougainvillea. Inside it was cool. His mother had found a discarded air conditioner at the school where she worked and spent a lot of money getting it repaired. Then she’d had it installed in Eddie’s room.

“Ma,” he called again, but there was no response. On the dining table was a sardine sandwich with onions, his favorite. He hated eating alone but the swim had tired him out. Once the sandwich disappeared, he waited at the door for her to come home. Generally she arrived by nine. But that day she was late, very late.

He had fallen asleep near the door when he heard it open hours later. Then he saw her, in the stark fluorescent light from the deck outside—she walked through the front door covered in dirt. Her white blouse was ripped and she was clutching at it in the middle, desperately trying to keep it closed. She seemed oblivious to him as she entered. He averted his eyes so she would not feel the shame of having her son look at her in this state of undress. His mind was racing. He quickly glanced over to see if she was bleeding; he could see no red. He followed her to her room. “What happened to you?”

“Nothing, *lah* . . . nothing. Go to bed, Eddie,” she said very softly, “I’m okay.”

He wanted to protest. But he just stood there, unsure of what to do. She sat on the edge of the bed, the white sheets now stained with dirt from her blue cotton skirt and open blouse. She covered her face with her hands and he noticed her nails were chipped.

“Go to bed, Edward. I am fine. I mean it, go to bed. I am fine.” Then she stood up and ran into the shower. He under- stood. She was trying to wash away the sins of another. Eddie went to the refrigerator. It was a wonder the twenty- five-year-old contraption still worked. Grabbing a packet of soursop juice, he sat down at their rickety dining table. Had she been assaulted? Raped? What if it were rape? How would they ever get over it? This was not happening; it was like a scene from a bad movie.

He felt his hands crush the packet as anger flowed into his arms. He wanted to kill the bastard who’d hurt his mother. After all, he was the man of the house. He never knew his father, except through the pictures his mother kept around the house. He loved the one where his father beamed, holding his new- born boy. It was taken at the house when Eddie was just two days old. That was the last time his father held him.

His father’s death was a testament to the times they lived in, his mother often said. He worked as a bank teller— a disgruntled employee and a knife told the rest of the story. Just like

that, for no reason at all, his twenty-five-year-old father had been stabbed. Their only solace was he died almost instantly.

After his father's death, Ma seemed to forget everything except how to make sure that she and Eddie had enough to eat. She had no friends, preferring to spend all her free time with him. He was grateful that she was not interested in dating men. Unlike other kids in his school whose divorced parents were seeing other people, Ma seemed happy to be alone. She never seemed to need anyone besides Eddie.

Yes, he was thankful.

"You are like my tail, Eddie, always behind me," she would joke.

He rarely left her side, even when other kids and even some adults made fun of him. "Let her go, Eddie, she has to work. You can't be her shadow your whole life, you know—you have to be your own man," they would say.

Ma worked shifts at the primary school nearby, doing any- thing and everything disgusting—the clean-up lady no one noticed. She cleaned the toilets, collected rubbish, and even mopped vomit, feces, and urine off the bathroom floors. He felt sorry for her when he watched her cry herself to sleep each night. Someday, he hoped, he could give her peace.

Even so, everything was perfect when it was just the two of them, Ma and Eddie. Until that day when Ma came home with ripped clothes.

Eddie could still hear her in the shower as he left the dining table and walked into her room. She had such simple tastes, a tiny bed with a tattered mosquito net draped over it, a small side table where she always set down the romance novel she was reading, her prayer books neatly stacked on a narrow book- shelf on the other side of the room. He wandered over and ran his hand across the prayer books. His poor God-fearing mother.

What would this rape do to her? Would she be able to handle life now that she had been desecrated?

He saw the bathroom door open and fled. He did not want her to see his tears. He could not help but cry. After all, what could he do to help her?

His head began to pound. Voices that he had ignored for so long began to get louder, stronger; first begging and then de- manding that he listen to them. They owned him and he could no longer ignore them.

You are the man of the house, Eddie. You have to help her. Find out what happened. How can you leave her in there alone?

You are a coward, you cannot do anything. You should have died in the womb.

Yes, Eddie you are a loser.

