

# Real Dhaka

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It was a Saturday morning. Dad parked the car and turned the engine off. He nodded at me and signaled with his fingers.

*One, two, three ...*

We simultaneously opened our doors and scrambled out. And then we ran. We ran as if we were action movie stars, dodging vegetable carts and bewildered people. Women with resplendent saris stared at us: two brown-skinned foreigners fleeing as if they were Bollywood celebrities who were about to get mauled by fans. I looked behind me. They had spotted us! Four of them on foot and one on a makeshift cart.

I glanced around, looking for a way out. The market was small. My sneakers stepped on red plastic bags, vegetable peels, and the occasional human spit. Everywhere vendors were screaming at passersby, trying to lure them into stalls. The air was replete with the smell of raw meat and curry. I looked back again; the vendors were gaining ground. One of them made a superhuman over a cart of fruits and was soon running alongside me. That was one of the times I hated my short legs. The other times were during soccer practice.

“Madam, madam! Money, please. Look!”

A man showed me his hollow left eye socket and a heady combination of fright and shock rippled across my body. Dad grabbed my arm and dragged me up the stairs to the second floor. The beggars gave up their pursuit when they saw two Caucasian tourists get out of a car. Those guys were trained like a pack of wolves.

I glared at Dad while gasping for breath. Waking up a fourteen-year old before lunch time on a weekend was like breaking one of the Ten Commandments. You just didn't do it, but what do these parents know about teen protocol?

A few months earlier, after we had arrived, Dad told Mom and me over the dinner table that the beggars here would sometimes maim themselves in

order to get more money. Some families would even blind their own children just so they could beg “more effectively.” Mom and I recoiled from our plates.

“What is this place?” I asked him. “Is this what you meant when you said we’re going on a great adventure, like the Swiss Family Robinson?”

“Well, aren’t you having fun? This is cool stuff, right?” He began with a smile, but upon seeing my blank face, he promptly gave up. “Sam, it’s not so bad. You’ll see,” he said.

I had my doubts then.

I leaned on the rail of the stairs trying to catch my breath. “So much for fun,” I said. Dad was clutching his side and breathing heavily.

“This is what you need—exercise! You only get out of your bed to play the piano. You’re going to have arthritis before you know it!”

“I’d rather have arthritis than run a marathon with a pack of crazy beggars behind me.”

“*Hoy*, don’t be like that. Consider yourself blessed.”

“*Opo, opo*, can we just buy those vegetables and go home?”

Dad shook his head at me. He had this idea that if only he could get me out into the downtown streets, he would make a social worker out of me yet. Last week, we went to an orphanage that his organization was working with; the week before that to a school for the deaf and blind. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that I could barely remember what we did in those institutions. I thought of the cable TV, and my piano, and Mom’s adobo back at the apartment, and I almost wanted to invoke Armageddon just so we could have an excuse to leave.

We finally reached the produce stall at the end of the corridor. A tall man sat in the middle of it, surrounded by piles and piles of eggplants, tomatoes, lettuce, string beans, etcetera. I had never seen so many infernal vegetables in my whole life.

“*Oi, suki!*” The man yelled at Dad, and I did a double take.

“Siddharta!” Dad greeted him cheerfully.

“I told you to call me Sid!” the man replied with a thick accent. It took me a while to decipher the words.

“But I like Siddharta,” Dad insisted with a laugh.

Sid stood up and waved with a flourish toward his goods. “What will you be having today? *Talong*, some *okra*? Maybe the *misis* needs *kamatis*?”

They both laughed. “You are getting good with the Tagalog!”

Sid looked pleased. “Well, so many Filipinos here in Dhaka, I have to learn! This your daughter?” He bent down slightly to peer at my face.

“Hello,” I said automatically.

Dad gestured at me and winked at Sid. “I’m introducing her to local life.”

Sid laughed as if he were drawing it up from a well somewhere in between his lungs. “If she survives the market, she can survive anything!”

