

The First Two Pages of “Kohinoor” by Smita Harish Jain
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An Essay by Smita Harish Jain

Often, the theme of an anthology suggests the opening pages for a story, and *When a Stranger Comes to Town* was no different. The call for submissions asked the question, “What is it about strangers that is just so unsettling?” and I knew instantly the “stranger” I wanted to write about—a person, sure, but first, a place.

I grew up in Mumbai, India, back when it was still called Bombay, a city of dazzling contrasts and breathtaking uncertainty, where slums are built next to luxury high rises; where daily life is guided by the whims of a fluid power structure; and where chaos is the constant, until it isn’t—in other words, the perfect setting for an unsettling story.

My challenge was choosing just the right images to capture the richness, incongruity, turmoil, and—I assumed to most readers—unfamiliarity of the place Suketu Mehta described in his 2004 book as “The Maximum City,” the most apt description of my hometown I have ever heard. Nothing in Mumbai happens on a small scale: excess and deprivation, decency and corruption, glitter and filth. If I wanted to keep the readers unsettled, I knew which end of the spectrum I had to be on and wrote this opening paragraph:

Govandi Road Jail stood broken and decrepit on a dirt field inside the “Gas Chamber of Mumbai.” The pollution from the garbage

incinerators at the nearby Deonar Landfill, the largest dumping ground in the city, coated the buildings inside the prison with black soot and filled the air with the smell of rotting foods and burning rubber. I waited outside the prison's massive iron gates for the warden to arrive.

Hoping I had whet the readers' appetite for more, I thought I could take a chance on what came next. I'd been thinking a lot before I wrote this story about the narrative question—for both the novel and the short story form—and I wondered just how far a writer could push introducing questions, before the reader would demand answers. I experimented with this idea in the next passage.

Several meters away, three young men—I guessed them to be in their early twenties—sat under a neem tree and shared a Goldspot. They passed the bottle of orange soda around, until one of them waved it off and reclined under the shade of the giant tree, a temporary respite from the searing August heat of the city.

They were joined a few minutes later by two more men, who had just emerged from the prison compound.

“Then what, Vikas?” the one lying in the shade of the neem asked.

Vikas checked the sheaf of papers in his hand. “You have Shetty today at 7 pm; don't be late,” he said.

“Shetty is easy. I don't even have to ask anymore,” the man said, puffing out his small chest and waggling his eyebrows.

“They're all easy,” Vikas said. “One by one, we'll take care of them. Amit, you keep the schedule.” He handed the papers to the other young man, who had come through the prison gates with him.

Amit pocketed them and motioned the others to get up. The three friends rose to their feet, and all five mounted Maruti scooters and left in a cloud of dust.

Before I could make any sense of their conversation, I heard my name.

Had I posed too many questions? I wondered. “Who are these people?” “Why are they there?” “What are they plotting?” Even as I was writing this setup, I found myself teetering on the edge of “Please stop throwing out so many questions.” and “Give me another question; I can take it.” I hoped the readers would trust me to keep my implicit pact with them: that if they turned the pages, all would be revealed.

The time had come to introduce my narrator, the person who would eventually provide the answers, and to continue building the story’s setting.

“Mr. Dhawan?”

I turned to see the warden, a large woman dressed in a dark olive uniform and combat boots. Together we walked to Jali Mulaqat, the visiting cage for undertrials, where those waiting to move from the prison to the courts were housed. She described the many structures we passed along the way, sounding more like a real estate agent than a prison official.

“In these buildings, we keep our serious offenders, those imprisoned for murder, cheating, rape,” she said and directed my eyes to a row of five brick barracks with standing seam steel roofs. “No one has ever escaped from there.”

She continued her tour, taking me past outdoor toilets, a small grassy maidan, and a crude gym consisting of several mismatched barbells and a treadmill that was plugged into nothing. She gave me tidbits about each that she hoped would make it into my article, until, finally, we arrived at the cage.

Inside, women sat in large groups, sharing their problems and proclaiming their innocence. Some were just girls and busied themselves chasing cockroaches or pulling lice out of each other’s hair.

One of the things I enjoy most in reading a short story—or a novel for that matter—is getting to the moment when I understand the title. Some titles make

sense right away, like “The Summer Uncle Cat Came to Stay” or “The Caxton Private Lending Library & Book Depository.” Others take some time, like the layered meanings of death, love, and heartbreak of the rose in “A Rose for Emily.” My title, like the main character it references, was based on a priceless gem, cursed and coveted, whose story was built on a foundation of myth.

I searched the crowded space for Kohinoor and found her in a corner of the cage listening to the occasional caws of an Indian ringneck perched in a peepal tree outside the Jali.

“Miss?” I started, not sure exactly how to address a dance bar girl.

“Sunilji, you have come,” she greeted me with the familiarity of a fast friend. Despite the closeness in our ages, she added the honorific *ji* to acknowledge the difference in our stations.

I bobbed my head from side to side, a classic Indian gesture which can mean yes, no, and maybe – sometimes, all three at the same time. I felt like a teenager seeing a naked woman for the first time, even though she was covered from head to toe in traditional women’s prison garb, a white sari with blue borders. Still, she took my breath away.

“Kohinoor... *ji*,” I said, adding the honorific as an afterthought. It wasn’t necessary for someone like her, but in her presence, I was merely a disciple.

I’ll admit that, at this point, I didn’t know much about my stranger. I wanted her to grow organically with the story and discover her like the readers would. By the time I got to her later description as “the dancer that had captured Mumbai— first as an enigma, then as an icon, now as a martyr,” I understood her.

With my setup done, the rest of the story came quickly. Options emerged, pathways became clear, and situations presented themselves. I relaxed into the ease

of it and enjoyed the opportunity to revisit Mumbai, even if only in my memory.

I had set out to write a story about unsettling people and places and ended up with a slice-of-life piece that didn't seem so strange, after all, and, maybe, that was the most unsettling thing about it.

“Kohinoor” is part short story, part morality tale, and part justification—justification for what? You'll see.

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Smita Harish Jain has stories in *Mumbai Noir*, several *Sisters in Crime* anthologies, and upcoming ones in *Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine*, Malice Domestic's *Murder Most Diabolical*, and more *Sisters in Crime* anthologies. She recently finished writing her first novel, also crime fiction, also set in Mumbai—the first in a series.