He left the house and ran across two wide streets, down the passage beneath the highway, and emerged on the beach clutching at his head and screaming, "Stop it, stop it, go away, go away, I don't hear you, go away, go away!"

As he sat on the dark beach throwing rocks into the water, gentle cold waves washed his feet, calming him down. The emptiness of the beach reminded him of his mother's life. She had nothing except him and her honor. Tonight she had lost the more important of the two. He could never restore that.

As the sun came up, he decided to go home. Ma was sound asleep.

Sleeping?! How can your ma sleep, Eddie? Has she no shame? She should be praying to God and asking for help. She should be cleaning herself. How can she sleep at a time like this?

What woman sleeps after being raped? Why hasn't she called the cops?

Maybe she liked it, eh, Eddie? Maybe your ma misses having a man around.

"No, no, no!" He covered his mouth and then his ears as the voices began to take over. The next morning, he tried to talk to her: "Who was he? What happened? Were you attacked? Is it someone we know?"

She would not answer. Her purity had been lost and she seemed not to care. *She has become a slut. She liked it with the strange man. Or men. Why else won't she tell you what happened? You don't know her anymore, Eddie. She was with a man—a man, Eddie, who was not your father. She was with a stranger.*

No, no, Eddie, she was possibly raped. You need to take care of her.

Yes, Eddie, you need to take care of her. She needs to be cleansed of all the filth, the sins.

He had too much on his mind to go to his ridiculous special school so he wandered off to the arcade in Parkway Parade. He needed to think and school was not the place to be. Fortunately, the voices left him alone at the arcade.

Around noon, he decided to head home. His mother was usually at work at this time, but this day was different, he knew she would be home.

He saw her back first; she appeared to be on the phone. She turned toward the door, but did not seem to notice him. She was staring at the ceiling and talking very quickly.

"I can't believe this happened . . ." she was saying.

He stopped. Perhaps now he would hear what had occurred. She would reveal the name of the bastard to her friend, he thought. This would be good, he needed to know and he would find out right now. She began to cry and her words got muffled. He could barely make out what she was saying, and he stared hard at her lips.

"We were walking through the park . . ." She was clearly getting more and more agitated. "It was so quiet and no one was around. He turned and kissed me and then . . . and then he pulled at my blouse . . . in the dirt right here in the park. I can't believe it happened. I think I'm—" She stopped mid-sentence when she saw him and quickly hung up the phone. "Would you like something to eat?"

He said no. Her question surprised him; usually it would have been a torrent of, *Why are you not in school? Where have you been?* Today she seemed uninterested.

Told you, man. Told you, she is hiding something. She is seeing a man. Eddie, don't listen to him. You don't know what she said. You did not read her lips all the way through. You don't know the whole story. There he goes, Eddie, calling you stupid because you can't hear properly. Yes, he is calling you stupid—are you going to let him do that?

No, I am not stupid. I never said you were. Thoughts clawed at his brain like tiny crabs taking over the shoreline. He remembered that day even more clearly than the day of the rape. Because after that phone call, her behavior began to really change.

Ma began to stay out later after work each day. When he asked why, she made excuses that made no sense. She seemed constantly lost in thought, and he hated the fact that she ignored his questions. She began to scout local resale stores for silk blouses and bright skirts. She even started wearing makeup. Perhaps, he thought, she feels like she has been prostituted so she needs to dress and behave like one. He wondered how he could help her. He asked her constantly about that day; she never responded.

Although she did still go to the Holy Family Church, he noticed that she had stopped praying in the mornings. She was more concerned with the way her hair looked than with reading the Bible.

I told you, she is turning into a prostitute.

No, she isn't. She is a kind, gentle woman, don't forget that, Eddie.

She is a prostitute, Eddie. Ever wonder where she goes out at night? Why is she so late? Who is she with? Why won't she tell you?

The final straw was when she began to have people over several times a month. Men and women came to his house for what she called a reading club, to discuss some book. He hated them on sight, and hated the fake attention they showered on him. She thrived on it. A cleaning lady in a book club—it was a joke. The people came and talked to her, they ate and drank together and laughed. They were stealing his mother from him, and she was letting it happen. “Why are you trying to be so *atas*?” he asked one day, and she slapped him. It was the first time.