Dad certainly took his time choosing the vegetables and chatting with Sid on the side. The corridors were brimming with people, mostly women. Flies were buzzing at a nearby fish stall, indifferent to impatient hands swatting them away. Two toddlers played on the wet, muddy floor while their mothers haggled with buyers. Most of the local patrons would stop and look at my pink sneakers, my gray hoodie, and then my face. They would then transfer their scrutiny to Dad with his brown walking shorts and running shoes. I stood there and tried to arrange a placid smile on my face, one that I hoped looked benign.

I nudged Dad’s side and stepped closer to him. “Okay, Dad. Maybe it’s time to get out of here.”

He paid Sid, we waved goodbye and walked back to the stairs. Dad handed me the plastic bag that contained the tomatoes.

“Your goal is to keep these safe until we get in the car.”

“Not again!”

He led the way to the bottom of the stairs, and then we were running again. I dodged a man with a broken arm, the fractured bone sticking out from the skin, while Dad hoisted the plastic bags over the heads of several children clutching at his pant legs and shirttail. Finally, I found myself yanking the car door open and throwing myself in the passenger’s seat along with the tomatoes. My real goal was to get out of there alive. Dad started the engine as children and adults surrounded our car and knocked on the windows. He maneuvered the car like in one of those James Bond movies he’s so fond of, and then we were out of the market and into the open road.

I slumped with relief, clutching at my seatbelt. He winked at me.

“Tomorrow’s another day, eh?”

If there’s anything that I will never forget about Bangladesh until this very day, it would be that market fiasco. That, and of course, Pobrito.

DHAKA IS THE capital city, said the travel booklet I read on the plane, and so I expected it to be like Manila, with busy pedestrians and honking cars and general disrespect for the laws of the road.

My expectations were met.

Upon exiting the airport, I found myself in an immediate tug-of-war with an overenthusiastic porter who claimed that my bag looked heavy and I needed his help.

“No, it’s okay!” I said over and over again, my voice climbing a decibel each time, until Dad put a stop to it by asking the porter real nicely to let go of the bag. The porter, momentarily confused by this smiling man patting the head of a hysterical child, let go and looked blankly at us. When we were safely in the van, my father looked at me and gave a calm smile. Nothing fazed my dad. If a Royal Bengal tiger appeared out of nowhere and sank its fangs into me, he would have approached the beast and asked it kindly to let go. I wouldn’t put it past him.

Every intersection in Dhaka was a circle, which made me feel like we were doing eights round and round the city. Their version of the pedicab, the ones they called “rickshaw,” weaved in and out of cars with the confidence of ten-wheelers. Ravi, our driver, had to step abruptly on the brakes every five minutes and cast glances at the rearview mirror to see if we were still on our seats. We got stuck at one intersection when a bunch of cows had to cross the road. The cow herder ambled calmly amidst the burst of screechy horns and humans screaming curses. The cows themselves walked with even steps, chewing fresh grass, glancing around so calmly they made me feel like we were the interlopers.

There were only the three of us in the apartment until Pobrito came. I haven’t thought of her for a long time so conjuring her up in my mind is like trying to reconstruct a faded image. I should just start with that afternoon when I had been in Dhaka for three months. I was staring out the living room window to watch a bright yellow rickshaw pick up two children. Rickshaws had tall wheels and colorful bodies, like a lean and lanky man with a penchant for neon-colored clothes. At first sight, they looked quaint, even delicate like a carriage. That is until you ride on one, and the *wallah* doesn’t slow down as he pedals around a corner, and you find yourself gripping the roof and screaming your head off while the thin wheels skid to one side.

In the distance, a voice was chanting a prayer through the outdoor speakers of a mosque. I refocused my gaze on the music sheet in front of me

and sighed. Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. If I didn't master that piece by next week, my piano teacher would accuse me of not practicing, and then my mother would crow at me. It was like an endless cycle of suffering.

I started playing the first few measures. Pobrito was sweeping the floor behind me. "Pobrito," I said without turning around to look at her.

"Yes, Madam?"

"Ugh, I told you not to call me 'Madam'. That's my mother."

