

Me no english

AFTER having crossed our early teenage years, how many of us can admit to regularly accompanying our parents to all those social events specifically designed for men and women in their forties with gall bladder operations? I'm talking about the weddings and birthday parties where when Ma asked you to go, your prompt reply was, "But I don't know anyone there." Or "There's no one there my age." Or better yet, "What am I going to do there?"

I know you're not antisocial for thinking that even reading a chapter on Organic Chemistry is better than sitting amidst heavily plastered aunties and pot-bellied uncles discussing how it is to live with arthritis along with dashes of whose son ran away with who.

Trust me, we are in the same boat here. But last Friday, I said yes to my parent's suggestion to attend the surprise birthday party of a woman I had never seen and in all probability, will never see again. Quite impulsively so, though there was a secret reason behind my surprising interest (it left my father pleasantly surprised to see me being "social" for the first time in my adolescent years).

This birthday party was not for an ordinary woman. Without risking getting offensively specific, let's say her circle comes from the celluloid world of couples dancing in the rain/around trees. Like the slightly opinionated, mostly self-assured teenager that I still am, I went there somewhat amused, somewhat curious and well, with a few expectations. I had, in my mind, some fixed images of the crowd I'd be rubbing shoulders with (not literally, just figuratively) that evening.

My problem, you see, lies with



the nouveau riche the upper crust of the social cake with icing so rich and so calorific that it leaves you gastronomically a bit distressed. And that's exactly the kind of people I thought I'd meet middle-aged men with gold bracelets, older men with gold chains, a lot of gold basically. Did I meet such people? You bet I did.

My evening was spent in some sort of silent amusement that the prejudiced enjoy while seeing the object of their prejudice, mine being people wearing sunglasses at 9 pm, women decked in gold, checking out other women decked in gold, etc. The word, I believe we use for labeling these men and women are "khaat" a term ruthlessly thrown at anyone or

anything that differs from our ideals of what's fashionable and acceptable.

Well, the evening had an interesting lesson in store for me.

During dinner, I found myself seated in a table full of young men and women, most of them newly wed from the look of things. Casual dinner table conversation informed me that almost all the couples had graduated from two well-known private universities here and some had emigrated to a different country and were here on holiday.

Now these couples provided a stark contrast to the guests seated in the other table. My table was well-dressed, sophisticated and like Bangladeshi people who come back

to Dhaka after six months of living abroad couldn't carry on a conversation without using a few English phrases here and there.

Now the amusing part was that one of the young husbands must've thought my dad and I, the simpletons that we are, didn't know English.

This young man is your average impressive looking, English speaking, nice clothes wearing young married man. With the token pretty, English speaking, impressive looking, nice clothes wearing, thin wife with dyed hair. If you'd look at him and then look at his "khaat" counterpart at the other table, that is, the average non impressive looking, strictly dialectic Bengali speaking, flashy clothes wearing young married man, you'd think, "Now THIS one is smart," as the word often is misused to describe someone sophisticated.

I guess the dinner that followed was to change a few definitions that night.

Our man here having a fair, pinkish complexion we so easily associate with wealth and class and a shirt collar that left ample chest hair showing got my attention when he used an English expletive that's a favourite of modern day rappers in a table which seated mostly adult ladies and gentlemen.

He was engaged in a conversation with not another foul-mouthed man but a woman who immediately became silent after the word was uttered in his loud, pompous, I-know-English-expletives-which-you-can't-translate-voice, uncomfortably hanging in the air. Throughout the dinner, he'd complain about the "terribly off-key" Bengali song that was playing.

The birthday woman requested

everyone's attention to which he'd crack juvenile jokes in... surprise, surprise, English! When there was live music playing, he'd refuse to clap along with everyone else, looking visibly self-conscious and yet deliberately trying to look nonchalant. He'd clap (with quite a show) when the music would end and whisper, in embarrassed English obviously, about how he's only clapping for the singer's efforts.

So, as if to teach my prejudiced mind filled with preconceived notions a lesson, I had come face to face with another Dhakaistic stereotype from the most unexpected table. The kind of man or woman who's outwardly quite sophisticated and believes that puts him/her somewhere above from where s/he can ridicule others who appear less sophisticated.

Moral of my little encounter: though it's easy to judge people by their sartorial elegance, sometimes nice clothes hide a crudeness we mistake to be the symptom of wealth and hence deem permissible. I also learned that what separates someone "khaat" (excuse my use of the label) from someone who isn't, isn't wearing sunglasses in the dark but having the ability to be comfortable in situations.

So my opinionated self decided that after that night, if a man wearing a polka dotted suit still walks into a room without squirming uncomfortably and ridiculing others, in my mind, he'd be far less "khaat" than that well dressed who couldn't stop uttering English expletives in civilized company because all the time he thought they couldn't speak English.

By Maliha Bassam

The new year... with a twist?!

EVER heard of the saying "Beware what you wish for...it just might come true"? And I never realized how true that saying was.....until I received a massive dose of granted wishes.

