



A LIFE SPENT ON ROOFTOPS

“We can crawl to a rooftop and inhale the light below and stars above as we laugh and forget the world we left on the ground.” - Victoria Erickson

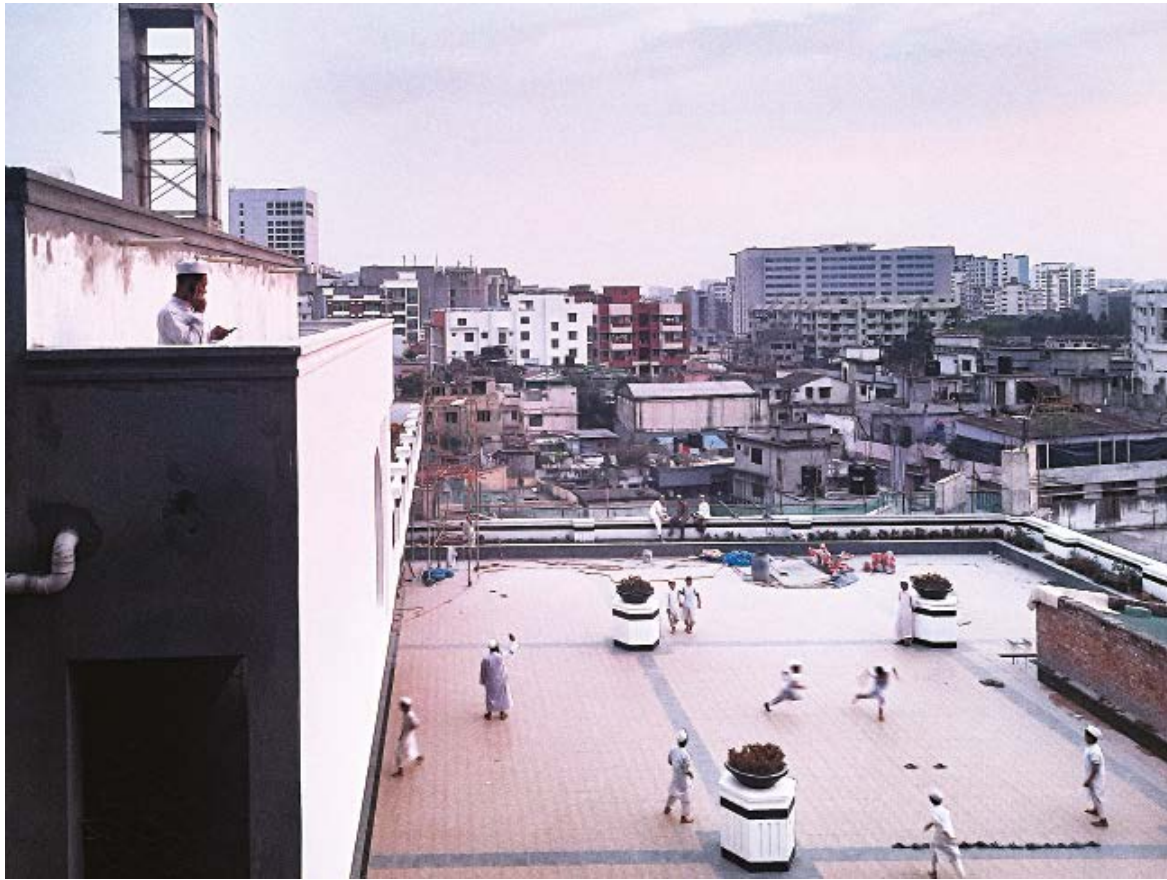
MRITTIKA ANAN RAHMAN, OSAMAN BIN AHMED & HIYA ISLAM

When I think of my home from miles away, the years of memories I have growing up there come rushing. I find my mind escaping to the rooftop to savour a moment alone under the open sky, in the middle of the concrete jungle that is Dhaka.

Going down memory lane, the rooftop had always been at the heart of my childhood. I remember *Maa* holding me in her arms and taking me around, teaching me names of all that we could see. A few years rushed past as the number of children in the family grew and they all followed suit; sunbathes and oil massages were a ritual for all at dedicated times of the day. For a few of us, the roof is also where we took our first steps.

On that note, the rooftop has been a part of many firsts in my life. This is where I learned how to ride a bicycle. Working the balance while keeping eyes on the road—a colossal task—there were days I’d look behind to see if my dad was there to keep me safe. As days rolled by and the many bruises healed, the lingering fear faded. And then one day, I’d started riding on my own; it was a moment to cherish forever.

