

LEARNING TO BAT: A SHORT STORY BY SONALI SINHA

Rhea woke up early on a Saturday morning because the accounting firm she worked at required all hands on deck when they found multiple errors that caused a ripple effect which meant everyone had to go in and redo a month's worth of work. She looked into the mirror as she prepared herself for a day in Corporate America. She dabbed her foundation over her freckles and then pulled her hair into a tight ponytail. She played around with it so that her black hair covered purple highlights. After slipping into her pantsuit, she grabbed her "I hate Mondays" thermos and headed to her firm.

Before heading to her desk, she went to the upstairs floor bathroom. "Hey Ruth!" she exclaimed to someone waiting by the sinks. The person was fluffing her white-blonde hair and playing with her bangs. Rhea walked closer to her and parted her bangs. "Your hair looks good."

She blushed and whispered, "Thanks. Ummm, there's so much gossip about you."

"Yeah, I figured. Megan gave me a dirty look so I smiled at her and told her she has something in her teeth"

Ruth gazed at her in awe and said, "You're such a trooper. You don't deserve any of this, I hope you know that. Because you know I can always

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Before she could finish her thought Rhea stepped in and said, “No. I can take it. You’re the one who figured out someone’s skimming money. We fudged the numbers just bad enough that people have to come in here a few weekends. Once they look over everything, they’ll notice it too. If we didn’t do something about it, everyone else would’ve gotten in trouble. I didn’t mind taking the fall because I’m negotiating job offers right now. No one’s getting hurt.”

“Yeah, no one’s getting hurt,” she repeated with relief. Rhea kissed Ruth on the forehead. In a nervous voice, Ruth worked up the nerve to ask, “Did you want to hang out tonight?”

“Aww, I would love to but I already told Jess.”

“Oh. No problem. I guess I’ll see you on Sunday at the softball game?”

Rhea tried to put on her most confident voice but felt her cheeks burning as she said, “Totally. It’s gonna be awesome.” She walked out of the bathroom in a hurry and prepared herself for a morning of dirty stares and passive-aggressive comments while she worked through the numbers that she and Ruth messed up.

Once she was done, she headed back home and continued her new hobby of looking through her jewelry. A week ago, Rhea ran into her first high school girlfriend, Shayla, at Stop and Shop. They both thought it was a good idea to get some coffee and catch up. It ended up with them in tears and gaslighting each other for not being confident in their sexualities as young

teens. But it made her reminisce, thus bringing her to pore over her high school jewelry box and go through her necklaces-- a black pleather choker, one with a skull charm, a light pink rose pendant and diamond-- until her phone started ringing. She answered Jesse's Facetime call and faced the screen to the ceiling fan. He rubbed his puffy eyes and tried untangling his curly, brown hair while his bedsheets still covered half his face. "Good morning, we were wondering where you were at work today," she said.

He got up frightened and stuttered, "What do you mean, I didn't take the-- oh my god stop doing that."

Rhea was cackling on the other end and was able to get out her words, "We used to work at McDonald's during high school and you still fall for it. It's been years." She finished accessorizing and entered the Facetime frame.

She chose a sword necklace to match her black corset top and purple-colored contacts. She stared at her image on the Facetime screen so she could arrange her purple highlights to pop against her black hair.

"Where'd your freckles go," he asked.

"I covered them up with foundation, it doesn't feel like a freckles day."

"Bad bitches can have freckles."

"Bad bitches can do whatever they want."

"Period."

"So...", she asked.

"So...", he responded.

“Why’d you call Jesse?”

“Oh, I thought we were playing a game there for a second. Uhhh do you still not know how to hit a baseball”

“That’s why you called? Honestly, I don’t even want to learn it that bad anymore”

“Nope. We’re doing it. Because then you’re going to feel embarrassed and get mad at me for not teaching you”

“I don’t even have time today.”

“Then make some time, girl.”

“I have to water some plants, I have to livetweet my reactions to the Hallmark Channel, go shopping.”

“What if I told you I’ve secured the goods?”

She rolled her eyes and said, “Oh my god, grow up.”

He lifted up his bong and in a singsong voice said, “It’s right here.”

“I guess I have time tonight.”

“Great!!!”

She tried to interject and said, “But I---” but he had ended the call by then.

She started to take off her Corporate America foundation that she forgot was still on her face.

It was 10 p.m. and Rhea had just texted Jesse she would be there in five minutes. Thirty minutes later, she pulled into his driveway and switched to

a playlist they made together for special nights like this. He got in the car when “Young, Wild, and Free” was playing.

She turned to him and asked, “Did you remember to turn off your gas?”

“Ch’yeah.”

“Your room light is still on,” she said, pointing at his window.

“Fair enough,” he said and got out.

He came back with the plastic bag from earlier in the day and something stuffed in his sweatshirt. “It was good you sent me back there. My gas was actually on and I forgot my bong.”