She doesn't need you anymore, Eddie. She has them. A cleaning woman—what does she need to read for, Eddie? She is becoming atas, Eddie. Soon she will think you aren't good enough for her.

He began to withdraw.

He knew it was all because of the rape. It had changed her; she was no longer the beautiful, pious woman he had loved. She was now a cheap slut, flaunting herself in front of

these people in her new clothes and makeup, laughing out loud, pretending to be someone she was not. He was sure she was in a lot of pain.

You are right, Eddie, she needs help.

Her soul has been desecrated, you need to cleanse her. She is in pain. Evil is making her hide the pain. You need to help her, Eddie, she is your ma. She would do the same for you.

Help her, man, help her.

The decision was made. The voices were unanimous. He decided he would help her. He would put her out of her pain.

He picked a day about two weeks later, telling her he had saved enough to treat his mother to a nice meal.

Then he began to plan, meticulously writing down each step.

When the day finally arrived, his mind was calm. He was prepared. Even though God had not given him the best ears or brain, he had given him several advisors who dwelled in his head. His mother dressed down for the dinner, which pleased him. At five p.m., he told her he was ready to go. Together they walked to a little beachside restaurant nearby, one he knew she liked. Because it was right by the water, you could feel the sand under your feet at the table. Ma loved it, and he wanted her to enjoy this evening.

She ordered her favorite, fermented shrimp-coated fried chicken wings, for the two of them, the extra large basket that they had shared many times before.

As they ate, he began to tell her about the new place he had discovered—it would be his present for her birthday.

“It’s beautiful, Ma! You have to see it, will you come with me?”

She smiled at him. “Yes, of course.”

She reached into her purse to pay. He protested. It was his treat, he said. After he paid, he took her hand and started walking.

They had been strolling along the water for about fifteen minutes when Ma started worrying. “Where is it, Eddie? I’m getting tired and it’s getting dark.”

“Just a bit longer, Ma,” he said.

They reached a tiny jetty, a long slender walkway that cut a swath far out into the blue. Eddie squeezed his mother’s hand, gently tugging her along as he stepped onto the jetty and headed toward the edge. “Happy Birthday, Ma!” He beamed as he pointed toward the panorama at the end of the pier.

She had lived on Singapore’s East Coast all her life, but even in the dimming light of the evening, she was stunned by the view. He had managed to find a view of the sea that she had never seen before. Shades of blue looked like flowing silk, the shadowy tankers twinkled in the distance. All the colors and sights melded together to form a perfect seascape.

She stepped further toward the edge to take in the beauty. She never saw the push coming.

This is for you, Ma, this will save your soul.

Yes, Eddie, you did it, you have cleansed her of her sins. Now she will be with Him, she is safe.

When she screamed, he began shouting along too: “Ma. I love you! I’m coming, Ma! I love you!” In a new pure world, they would be together. No unhappiness.

He closed his eyes and took a step forward. But then a bony hand grabbed him and pulled him back.

“Ah, boy!” he heard a stranger shout. “What happened? Did your mother fall in?”

Eddie began to cry.

Her funeral was held a few days later. It was a quiet ceremony. There was no body; it was never found.

When her new friends, the ones he hated, showed up, he sidled up next to them to hear what they were saying.

“Pity,” said one.

“Yes,” agreed another, “she was so in love and ready for her new life. What a waste.” Love? In love? What were they saying? His mother in love?

“Yes,” whispered the first. “She told me about him a few months ago. Their first encounter made me blush! They made love in Fort Canning Park! She said she was a mess when she got home.”

The jolt of the bus stopping brought him back to the present. “Time to get off, Eddie,” Uncle Teo said. “I’m sorry.”

Eddie thanked him and walked out into the night breeze. The bus had dropped him off where he had started, by the Merdeka Bridge.

He pulled the thin jacket closer to his body, heading to his usual spot in a corner. When he closed his eyes, he knew he would see his mother, the jetty, her back, his hands. Slowly but surely the dreams would come; dreams filled with snakes. Some nights they would slither up his legs first—on others, they would simply coil around his stomach. Just before the bites, he would wake up screaming.

ⁱ This story first appeared in Singapore Noir (Akashic Books, 2014)

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!"

Diana Abu-Jaber, author of Crescent and Birds of Paradise

"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*

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