Living as part of a joint family had its perks. I was never lonely. We never ran out of games to play. *Borof pani, kana maachui, chhowa chhui, ekka dokka, gollachhut*—the list goes on. As we grew out of these games and moved on to sports like cricket, football or badminton, all within the restricted space, the trouble



began to rise. At some point, someone would send the ball or shuttlecock flying beyond retrieval. And then it was another game to get back our stuff from neighbouring rooftops or the street down below.

The call for Maghrib prayer would mark the end of day. The kids would scamper away. *Djinns* and other supernatural creatures came out after dark, we were

told. The sky painted a deep blue colour on our faces, and when sometimes it changed to orange, we’d stay back longer on the rooftops just to see the chemistry in the skies.

Amidst all this, we’d never miss *Dada*, the one man who got me into rooftop gardening. I remember how he made lemonade for us from the first lemon my plant bore. Over time, the number of plants in my little garden grew and so did the incidents of stolen fruits. I remember *Dadu* grinding henna leaves and applying the henna on the palm and tips of my fingers. In between the many flower pots I would often find dragonflies. *Baba* and I would chase them while *Maa* would yell at us fearing we’d trip over the edge. That being said, these rooftops are a reason to spark new friendships between the young and the old.

The roof bears witness to the birth of relationships, be it a meeting with strangers waiting to be friends or a full-fledged wedding. Time and again, the rough cement floor gets adorned with *alpona*; new art being painted over the remains from the *holud* of an older cousin. In this way, the rooftop builds traces of man-

dalas as new families get sewn into a sacred bond. Coming to the top of the roof, it is these teeny-tiny bits of relic that take me back in time—the hours spent honing dance moves and perfecting harmony, the bickering over spots and of course, the days of celebration and feast. This place is never tired of hosting people. From birthday parties to *Eid er chand dekha*, from solo strolls to hangouts, the rooftop beckons you.

And every winter, BBQ nights were something we all looked forward to. Be it with friends or family, there is always a snug vibe attached to this get-together. As the BBQ grills gather dust in a locked cabinet throughout the rest of the year, these are taken out on chilly winter nights to prepare juicy chicken and fish amidst familial hokum and de trop culinary advice. The nights grew dark but we would not go down. Circling around a makeshift bonfire and sharing blankets, we’d spend hours listening to ghost stories.

Although rooftops sound like a sly location to rendezvous, as teenagers, the experience has not fared well for most of us. In hindsight, it is anything but clever. As we grew older, we seemed to go out more often

than go “up”. Walking up here on a random Sunday, I miss the guitar and impromptu karaoke with my friends. Writing lyrics, singing out of tune yet managing to catch the attention of certain someones from rooftops around; an excuse to kill time while making memories.

This place of whatever square metres is a cure to everything, a sanctuary whenever one needs it; for privacy or some fresh air the balcony can’t compensate. Watching the sun come up or go down, I’ve spent untold hours on the phone, sitting in the same spot I call mine forever. Over time, I may have quibbled for custody with unnamed men and snotty kids.

Years down the line, my rooftop experiences have changed. As an adult, sometimes at the end of a long day of pushing through Dhaka traffic, I’d take the elevator past my apartment, all the way up to the top floor and to the roof to breathe on my own for a moment, before going back down to my home which, although loving, could often feel crowded. The roof also became a place where I could savour an occasional treat picked up on my way home without being guilt-shamed into sharing with the entire household (read: ice cream when the rest of the family has a cold), choosing the lights and sounds of the city beneath me over a repetitive TV show episode.

I remember one lazy summer afternoon when it started to rain—not drizzle, but full on shower. Cats and dogs, as we learned in childhood. I seized the moment and raced to the roof to be in the rain like I hadn’t done in so many years. I could see the places a younger me had made splashes in the puddles, ran across the water barefoot with little regard for my life. I had glided right underneath the hanging clotheslines, where so many of my outfits had gotten mixed up with the neighbours’ over the years, leading to confusion over the never-before-seen clothes that magically appeared in my closet. Sitting on the gleaming roof as the rain gave way and the sun came out, I couldn’t help but smile—what is it about rooftops that make the rain seem so magical?

Another way in which the roof gave me peace and solitude when needed, was by being the perfect spot in the evenings to sit down with a good book. There are few things in life that can be more comforting than nice sunset views, breezy weather and a page turner.

The roof is more than just an open space, dear reader; it is where life happens. The more you think back on, the bittersweet the heart gets. As we get along with our lives, this place remains the space we can never turn down. And as I recall my memories of my home and my upbringing, I realise that somehow, someday, my rooftop had a special role to play.



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