“Oh. That’s good. I don’t do it to nag you, you know. I just worry.”

“Yeah, I know. You care. And I’m probably gonna nag at you a lot tonight so you can learn to hit a baseball.”

“Ughhhh,” she replied.

They pulled up to the baseball stadium. Before they got out of the car, they both took a few hits and he promised she could have more later once they were done with practice. She walked up to the doors, pushed and pulled, but had no luck. Jesse was ready to go to a nearby park until he watched her go to the nearest fence and start to climb. He ran up to her and yelled,

“Rhea what are you doing?”

“I’m climbing the fence and since I’m high, I think it is a good idea.”

“What if we get in trouble?”

“Then we just beat them with the baseball bat,” she replied and jumped onto the ground on the other side of the fence.

Rhea, still enjoying the effects of the weed, laid on the ground, staring at the stars, and fiddled with her necklace while Jesse paced back and forth telling her about making contact, following through, and how to turn her hips. She was giggling to herself and her mental bubble was popped when he stood over her and asked, “Are you ready Rhea?”

“Yeah bro, I gotta use my hips. I’m gonna hit it out of the park and steal the bases.”

“Just hit the ball first, okay? Look at me.”

He walked a few feet forward, demonstrating good form and bad form which he suspected she would try to do if he didn’t prevent her beforehand.

“That’s good shit Jess,” she observed.

“You do it now,” he said and handed her the bat.

She walked over and twirled the bat in circles before attempting Jesse’s good form. “This is what the professionals do.” Then, she swung it.

“That was good!”

“It felt good!”

“Okay now throw the ball at me.”

“Do it a few more times”

She demonstrated a hybrid of weak and good form the next few swings.

“You’re ready,” Jesse decided.

He pitched the ball and she was able to make contact three out of the ten times. And then they decided to take a break. She walked up to him triumphantly and said, “The MBL wishes they could have me.” He burst out laughing. “I did pretty good Jess. I hit it and everything.”

“For a first-timer, it’s good.”

While he was packing the bong, she asked, “When was the last time you played?”

“Probably high school. I was able to round up some people in college. And then I tried to teach Kira to play because she felt left out. But you know how that ended.”

“Oh right.”

“It’s okay,” he said as he took a hit and passed the bong on.

She blew smoke out and said, “Dude. If you wanna talk about it, I’m right here.”

“There’s not much to say. What do I even say? I’m sorry I couldn’t be there for you. I didn’t even know your favorite song. I didn’t dye my hair pink but I didn’t want to. There are other ways to support breast cancer. I donated and stuff. I don’t know. It was my first relationship, I guess you just learn a lot of things you never expected.”

“Brodie, her favorite song changed every few weeks. No one can keep track of it. And you did the half marathon for breast cancer. Someone’s titties are cancer-free because of you.”

“They’re getting treated.”

“Yes, they’re getting the treatment they need because of money YOU raised. And what do you mean you weren’t there for her? I’ve watched you drive her to the airport and babysit her cat. And the cat used to scratch you. A lot. I still have this scar on my arm,” Rhea said as she pointed to her elbow.

He shook his head and said, “No, like emotionally. She said she felt like I wasn’t listening to her. There was stuff going on with her family.”

“The cousin's thing? Where her cousins kept bullying her because she always stole the car? Or her dad’s affair? Or her mom’s affair?”

He turned, surprised, and exclaimed, “How’d you know?”

“Everyone kinda knows a little bit. She posts things on her Insta stories, her YouTube channel and then you start to piece it together. I feel for her, you know? Whatever she’s got going on is fucked. But what are you gonna do? What can a marriage counselor even do? Those expectations she put on you were way too high.”

“She told me it was all a secret.”

“I didn’t know you thought it was all confidential. I was waiting a respectful amount of time to shit talk about it with you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you knew?”

“Dude, I was being respectful. And I know you’re mad but don’t you turn on me right now. If she’s making you question yourself this much, she’s not for you.”

“But--”

“I know she’s going through stuff but how is that your fault? You tried to be there for her. You did listen. You didn’t even air her dirty laundry.”

“I could say the same thing about you.”

“What???”

“Why are you learning to play baseball? And watering plants? You don’t even like plants.”

“Keep the plants out of this.”

“Why are you going out of your way to do things you don’t even like for someone you swear you don’t even see in that kinda way?”

“Yo, listen, we need to get practicing. Otherwise, it’ll be embarrassing for you. You used to be an all-star athlete. You gotta train me right?”

“Why haven’t you told me about Ruth yet?”

“It’s fun. It’s just a fun thing,” she shrugged her shoulders.

“Oh, and she didn’t make you feel bad when that whole thing at work went down? She’s using you.”