As the New Year approached, me and my parents prepared for a very festive few days to be spent on a Europe tour. Sounds dreamy, doesn't it? I, above all, was on cloud nine because, being a great fan of Dan Brown books, some of the countries I was about to visit was on my list of dream holiday destinations. In fact, many of our wishes were about to be granted...unfortunately.

Everything was going well, until we first landed in Abu Dhabi, from where we were supposed to catch a plane to London. After waiting at the airport for 6 hours, we were about to board the plane, when an official demanded to see our passports. Seconds later, we were told that travelers from some particular countries (thanks to our 'brothers' and their 'noble deeds for mankind') were not going to be allowed to land in London with a Europe states visa...a separate London visa was required.

The plane left without us, and a very harrying, frustrating, exhausting 7 hours later, we were told we could go to Amsterdam (our actual destination) via Paris...on a plane

that left at 12:30a.m.. The reason? It just so happened that there was an overload of Hajj travelers that same day at Abu Dhabi; a total of 8 flights had been delayed and there were no hotel rooms available for the passengers, which had to be dealt with first. And so it was that after spending 12 hours without food, and then another 6 hours without anything to do in that same airport (which by coincidence resembles the suffocating inside of a green and blue beehive, in shape and design), we finally boarded the plane.

When we landed in Amsterdam 12 hours later than initially intended (on the 24th of December), one of our suitcases was realized to be missing. So instead of touring the city, we spent the entire day traveling to and from the airport, until we received the missing luggage at night.

The next day was Christmas...a horrible experience. We traveled for most of the day on a bus to Paris, and once we reached there (delayed, once again, by 2 hours), our guide told us that we would be better off not going into the city to celebrate because everyone there would be drunk and the temperature was 4 degrees Celsius. So we spent the night in a single room with nothing to do. Merry Christmas!!

When we started our sightseeing (finally) it was, of course, a thrilling

experience. In more ways than one. At the top of the Eiffel tower (a wonder in itself), the temperature was near freezing, the icy wind felt like digging sharp knives digging into us, and I had a hard time not dropping dead with frostbite. When in the incomparable, indescribable Louvre Museum (my ultimate dream come true), I was requested to leave one of the exhibition rooms (very slightly politely) for taking photographs. Of course, our white-skinned mates had the birthright to take as many shots as they pleased. This was followed by sub-zero temperatures and gorgeous, dazzling (read: foul and treacherous) snow. We were reduced to wearing three layers of warm clothes and trudging through the snow in them, while sightseeing. YAY!! (I'm still suffering from brainfreeze).

On the night of the 30th, we started a bus journey, and a grueling 22 hours later, arrived in Rome on New Year's Eve. We were all looking forward to having a truly sensational time that night, until we were told that the place where we were staying was too far away from the city centre for us to join in the fun, and besides, the only thing people do that night is drink. Another special night wasted sitting like a zombie in front of Italian television, with the only hint that it was New Year's Eve being a few

fireworks and crackers bursting along the streets.

Thankfully, the temperature in Rome was not near freezing, although it was nowhere near warm. In fact, 6 degrees Celsius is a damn sight near freezing, compared to the 26 degrees in Dhaka. As it was, just when we thought that our troubles were over and we'd get some decent sightseeing done, it suffices to say that disaster struck.

Rome is a city of legends, and walking along its streets is like walking in (I have to use the word again) a dream. You can only realize its grandeur if you have been there. The buildings, the sculptures, the scenery.....it's unforgettable. I mean, the only thing we had to brave was torrential rain, slippery brick roads and icy winds. We experienced the Vatican City, Tiber River, and Bridge of Angels etc. in fine weather (thankfully) but when we headed for the legendary Coliseum at about 7 p.m., the trip became truly memorable. Hundreds of tourists from around the world were seen huddled around this immense structure, and the nearby shops and sheltered areas were also brimming with people, holding umbrellas and trying their best to ward off the cold. From hosting Gladiator fights in the old ages, the Coliseum has now been reduced to sheltering people from the rain. For an hour we braved the rain and

stinking smells coming out of the sewerage system (quite similar to what we are used to in Dhaka) standing there. And we had to take photographs holding very hard onto our umbrellas (which didn't really prevent us from getting absolutely drenched). And the weather didn't improve when we visited the next few sights either.

Right now we are preparing to visit Venice and a few other places. Despite the dismal weather forecasts. Despite the series of ill luck we've had these past few days. If you do not want to read any more of my writings, please pray that the trip goes well, so I won't have to give you an update. In fact, I believe I was much better off back in Dhaka with the rest of the family, with my friends and attending my classes (okay, forget that last bit).

But I'm sounding too ungrateful and like a complete grouch. Truth be told, the splendour, excitements, thrills and beauty I've experienced in these places quite outweigh the bad incidents. And what makes it worthwhile the most are the fellow countrymen we have met on the way. It was like living in a home away from home, and made life much easier for my family. It has been (and I hope will continue to be) a truly memorable experience.....in more than one sense of the word.

By Ferzeen Anis