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Munni

by Veena Gokhale

A nosestud enlivened her nose. You could divine her mood by studying her flared nostrils, when you couldn't read the expression in her large, dark eyes. Her eyes beamed their attention acutely on one thing at a time, not given to easy distraction. Her habitual expression was thoughtful.

Her waist-length hair was well oiled and firmly braided; two braids, ends tied with red ribbon, then looped, so that the ribbons appeared as large bows beside her ears. We used to call these braids jilbi veni. Jilbi was a sticky, coiled, bright-orange sweet, accompanied by a glass of pungent buttermilk, served at the local sweet shop, to the strong-hearted.

Munni was tall for her age and wore long skirts with waist-length, half-sleeve blouses, both cut from the same brilliant, floral patterned, cheap, cotton fabric. I remember the rough texture of her clothes, while my own dresses were soft and frilly. And these we called frocks.

Her feet were usually bare: dusty, black feet, a little cracked at the soles. She would have to go and wash her hands and feet as soon as she came to our place. (This decree, issued by my grandmother, applied to everyone, shod or unshod, who came into the house from outside.) Later, when she travelled with us, she wore rubber, 'Hawaii' chappals, which had a single, strong grip for the big toe.

I have little recollection of what I looked like at 10. The mirror was alien to me then. But the image of 12-year-old Munni is branded on my memory. Munni was my playmate and my baby brother's nanny, in that order. At least for me. I didn't distinguish

between her two roles. After all, I too had responsibilities towards my little brother.

I see now that a chasm lay between us. Munni and I dealt with that difference with the ease of children skipping rope, counting to a 100 without missing a beat. If we met now, would we hesitate, and stumbling in our hesitation, draw back fearfully from the edge of a seeming precipice?

Munni's favourite game was Hopscotch, which was known to us as 'billus.' She would hitch up her skirt, tucking it into her waistband when we played the game. We were very serious. There was no fooling around. We often had a third person as an umpire.

I was partial to 'Phugdi,' which consisted of two people facing each other, keeping their feet together and holding their hands crossed, at arms distance, then swirling madly in unison, feet tapping hard on the concrete floor of our veranda.

"Stop, STOP!" I would be the first to say as we would slow down from what felt like a terrific speed. We would stagger to the wall and lean against it, giggling, euphoric. The game was all the more attractive since my grandmother forbade it, afraid that we would lose our balance and crash to the floor.

I was doing 'craft' at school and there was homework to be done in this, as in all the subjects. Munni loved craft. She had gone to a municipal school in the past and had completed Class Three. Then she had stayed home to look after her younger siblings and had been hired by my parents to take care of my brother.

She read aloud sometimes from my old Hindi textbook. The words rolled out slowly, with an effort. But Munni enjoyed reading. She would be transported for hours afterwards.

At our craft sessions, we painted eggshells, and put them on twigs we had collected, to

assemble decorative trees; we made paper mache bowls and painted them, we cut paper into patterns, and worked with crayons and watercolours to make paintings of clowns, mountains, birds, houses, planes, people and whatever else took our fancy.

After one such session, Munni took my brother for his bath and I started washing the brushes, palette and my black and purple hands in the kitchen sink, when my mother said to me in English, "Don't sit so close to Munni. She may have lice."

English had been a sort of a code language between my parents before I went to school. They used to talk about things like their evening plans that didn't include me and other 'adult' stuff, in English. It was also a language in which they would negotiate about my grandmother who was crafty enough to pounce on them and demand that they use only Marathi in her presence. As I became proficient in English, it no longer served these purposes. But, it could still be used to hide things from the servants. Munni and I spoke in Hindi. I had no understanding of Telugu, Munni's mother tongue. I conversed with my grandmother solely in Marathi. I spoke with my parents in English and Marathi and with my baby brother in gibberish.

"She may have lice." The words echoed in my head for a couple of days. Why should Munni have lice? She washed her hair as often as I did.

Munni lived in a single room with her parents and four brothers and sisters, in the servants quarters down the road. The quarters consisted of about a dozen, narrow rooms set in a row, with a common latrine and bathroom. They were a five minute walk from our house, and a two minute run. I could see Munni's house from our garage which was behind our garden.

I went to Munni's house sometimes to sample the chili-hot food that her mother, who worked as a housemaid, cooked for her family. Sitting cross legged on the floor, I sampled Andhra-style rice and curry at Munni's house, for the first time. I felt my

tongue, then throat, chest and stomach, and ultimately my whole being, catch fire. Flames escaped from my mouth, and possibly my ears. I turned into a dragon, albeit a pitiful one. Tears streamed down my cheeks and choking sounds escaped my mouth. I was plied immediately with glasses of water and given a lump of jaggery to suck.