Pobrito laughed. She was only two years older than I. Dad had met her when he was visiting one of the orphanages downtown. She would be sweeping our kitchen floor by seven in the morning and would leave just after I came home from school. Her mother had died when she was twelve, and her father had abandoned her and her six siblings. They lived with their grandmother in a cramped shanty after that. Since then, she had considered herself an orphan. She and her siblings joined the hundreds of street children running after tourists until they were taken in and educated by the orphanage.

She had the longest pair of eyelashes I had ever seen on a woman. I hated her for it. And her eyes were deep-set and dark like those Indian movie actresses who frolicked around in the rain during massive musical numbers. Mom had called them "extraordinary," her eyes I mean, but I've always wondered why. They seemed to glimmer with years that were beyond her age, as if they had been reincarnated for centuries.

"What do you want to be when you're older?"

Pobrito didn't reply, and I thought she didn't understand. I stopped playing and turned around. She was still holding the broom, but no longer moving.

"Well?"

"I don't know."

"Teacher? Bollywood actress?"

"I like kids," she said haltingly, before resuming with her cleaning. "You, Ma—Sam?"

"I'm gonna be a rock star, you know. Like a classical rock star," I said. I didn't expect her to understand, but she laughed anyway.

"You play beautifully," she said, before going to the kitchen to cook rice for lunch.

Mom and Pobrito didn't get along very well at the beginning. It all started when Pobrito did our laundry for the first time, and Mom saw that some of the buttons of her favorite blouse were gone. When she showed it to Pobrito, the girl burst into tears. Apparently, back in her village, they would slam the clothes against the rocks by the river to get rid of the dirt. Pobrito confessed that the wall in the laundry room might have been her substitute for the rocks.

She clutched Mom's hands and begged Madam for forgiveness. She said she was the only one working in their household. What will become of her siblings should she lose her job, she asked mother? Who would buy her grandmother's medicine? Mom relented and told Pobrito that it was all right, but she should know better next time, and Pobrito, overcome with joy, cried even harder. I had to lie down in bed after witnessing that scene. Later, I asked Mom:

“How come if I cry like that, you don't give me a break?”

“You don't have her eyes.”

Pobrito was true to her word. Nary a button was ever lost again after that incident. Mom decided to introduce Filipino cuisine and taught Pobrito how to cook adobo. When Pobrito tasted a spoonful, she was silent for a while before turning to us and saying, “I like it.”

She really didn't. I caught her chugging down nearly an entire pitcher of water in the kitchen.

One Saturday, Dad bought a Bengali pop music CD. The strain of an extremely high-pitched female voice blasting from the speakers nearly wrestled me off my piano chair. I braced myself against the piano and tried to restore my bearings. My parents attempted to execute a dance they'd seen in the local channel, amusing Pobrito who had stopped mopping the floor to gape at them.

Mom grabbed Pobrito's arm and asked her to teach them a Bollywood dance. Pobrito could only laugh and shake her head but, upon seeing my father do a clumsy impersonation of a Bengali dancer, she decided that perhaps a little lesson wouldn't hurt. They were at it for almost an hour, my parents trying to copy Pobrito, who was turning round and round, her yellow sari ballooning around her and the bangles on her arm clinking with every whirl. I have to admit: I endured the screeching if only to watch Dad almost fall flat on his face.

I got used to Pobrito more than I got used to my classmates. I went to the only English-speaking school in the city, along with the rest of the United Nations kids and the future Bengali business tycoons. It was exhausting listening to all these kids go on and on about how their cars had broken down, and how their parents had grounded them over the weekend because they had been caught smoking a joint, like, what's the big deal with these old people, like, have they never done it before? It was then I realized that being a spoiled brat is truly an international phenomenon.

On the first day of school, I almost ran out of the compound. There were too many teenagers, and too many languages being spoken in one corridor, and too many undecipherable cultural signals. I spent a lot of time in the bathroom that day, staring at myself in the mirror and trying to teleport my way back to the apartment. But the chaos eased with the passing of months. I would go to school, run to the school bus station by exactly four in the afternoon, and go home. That place made me feel very Third World.

