



CENTREFOLD

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# RISING STARS



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## My city, my home

By Sabrina F Ahmad

**T**HE bus crawled through the jam at the Jatrabari intersection, and all the shop signs finally began to read 'Dhaka'. I sighed as the first pang of disappointment surfaced. I was back in Dhaka. Suddenly, it hit me. A flashback from a not-so-distant past.

The microbus sped down Airport Road, and the Dhaka Gate came into view. At the back, the four children cheered madly. "Ain't no city like my Dhaka city!" one screamed and soon they were chanting it in unison. After only four days in Calcutta (back then, it was still spelt like that), they were glad to be home.

"Things were different then, weren't they?" the quiet voice jolted me out of my unexpected reverie.

I looked around me. It wasn't one of my co-passengers, certainly not from my group, and yet, the voice had been achingly familiar.

"You know me."

"Who are you?" I whispered, my eyes darting nervously in all directions.

"Dhaka."

I looked out the window and saw her, the city, and my home. People milling about everywhere. Vehicles of all shapes and sizes jostling for space. Clouds of dust, the combined stench of smoke, sweat and desperation everywhere. Dilapidated apartment buildings vying with shiny towers, clawing their way up to the sky. I shook my head. "I knew you, once. Not anymore."

I was mute as I stood in line to collect my travelling bag. Mute when I located my car. Mute as I reclined against the pale, worn-out grey upholstery and gazed out. She spoke to me again.

"Have I really changed so much?"

"I've been living here all my life, and yet I don't recognise you anymore."

"Tell me how it used to be"

By this time, the confusing jumble of roads and buildings had rearranged themselves into a recognisable pattern, and I realised that we were entering Gulshan through Badda. The rows of shops yielded to the open intersection known as Gulshan Point 1.

"See that? There used to be a roundabout right at the centre; a green patch filled with trees, and the railings covered with posters. The shopping mall you see right opposite wasn't there. I don't remember what was."

We turned right, and proceeded down Gulshan Avenue. I pointed out the brightly lit shops and tall, imposing apartment buildings where the

and headed towards Karwan Bazar. The old five star hotel loomed up ahead. I remarked how this area, housing the headquarters of quite a few private television channels and a few newspapers (including our own) had become something of a news hub over

by the hospitals, schools and universities sprouting up like fungal growths everywhere, replacing the trees, the open spaces, and the single-unit houses with their gardens.

We turned around and shot down Manik Mia Avenue, which was once a boulevard bordered by Radhachura trees, if my memory serves me right. Right now, particularly after the franti

She glances at me to try and discern my mood, but by now, we've passed through part of Kemal Ataturk Road and its jumble of shops and private universities and are waiting at the intersection at Gulshan 2. "There used to be a roundabout here too. Grass and tall trees. They never needed a lawn mower to keep it neat; a couple of goats let loose once a month would do the trick." My companion sighs wistfully, and to cheer her up, I decided to pass by one of the two parks in Gulshan 2. "When I was still a chubby school kid, this park was in a terrible state of repair. Look at it now; well-manicured grassy embankments, neat concrete walks, and not a drop of litter anywhere."

We enter through DOHS Bahidhara, that concrete wasteland of congested apartment buildings. "I didn't come here very often as a kid, but I do remember there being more grass here. Bashundhara is still pretty though," I added quickly, so as not to depress her again. Crossing the rail-lines we found ourselves roaring down the Airport Road. This too, had changed; many of the fields on other sides had been replaced by buildings, and there was even a glittering new hotel. It was good to be out on an open road, nevertheless, and I lean back with a happy grunt, and feel my companion relax too.

The airport flashed past us, and I didn't bother remarking on the developments around that zone. It was the same as had been done with the islands on Manik Mia Avenue and just about anywhere along the routes taken by the Summit guests. From the noncommittal expression on my face, the city must have realised that I'd long grown used to the changes.

"Uttara used to be a wilderness in the nineties; look at it now," I commented, looking all about me. Shops, malls and markets greeted the eye, and everywhere there was a bustle of activity. "Oh look!" I pointed excitedly at my old school building with its green glass windows and large auditorium, and the city knew then that I wasn't entirely unhappy with the way things were now.

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re had once been independent houses with front lawns or big gardens.

We passed the neglected bit of land that had, until recently, been the Sweepers' Colony, and in the Dhaka I once knew, a park. We sped past Tejgaon, I remarking on the large handicraft store, and the bright and shiny car showrooms, none of which had been around in the 90's, when I'd been growing up. Some of the old smells still lingered, masked by the exhaust fumes and the odours of industrial effluents; the aroma from the biscuit factory, and the fragrance from the soap factory.

Presently, we passed the Saat-rasta intersection, turned right

the last decade or so. She beamed at the obvious pride in my voice.

Pushing forward, we passed the enormous blue-glass mall; now a famous landmark by its own right. I talked about the huge cinema complex it housed, and all the other amenities, and then asked Dhaka if she remembered the green patch that existed before the mall, then realised I didn't remember much about it myself. I guess you get used to these things, the way I've grown used to the traffic jams in Dhanmondi caused

by ornate road dividers fashioned to resemble grassy hills and waterfalls. Pressed for time, I decided to skip Agargaon and head back through Mohakhali, but while we were stuck in the jam, we talked about the classy summit centre and the Trade Fair area, which had led to a new development in our lives.

"Can you imagine you've got two flyovers on you now?" I asked Dhaka, as we soared over Mohakhali, looking down at DOHS, which had, after resisting change for so many years finally begun to give in to the apartment culture.

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