I kept going back for more. The way to do it was to mix the rice and curry well with your fingers, roll them into a ball in your palm and toss it in your mouth. Munni's father brought a juggler's effortlessness to this task. I would try to imitate him. Sometimes the rice balls made it into my mouth, sometimes they didn't. It made eating so much more fun.

Munni did not usually sleep at our house. She went home every night at eight and came back the next morning around eight thirty. But on one occasion, Munni and my best friend Sharmila, both stayed over at our house. My mother's night shift at the hospital, where she worked as a doctor, coincided with my father being out-of-town for work. My grandmother had recently had a stroke which had changed her from an active, vivacious woman, into a zombie of sorts, who sat in a chair on the veranda for hours, staring into space. She could no longer look after my brother when my mother was on her night shift. Therefore, it fell to the three of us - Munni, Sharmila and myself - to ensure that the baby got his bottle feeds and came to no harm, that night.

Sharmila was the same age as Munni. She was a warm, curious, energetic girl who liked to bully me sometimes. She was an only child as I had been, until the recent, exciting arrival of my baby brother.

Sharmila was dropped off at our place punctually at eight and my mother departed for her night shift, trying till the last minute to get another doctor to replace her. She looked rather anxious, though we assured her that we were more than equal to our task. She called from the hospital at nine pm to check if everything was all right.

Half-an-hour later, having fed and changed my brother, and put him to sleep, we all went to bed. Something woke me up sometime later. I lay in bed, disoriented, staring incomprehensibly at the roof of the large, white mosquito net which enveloped us like a tent. The sound of someone sobbing softly cut through the dark. I sat up in bed and so did Sharmila, who was sleeping next to me. ``Munni," she said.

We slipped out from under the flaps of the mosquito net, careful not to open them too wide. If a mosquito got in it was quite a task to chase after it and kill it.

I switched on the table lamp and glanced across at my brother sleeping peacefully in his baby cot, under a smaller mosquito net. Then I turned towards Munni who was sleeping on a mat, curled into a ball, face to the wall, her shoulders twitching with each sob.

Sharmila had already crawled over to her and was shaking her, trying to turn her around: ``Kya hua?" she asked. Munni continued sobbing, resisting the attempt to be turned around. I looked at Sharmila, feeling completely at a loss.

We sat kneeling by Munni for a minute or so. Then I put a hand on her shoulder and whispered in Hindi, "Why are you crying? What's the matter?"

Munni turned around to face us. ``Will you teach me English?" she asked. I looked at Sharmila, not knowing what to say.

"Will you?" Munni asked again.

"Of course," I said quickly. ``Do you want to learn English?"

"Yes, I want to learn English," Munni said.

"We'll teach you," said Sharmila. "It's very easy."

"You won't forget?" said Munni.

"No I won't," I replied, staring into Munni's eyes which were reddish and swollen.

Seizing the writing pad and pencil which were kept near the phone, I scribbled her name - M-U-N-N-I - on a page and gave it to her. Munni's face relaxed into a slight smile.

“Let's go back to sleep now or we might wake the baby,” whispered Sharmila.

I slept badly after that, dreaming that various characters from my storybooks had all come together in a huge room. They were throwing food around, getting into scuffles, and chasing each other. The scene spelt chaos and seemed to come out of a Laurel and Hardy movie that I had seen at the Club.

My family left that town soon after to go and live in Calcutta - a strange and wondrous place. We didn't understand the language at first, nor the customs. But we found them endlessly amusing and fascinating. Smells of fried fish rose up to our fourth floor apartment at all hours. My grandmother had died before our move to Calcutta. A strict vegetarian who didn't even touch eggs, she would not have appreciated these odours.

Munni came with us to Calcutta for a while. We would go for walks along the Dhakuria lakes near our house, excited by this proximity to water. The town where we had lived before was located in a dust bowl, in another Indian state. Bengal by contrast was wet and humid, a luscious green. Along the lakeshore were vendors selling mouth-watering new food - zaal-mudi, puchka and aloo dum.

Munni was sent back home after a month. She was at an awkward age, my mother said. Besides, it wasn't right to take her away from her family for long. We had only brought her along to help us settle down. My mother also mentioned that Munni would soon be married.

I never got around to teaching Munni English.

I never saw her again.

I picked up lice in Calcutta from someone in my expensive private school. I was finally allowed to cut my hair short and considered myself very hep after that. Photographs of myself with jilbi-venis disappear from the family photo albums around this time.

There are no photographs of Munni, only her image, branded on my memory.

Authors note: Munni means little girl in Hindi.