But school was definitely better than Dad's weekend excursions to the "real Dhaka," as he would call it. I would take out my Calculus textbook and pretend to do homework, and he would tell me to drop it so we could visit another social institution.

"I know the answers are at the back," he said while I look longer than usual to tie my sneaker laces.

"Have you been going through my bag again?"

"I saw you look at the back and copy the answers the other night."

"Oh ... about that, Dad, I really worked out the answers anyway. I was just checking."

"Right."

"I HAVE AN idea!" I told him while he was parking the car. "My English teacher said that prostitution here is legal. We should totally go to a brothel! That would be the 'real Dhaka!'"

Dad gave me a sideways glance. "Don't tempt me. I might register you; earn some money on the side."

"What is this place, anyway?"

It turned out to be a halfway home for acid burn victims. The Director, I think her name was Mrs. Pachagounder, opened the front door for us. Her sari had a purple sheen, and she smelled like freshly cooked curry. She shook

our hands and smiled brightly at me. We went to the main living room where the residents were doing embroidery on silk.

I stopped in my tracks. All of them had half of their faces gone, wiped out into a blank patch of lumpy skin. I clutched Dad's arm. He gently urged me forward.

"What happened to them?" I whispered to Mrs. Pachagounder.

"Usually, a man from the same village would propose, and if a girl says no ..."

"Then what?" My lips were trembling.

"Acid only costs five taka in the market. They usually attack at night."

We stopped in front of a girl about my age. Mrs. Pachagounder said something to her in Bengali, and the girl looked at us and attempted a smile, before quickly looking back down at her work. I looked at the empty eye socket, the melted skin that used to be one of her cheeks, a scar that was half her lips. I tried not to stare, but my eyes would run across the scars, would try to reconstruct her face in my mind.

Dad crouched down and said hi. The girl didn't speak. He pointed at me. "This is Samantha, but you can call her Sam."

The girl looked up at me again. I held out my hand. We shook hands briefly. Mrs. Pachagounder ushered Dad and me forward, and I took one last glance at the girl. She was looking at me, what was left of her eyes scanning my face.

I was quiet on the way back home. Another pop song was merrily shrieking out of the car radio with its huge knobs. Dad was saying something about how he would have me wear a statement shirt from now on that said, "Reserved," so as to warn suitors, but sobered up when he took one look at my face.

"Hey, kid ..." He put his hand on top of my head and turned it toward him. "You all right?"

I blinked a couple of times. "Sure. It's the real Dhaka, right? Maybe the brothel doesn't seem a bad place after all now, does it?"

Dad glanced back at the road, and then at me. "The world is an evil place sometimes."

I turned back toward the window and watched a bunch of cows cross the road.



“Yeah.”

That night, that half-burnt face would recur in my dreams, and I woke up, staring at the glow-in-the-dark star stickers that Pobrito and I stuck to the ceiling using a chimney broom. I barely noticed that my pillow was damp.

IN NOVEMBER THAT year the temperature dipped lower than my tropical body was used to. Also, Pobrito turned seventeen. Mom baked a chocolate cake. The icing was too sweet even for the ants, and half of the cake sagged. Pobrito’s eyes got bigger when she saw it. She said she had never been given a cake for her birthday, her voice breaking as tears suddenly came to her eyes. Mom told her that there would be none of that crying on her birthday, especially when there was nothing to cry about unless you were turning forty, which didn’t make sense to me.

Pobrito attempted to restrain the tears, and said between hiccups, “Madam and family are very nice to Pobrito. I wish you would stay here forever.”

I was playing a Chopin etude, and had to stop and turn around to stare at Dad. “But we’re not, right?”

Dad pulled my jacket hood over my head. “Don’t rain on Pobrito’s parade.”

“Really? I thought after that cake, well, anything goes.”