“No, no she’s not,” she said softly. “I’m just playing softball on my company’s team so I can make a good impression on my boss. And Ruth is a really sweet person. You really need to get to know her.”

“That’s bullshit. It’s toxic.”

She shook her head and said, “No. You were in a toxic relationship but you liked her so much and it was so painful to see you go through that because I love you like a brother. Don’t project your shit onto me.”

“Why were you so upset for a whole week when you took the blame for that thing going wrong at work. How is that not toxic?”

“Because you don’t know the whole story.”

“So tell me.”

“Jesse, it’s too complicated but basically me and a bunch of other coworkers fucked up. I wanted to take the blame because you know I don’t like my job already. Why mess it up for everyone else? And, um, I might have hung out with Shayla. Just like an hour.”

Jesse looked at her annoyed and exclaimed, “How many times do I have to tell you to stay away from her. You two are no good for each other. There are some things time can’t heal and this is one of them!”

“Oh my god, calm down.”

“You calm down!”

She handed him the bong and said, “You need this. And this is why I didn't tell you.”

He grabbed it angrily and said, “It’s mine, to begin with. And don’t say I didn’t warn you, Rhea. I did my part as your friend.”

“Time to practice, right?”

“I guess,” he said after blowing out smoke.

Just as they were a few throws in, Jesse shielded his eyes from a shining light.

Ruth yelled, “I’m actually getting into it. Stop getting distracted.”

“There’s someone here Ruth.”

She turned around and saw a security guard making his way to them. He boomed, “Who is that?”

Ruth ran and grabbed the bong. Jesse had already gotten halfway across the field with the bat. They struggled up the fence but the adrenaline rush helped sober them up and get back to the car. Out of breath, Jesse asked, “What happened to beating them with a baseball bat?”

“Shut up. Taco Bell or McDonald’s?”

“Taco Bell,” they said in unison.

“Jess, you gotta get back in the game. Up your confidence and meet a girl that’ll treat you right.”

“Are we still talking about this?”

She ignored his comment and said, “Open up my phone and type in mia dot the angel on Instagram. She’s cute. You’d do well together. She’d treat you right as long you’re a gentleman to her otherwise she goes psycho.”

“Whoa. You can’t call other girls psycho.”

“Literally not the point. Good people go psycho when disrespected. She’s not a psycho. Just don’t mistreat her. Which you won’t because I know you.

You two would be the outdoorsy couple. Camping. Skiing. Hiking. That's how you two would spend time together."

"Oh."

"Or do you remember Seneca from high school? I think it's xxsenxx now. I saw her in Target the other day."

"I could never do that."

"Why not?" she asked angrily.

"I had the biggest crush on her in high school. I don't wanna get all nervous with the butterflies and everything. And you know she's gay, right?"

"WHAT?" Rhea exclaimed.

"Why?"

"Because sophomore year of high school me and Becky snuck into the bathroom during Psych and we heard her crying in the stalls to her mom about how this guy Jesse would never even notice her."

"Wow she was crying over me," he said flattered. Rhea stared daggers into him. "Well how was I supposed to know?"

"What do you mean she was gay?"

"Well, I heard she had a girlfriend in college. And then one time during lunch, me, Becky, and Kevin found her diary left behind in class. And then we told him not to but Kevin started reading it and we saw sketches of like girls. And then like fanfiction writing that really got into it. It was about a

girl who was obsessed with roses and something about peanut butter jelly sandwiches. It sounded like a hardcore crush.”

“HmMMM. Well, sketches could mean anything. Maybe she’s just practicing drawing people. But... ”

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that one time she gave me a light pink rose pendant around Valentine’s day because she thought I lost it and even I told her it’s not mine, she insisted that I keep it because I make it look even more beautiful.”

“That’s adorable.”

“And it means that we can PULL,” she reached out for a fist bump.

“Hell yeah,” he said and fist-bumped back.

Rhea pulled up to the drive-thru line and they both started looking at the menu. While they were waiting for the other cars, she said, “You know what I don’t get? If you really didn’t think Ruth was good for me, why’d you teach me to play tonight?”

“I’ve been trying to get you to play forever. Everyone should know how to do it. And you smile all stupid when you talk about her. I think that’s nice.”

“I don’t even know what to say to that,” she said as she drove forward.

“You’re freckles are glowing.”

She ignored him and leaned her head out of the window to order and requested, "I'll get two crunchwrap supremes with potatoes instead of beef."

Jesse coughed next to her and said, "Vegan," under his breath but wasn't fast enough to dodge her slap.

She continued her order and said, "Then I'll 2 get cheesy potatoes and a chalupa cravings box"

He whispered in the background, "Baja Blast."

She repeated him and in a louder voice said, "With the Baja Blast"

They pulled into the parking lot and before opening up their food, she tried one last time to get her friend out of his rut and said, "Think about these Insta girls for a hot minute. You'll never know unless you try."