That afternoon, Mom sent Pobrito and me to the grocery store. There was no use arguing that I had to read *The Scarlet Letter* for English class or that I had to memorize the timeline of Napoleon Bonaparte’s ascent to prominence for European History. My parents didn’t believe that I had a stressful school life. As we walked the three blocks to the store, pedestrians stared at us. I imagined it must have been strange to see one girl in full sari mode, and the other wearing faded jeans and a hoodie. I always thought it ridiculous that they would warn us expatriates against wearing sleeveless shirts and above-the-knee skirts when their local women could parade around in midrib sari tops. But I didn’t want the unnecessary attention. I hated being stared at by those deep-set eyes. Even the men there had better eyelashes than I did.

We passed a building that was still under construction. We looked at the women in the corner who were busily hammering bricks into fine powder while their babies were tied to their backs. The women gazed back at us. One of them smiled to reveal a toothless mouth.

“Why are these women working here?” I asked Pobrito.

“No other work. Must feed children.”

“Where are their husbands?”

“Working in other buildings.”

We walked in silence for a while. I was contemplating on the things I had to do once I get home. Go on the Internet, read reviews of *The Scarlet Letter*, and improvise from there. I was about to tell Pobrito to walk faster when she spoke.

“I don’t want to be like them.”

“Like what?”

“Them.” She was still looking back at the women.

SUMMER WAS INFERNAL. Everything seemed to spontaneously combust under the Bengali sun. The birds would sit still under tree canopies, and I would turn the air conditioning in my room full blast and refuse to leave. School was out, thankfully, so I could lie around in bed the whole day if I wanted to. Pobrito would go in my room and wait for me to get up so she could tidy the bed, but I was a permanent fixture until lunch time.

Mom would draw the curtains to one side and throw my towel at my face.

“This is the last time I’m telling you to get up, young lady.”

There was no use trying to explain to them why sleep was necessary to someone young and full of life. They decided that I would not spend my summer vacation just rolling around in sloth, so they made me do the laundry with Pobrito and help her cook lunch.

“They should pay me,” I told her while hanging the clothes at the rooftop and securing them with a clothespin. The heat had bullied the summer breeze away.

“Your parents are so nice, Sam.”

“Of course, you’re biased. They don’t get the mechanisms of a teenager.”

Pobrito could only shake her head. “Don’t understand.”

Water dripping on the concrete floor was the only sound for a while. “How come you’re still not married?” I asked her while I squeezed water out of Dad’s jeans. I was sure she was past the marrying age there. Bengali parents would arrange their children’s marriage as early as, well, birth.

“No dowry,” she said.

“See, I don’t get that. You’re paying the men to marry you, and then you’re the one who gives birth and takes care of your husband while he goes home, kicks off his shoes, and watches TV?”

“What? Slower, slower.”

“Never mind, Pobrito. It’s better you can’t afford to marry. You don’t want to be an unpaid maid forever.”

She stopped hanging the clothes and looked at the ground. I looked at her face.

“What’s the matter?”

She abruptly shook her head and laughed. “Let’s go. Lunch time already.” We went inside and closed the door to the burgeoning heat.

HANDS WERE SHAKING my prone body, and I knew that I was supposed to wake up.

“Sam ... Sam!”

I could recognize Mom’s voice squeezing in my subconscious, but there was something behind the voice that I was uncertain of, something that sounded like ... terror. I abruptly opened my eyes and expected the house to be on fire. It was still dark outside. Mom had turned on the lights in the room and was looking at me with her hand clutching the front of her shirt. Tears were running down her face.

“What is it?”

Mom opened her mouth, but no words came. My heart felt as if it was slowly sliding down my chest. “Where’s Dad?”

“We got a call. Pobrito ...”

“What about Pobrito?”

“She’s in the hospital. They, uh, she ...” Mom crumbled on my lap and cried in earnest. It was between her sobs that I found out that two men broke into Pobrito’s shanty and threw acid on her face. Her siblings and grandmother were unharmed, but Pobrito was in critical condition.

I sat there and tried to comfort her, although my brain refused to process the information. I thought it was a mistake, that maybe it happened to another person. I stared at the wall and the image of dark eyes flashed in my mind. Beautiful eyes like polished glass. I allowed the tears to finally come.

TWO WEEKS LATER, I could barely move my feet as we approached the door to Pobrito's hospital room. Dad was already outside waiting for us. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "You don't have to go in if you don't want to."

We went in. There she lay in her hospital gown, her whole head swathed with heavy bandage. Her grandmother sat on a chair next to the bed, and held her hand. Mom approached the grandmother and gave her a hug. I stepped nearer to the bed.

Only Pobrito's left eye remained unbound. I reached the bed and gripped its metal rail, thinking of what to say.

"Hi." It was all I had.

Pobrito didn't move, but her eye focused on my face. She held out a trembling hand. I took it with both of mine. Looking back, I wished I said something that would have stirred her soul to go on, even with half a face, even with her whole future reduced to the stench of burnt skin. But I was fifteen, and I was afraid.

The dark eye was suddenly wet with tears that were immediately absorbed by the bandage. I thought of how it would be like if you couldn't even cry properly. I thought of the days ahead when she would eventually remove the bandages, and see herself. Would she remember how she looked like? How her eyes had once brightened by the sight of a lopsided chocolate cake? How somber they were when we looked at the women hammering bricks? Would she think that she would rather be an unpaid maid rather than ... this?

I was the first to leave, telling everyone that I needed a drink of water. I went out the door and almost ran into Dad. He caught me as I was about to sprint out.

"I want to go home," I said without looking at him.

"Alright, I'll take you back."

"How far back?"

He didn't reply.

THAT WAS THE last time I saw Pobrito. She died a week later. During the funeral, they didn't open her coffin. It laid there, all dark and final. Mom cried the whole day. I felt sorry for Dad; he spent all his time comforting Mom and asking me if I was all right while I silently stared at the wall above the coffin.

What I never told my parents about were the nightmares that went on for months after Pobrito was gone. They were always the same scenario. We're on the rooftop and I'm telling her, "Don't do it, Pobrito. You don't want to be an unpaid maid forever" and then it would dissolve into her hospital room where she would clutch my hand and whisper from behind the bandage, "You did this to me." And I would wake up and stare at the glow-in-the-dark stickers, barely breathing.

MY PARENTS AND I seldom talk about Pobrito nowadays. She was a subject that we would only reminisce about now and then, privately, in the comforts of our own minds. And when the memories turn painful, I found myself unable to seek the solace of our shared experience.

The other night, I visited my parents in our family home. While Mom cooked dinner, I went up to my old room and sat on the bed looking around. There was a pile of old photo albums in the bottom shelf of the bookcase. I crouched down and was about to carry them back to the bed when I noticed the cover of the album at the very top of the pile. A rickshaw decked in bright red and orange paint. For a minute, I could not move.

I took the album back to the bed and ran a hand across the cover. Dust clung to my fingers. I opened it just as Dad went in to tell me that dinner was ready. He's sixty now and limping from arthritis. He sat next to me and peered at the pictures while adjusting his eyeglasses. I turned to a family photo of us in the living room. We were all crowded around my piano. Mom had one of her arms around me; the other was extended to Dad who was barely in the shot. He must have ran after setting the camera timer on, but wasn't fast enough. Pobrito was there, standing on the side with a shy smile on her face.

Dad looked at me. "I'm sorry, Sam."

"For what?"

"I only wanted you to know how the world really is. I mean, it is evil, but not every time and not everyone."

I was still looking at the picture. "I think I might have killed her."

He peered at my face. "Unless you were the one who hired those men, I don't see how."

I gave him a small smile. "I told her not to get married, that it would be better for her not to."

He put a hand on top of my head and, for an instant, it reminded me of a screeching radio and cows crossing the road. “You give yourself too much credit. For all you know, she just didn’t like the guy. She was beautiful you know, old Pobrito.”

I gazed at his wrinkled face, the warm smile that still makes me think of wet markets and Bollywood dance moves. I leaned my head on his shoulder and for a moment I was fifteen again, and tomorrow could be another excursion to real Dhaka.

“Yes, yes, she was.”